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Local Self Governance and Sustainable Practices for Micro Urban Entities

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I. INTRODUCTION

Local government bodies or the third tier of the government can be defined as institutions responsible for the self-governance of their respective administrative units. These institutions govern the regional population of their respective units. In recent times, the role exhibited by local bodies has been essential for the efficient working of a nation. The need for democratization emphasized the construction of local-level institutions. These local bodies are responsible for performing multiple roles. From ensuring affordable and efficient civil facilities such as education, common public amenities and healthcare to strategizing planning and development at the local level of the region, these local governments promote the well-being of their citizens. People belonging to their respective communities, micro civil areas and regions are more aware of the problems faced by them than any higher level of government. Thus the democratic decision-making becomes more effective when people are given the power of regulating their own public affairs.

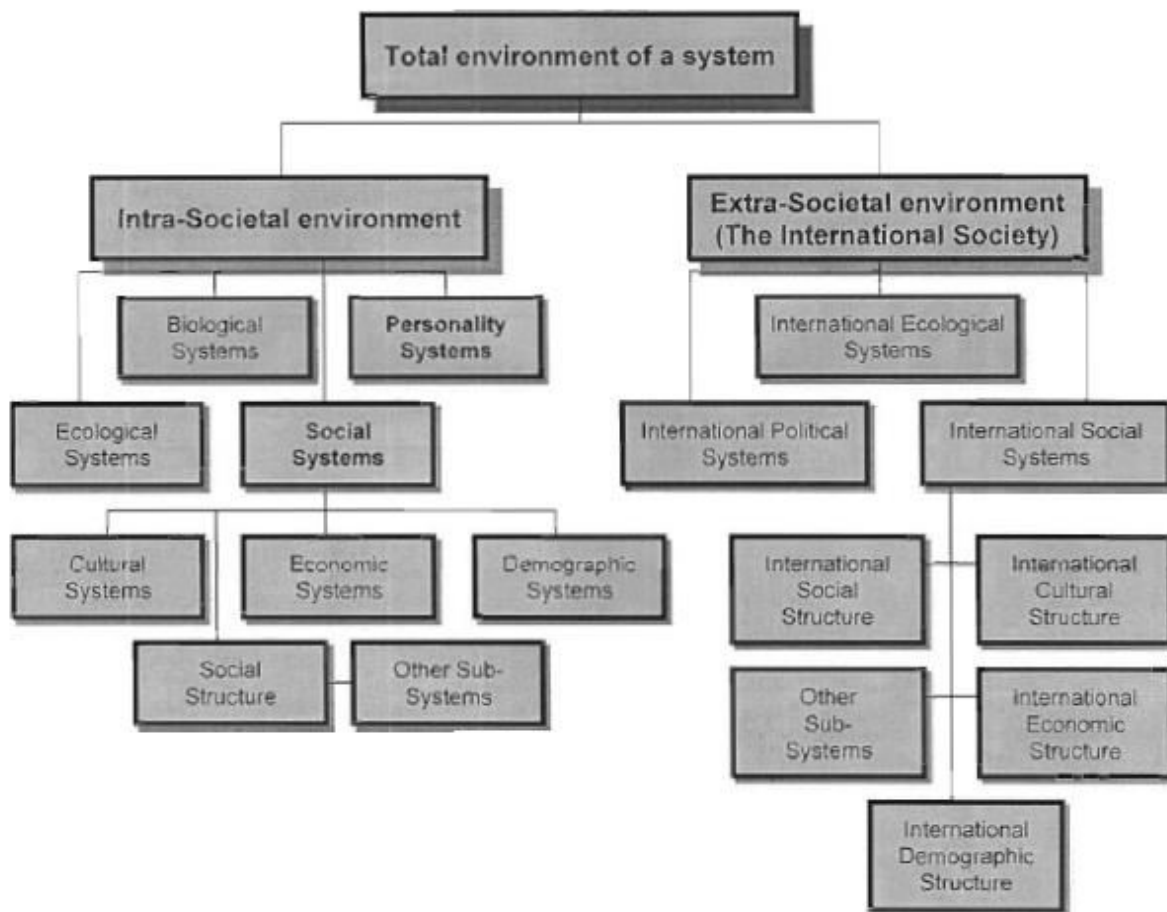
Right from the two amendment acts in the 1990s under Narsimha Rao's government, the country has been following what is called the bottom up-approach. This approach reflects that the primary units of governance in rural and urban areas are the constitutionally established local government bodies. In India, the realization of the importance of local bodies leads to two major constitutional provisions. The 73rd amendment provided a framework so as to formalize Gram Panchayat, it included Part IX of the Indian Constitution. The 74th amendment aimed at localizing the urban areas by adding Part IXA ranging from the articles 243-P to 243-ZG. Panchayat is the generic term used to describe rural local governments. Municipality is the term associated with urban local bodies. The recognition and constitutional status of local bodies enables them to cater to the political, socio-economic, and cultural needs of the local population.

