

The *Communitisation* of Public Institutions and Services in Nagaland, India

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Abstract Since 2001, communities in Nagaland have been brought into direct partnerships as stakeholders with government in local service provision. *Communitisation* is backed by a legal framework and strong state-level support. This has taken place within a context of enduring conflict, social unrest, limited public service delivery and a high HIV/AIDS rate in the state, located in the troubled north-eastern region of India. It has directly involved the Nagaland form of local governance, through Village Councils and Village Development Boards, which are believed to follow local customs of wide consultation and consensus-building around collective concerns. These in turn constitute committees which govern four local services: education, health, water and electricity. While evidence is only beginning to emerge, it so far suggests considerable positive impacts in terms of public service delivery gains in Nagaland. This article outlines some of the questions and issues the Nagaland *Communitisation* account gives rise to.

1 Introduction: democracy, security and service delivery in Nagaland, India

It is widely agreed that true democracy is only possible when each citizen has an equal say in decision-making and an equal opportunity to influence government outcomes irrespective of their cast, creed, class and gender. When citizens are engaged and can exercise voice and demand accountability, government performance can be expected to improve and corruption to be harder to sustain. Citizen engagement may also ensure greater efficiency in the delivery of goods and services, especially in the field of primary education, healthcare, local infrastructure and facilities, and the judicious use and conservation of natural resources such as water and forest resources (Kumar 2006). This article reviews efforts to engage citizens in democratic local governance in the little-known north-eastern Indian hill state of Nagaland, in which greater accountability and efficiency in public service delivery are emerging as outcomes of an unusual process of 'co-production', referred to as *Communitisation*. Nagaland has a population of 19 million, composed of indigenous or tribal communities with a rich and distinctive cultural

heritage. Public service delivery performance has historically been weak, partly because the state has been riven by insurgency, inter-group conflict and crime. An important part of the background to the process of *Communitisation* is the peace process between Nagaland groups and the Government of India, which has been ongoing since the 1970s. While the present study does not focus on the impact of the security situation on the public service delivery regime in Nagaland and neighbouring states, security concerns are likely to have been one of the crucial contextual and motivating factors behind official support for the *Communitisation* process.

While customary support systems ensure that absolute poverty is not widespread in Nagaland, 19 per cent of the population were BPL (below the poverty line) in 2004–05 (NSSO 2005). Naga society remains predominantly agrarian, with other important sectors including construction, transport and communication and public administration, which together comprise three-quarters of the State's Net State Domestic Product (Government of Nagaland 2004).

Unemployment has created a vacuum for many

Table 1 New governance spaces established through Communitisation

New governance spaces	Village Educational Committee (VEC)	Village Electricity Management Board (VEMB)	Village Health Committee (VHC)	Water and Sanitation Committee
Membership	14 members, including representatives of the Village Development Board, teachers education administration, parents (including at least one woman), the church, and other community members (including at least one woman)	Between 5 and 9 members. Includes a Council-nominated Chairman, the Secretary of the Village Development Board, one woman and representatives of each sub-village unit (<i>khe</i>)	12 members, including a Chairman, at least 3 Council members, the Secretary of the Village Development Board, 4 health and nutrition workers, and others from civil society/the church	Up to 8 members, including Chairman, Secretary of the Village Development Board, at least one woman and up to 5 other community members
Selection process	Village Council nominates the Chairman and Secretary. The Secretary of the Village Development Board is automatically a member	Village Council nominates the Chairman and Secretary. The Secretary of the Village Development Board is automatically a member	Village Council selects Chairman. Most other positions are automatic, based on professional position, or involve Council selection, with two members selected by the Women's Health Committee (Mahila Suasthya Sangh) from its members	Chairman selected by the Village Council. Board Secretary automatically a member. The woman representative, 5 other members elected/selected by the Council with consultation from community members. One member selected as Secretary in consultation with Village Council
Responsibilities	To act on administrative, academic and financial matters relating to local education provision	To function within guidelines framed by the Village Committee on the basis of parameters prescribed by the Department of Power	To directly supervise and provide support for the local health centre, its staff, and the Women's Health Committee	To manage and supervise water supply and sanitary systems. Responsible for maintenance of assets and equipment built or purchased by the Committee or transferred by the State Government. Required to follow conditions specified by the State Government. Responsible for appointment and control of staff required for the installation and maintenance of water supply and sanitary systems