The role and purpose of local bodies

At a broad level, local bodies perform legislative, executive, and judicial roles.

- **Legislative Role**-Panchayats in rural areas have power as well as the authority to legislate on the 29 subjects. Similarly, the twelfth schedule includes 18 subjects that are legislated by the municipalities in urban area. It is necessary for citizens to participate in elections and local bodies' meetings in order to secure the values of democracy at the grassroots level.
- **Executive Role** – It is mandatory for local bodies to execute various policies and provide basic civil amenities to their subjects. Apart from raising public awareness about the centrally sponsored schemes, it performs its obligatory functions such as water supply, drainage system, and women and child development. In addition, municipalities can raise their funds through taxes, fees, fines, etc. so as to finance their execution processes.
- **Judicial Role** – At the local level, administrative functions are based on the principle of self-regulation and autonomy. It indicates that the Panchayats and municipalities are required to provide justice provisions providing workable solutions to communities in case of conflicts. For instance, local bodies are entrusted with the responsibility of managing and overseeing civil, criminal, and revenue justice. Regulation of its subjects is to ensure that citizens are in line with the law of the land.

While executing these roles, the government agencies or bodies are supposed to take care of the components of system environment in totality, specially the Intra Societal environment as at the local level these components and systems are important for planning decisions.



Source: Adapted from 'A system analysis of political life', Easton, 1965: 83-84

II. SIGNIFICANCE OF LOCAL BODIES

The Significance of Local Bodies can be better understood by analyzing its functions.

1. Economic development and social justice

First and foremost, the concept of self-governance or decentralization has been an important principle of democracy. The idea behind decentralization was the wide scope of economic development and social justice from ground zero. The local institutions, people of the region and private sector cooperatively work towards improving the local economy.

2. Better solutions to multidimensional problems

It is a well-known fact that people of a region are more aware of the problems faced by them. These people, therefore, may find better solutions to break away from the socio-economic, cultural, and political problems they face. Judicious and efficient use of available resources is the first step towards solving the existing problems.

3. Increasing the prospects of community development

A high level of community participation improves the overall community development of different regions. Community development is a prerequisite for removing obstacles in the implementation of policies and renewing democracy.

4. Better civic amenities

A sort of cooperation between the locals and the local government helps in providing better services to the citizens. National development depends upon the development fragmented at local levels. Thus, an improvement in the civic amenities available to people at the local level results in the overall development of a nation.

5. More participatory

Local bodies help citizens to directly participate in democratic decision-making by allowing the constituent representatives elected at the local level. It encourages the idea of a strong democratic society consisting of vigilant and vibrant citizens. It is important to note that different marginalized groups should be given equal opportunities to express their political opinions or dissent.

6. Shaping future leaders

Local self-governance serves as a training ground for shaping future leaders. It provides a practical experience for aspiring politicians on how decision-making takes place in a democracy.

7. Nurturing women politicians and leaders

Local governments have the potential to promote women participants as political actors and candidates through the reservation of seats. Some proportion of seats is also reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This way, the third tier of our system can safeguard the interest of minorities.

8. Transparency

Local governments are often considered as an intermediary between different communities and the central government. The institution serves as a link between the two ends. Ordinary citizens are made aware of the policies and programs of the government. The Union government, on the other hand, is made aware of the demands of citizens.

9. Better infrastructural facilities

Local governments are not only a subsidiary to the central government, but also provide a space to articulate the political demands on the society. Existing at grass-root level, it is also responsible for looking after the day-to-day needs of people such as adequate water supply, sanitation, and electricity.

10. Greater accountability

Delayed responsiveness and poor accountability on the part of state governments often make the local people feel politically alienated. Devolution of power to regional and district levels encourages inclusiveness and greater accountability to the government authorities.

11. Safeguarding individual identity

The local bodies are empowered to preserve the individual as well as the cultural identity of various marginalized groups. It promotes the principle on which lies the foundation of democracy, that is, pluralism.

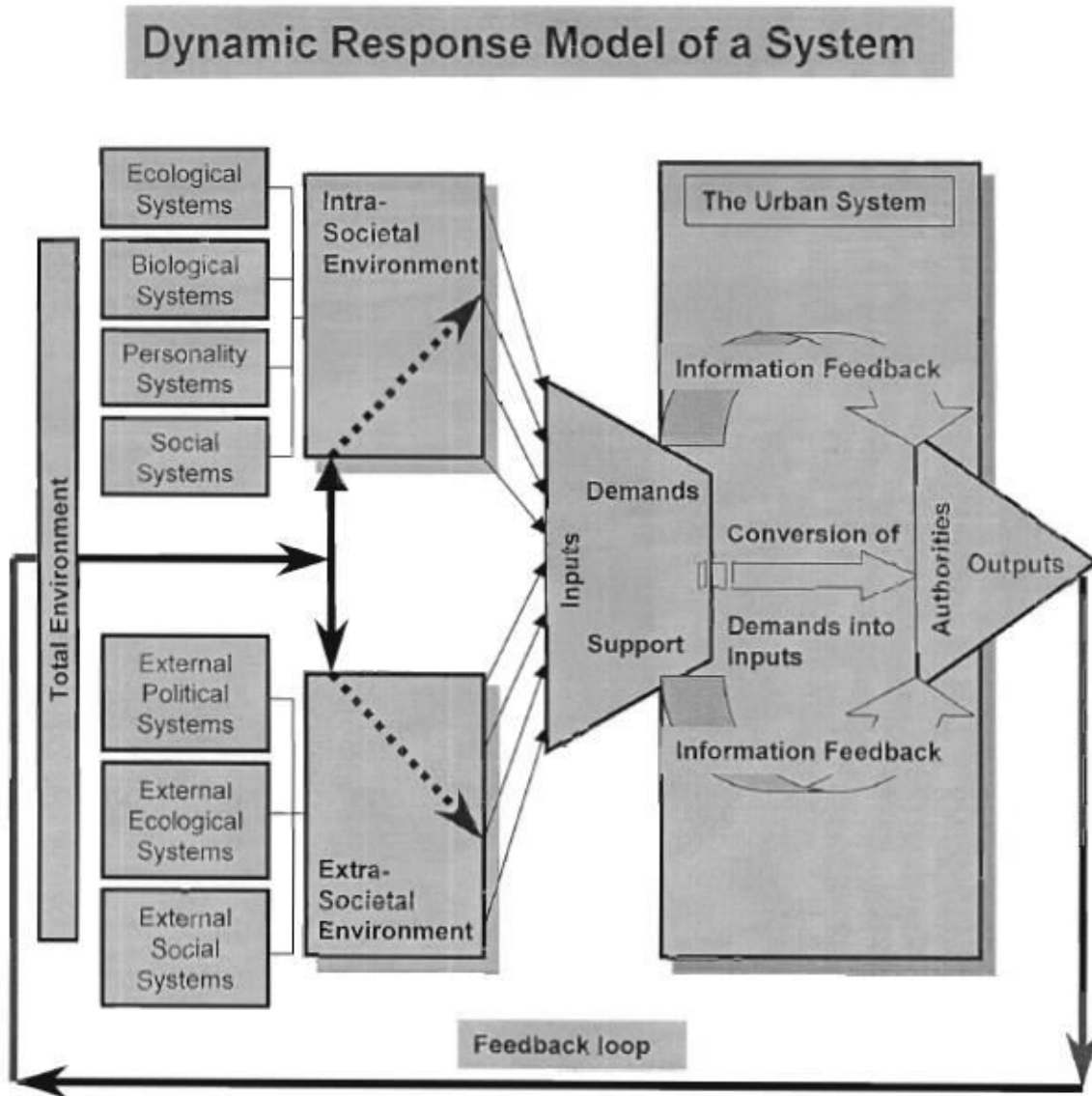
As subjects concerning individual's aspirations and quality of life are safeguarded by the local government, the central government can divert its focus on key issues such as national defense and security. Apart from the political communication that exists between local governments and the people they administer, the small local units are also responsible for tax collection, administration of justice, and management of legal affairs.

In recent times, there has been a change in the nature of functions performed by local bodies. Local governments now play a multifaceted role in incorporating and recognizing the social, economic, and political needs of their region as well.

- **Social infrastructure-** Socially, class inequalities and discrimination based on caste, color, creed, religion, gender, etc. are prevalent in municipalities. Local bodies work towards improving social harmony in the territory, which in turn helps in promoting national integration.
- **Economic infrastructure-** From the economic point of view, problems such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of resources are common in small areas. Local governments play a key role in the economic development of their region. They are responsible for providing physical infrastructure which includes transportation and communication networks, electricity, water supply, waste management, and so on.
- **Political infrastructure-** The administrative functions are enhanced by direct supervision from the local government. This way, local governments are required to work towards the overall development of their region. Local governments receive their funds from state governments to be disbursed at local level. Thus it becomes possible for local bodies to promote engagement of all sectors of the society which results in development and growth at the macro level.

Local Self Government as a response system for sustainable development

The joint working of local and state governments may result in better execution of policies and programmes. For instance, state governments can encourage local bodies to create political awareness of the policies benefiting the citizens. The lack of coordination among the various authorities can be an obstruction in the implementation of policies and programmes. The fundamental purpose of establishing grass-root level institutions is to reduce the concentration of excessive power at the hands of the Centre, thereby, operationalizing democracy.



Source: Adapted from 'A system analysis of political life', Easton, 1965: 83-84

III. MAJOR CHALLENGES

Local governments still face many challenges in their working, some of them are –

1. **Lack of political will** – While the success of local government largely depends upon the active participation of its members and subjects, there is a lack of political will among the citizens to be a part of direct decision-making.
2. **Lack of resources** – Local governments often face financial constraints in the deliverance of their roles. For example, state governments often deviate from their revenue sharing arrangement which makes it difficult for local bodies to finance their policies.

3. **Lack of accountability** – Due to the absence of communication between the state and local government, state governments which are required to execute policies such as poverty alleviation are not able to work effectively. Local governments thus act as a channel to complete the efforts of national development. It promotes the planning and implementation of government-led programs and policies in a myriad of ways. Considering the strong and active relationship between citizens and local government bodies, the latter is aware of the everyday problems prevalent in the region. Local governments are authorized to take decisions on matters such as housing, health, education, environmental protection, etc. which directly influences the way of living of community members. It is also important to note that the role of local government without appropriate fiscal decentralization can hinder the democratic spirit of this third tier of the government. There is no doubt that the existence of local bodies has intensified mass participation in active decision-making.

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