Activities	<p>Meets every 3 months. Manages, directs, supervises and controls local schools to ensure administrative, academic and financial discipline, as well as community participation and ownership. The Teacher-in-charge is mandated to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● receive equipment from the VEC ● maintain registers of staff attendance and report unauthorised absences ● maintain student discipline register, informing parents of serious infractions or irregular attendance ● convene parent-teacher meetings ● implement other Departmental and VEC decisions 	<p>Meets at least monthly, and as often as required. Monitors and acts to ensure availability of local power supply, including through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● requisitioning Power Department staff ● clearing trees/objects touching local electrical lines ● preventing accidents/power failures ● keeping custody of electricity-related equipment ● monitoring for and reporting energy theft, recovering losses ● monitoring and reporting on field staff performance to the District Electrical Authority ● maintaining a daily record of major power failure ● registering electricity consumer details. The Village Council appoints a separate audit committee to audit the accounts, transactions and records of the Board annually 	<p>Meets every 3 months. It:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● supports maintenance of health statistics and records on activities and responsibilities of centre staff ● assesses village health needs ● prepares and communicates preventive healthcare activities ● oversees execution of annual health plan ● procures drugs ● provides transport for referral of emergency cases using funds raised by the community ● mobilises supplementary local funds and technical expertise ● teaches/learns about communicable disease prevention, good health ● promotes community participation in health and disease control programmes including immunisation, cleanliness and sanitation ● promotes and monitors antenatal registration and check-up 	<p>Meets at least every 3 months or more as required. In coordination with the Public Health Engineering Department, it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● deals with repairs due to natural calamities, etc. ● levies and collects water fees for cost of operation and maintenance of water supply – implements development projects including watershed improvement and protection of water supply
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young people, and alcoholism, drug addiction and involvement with militant organisations are persistent concerns. In addition, Nagaland has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in India, at over 1.25 per cent (Thakar 2002). Recent research suggests that the high HIV/AIDS prevalence rate was likely to be one in a complex of factors including ongoing conflict that negatively affects public service delivery (Jacob 2008).

Communitisation, which began in 2001, was the term coined to describe the initiative through which government sought to involve the local community directly as partners and stakeholders in the management of public utilities and services. The background to this unique experiment includes constitutional provisions under Article 371, intended to enable Nagaland to preserve its customary laws and governance system (George and Yhome 2008). Local governance is organised around Village Councils and Village Development Boards, as per the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act 1978. Village Councils are responsible for constituting the Development Board by nominating members according to the local custom. The Village Development Board is mandated to formulate village development plans within the annual budget allocation and other funds raised locally. Tenure of membership is for three years, unless decided otherwise by a formal resolution of the Council. The members may include village councillors or others eligible by virtue of age or local custom. There are no limits to numbers, which are decided by the council. At least one woman must be on the Board to represent the women of the village. Government servants may also be chosen with the permission of the Government, with the exception of the subordinate officers of the Deputy Commissioner. The Council is empowered to replace members of the Board at any time (Ao 1993).

The present study focuses on how this unique government–community partnership has evolved in three districts: Dimapur (with a relatively plain topography and an important commercial hub), Kohima (at a high altitude and state capital) and Mon (remote and very less developed). The study draws on interviews with civil society organisations, the different *Communitisation* committees, local political leaders and other stakeholders, including citizens, civil servants (Deputy Commissioner),

Project Director, District Rural Development Agency and Block Development Officers. It also draws on secondary data from government records and other secondary sources.

2 The Communitisation reforms: new institutional actors, spaces and relationships

Nagaland has had a virtually non-functional institutional and service delivery system for primary education, health, electricity, water and sanitation. Access for the majority of the poor and excluded people was limited, and public service performance was unsatisfactory for most people. The challenge for the Government of Nagaland was to revitalise the deteriorated public services system, and to do so in a way that would benefit the rural poor.

Taking into account the strength of traditional civic bodies and the state's rich cultural heritage, an idea emerged to create an innovative programme involving the local community as core partners and stakeholders in the management of public utilities and services, with strong accountability. The experiment began in 2001 under the leadership of Mr R.S. Pandey, the former Chief Secretary to the Government of Nagaland. Legislation to support the *Communitisation* process was passed in 2002. Given that the process and methods of managing the public institutions were not merely decentralisation, but also aimed to actively engage the members of the local community, a descriptive term was coined: *Communitisation*.

Communitisation was seen as a unique partnership between the government and the community involving transfer of ownership of public resources and assets, control over service delivery, empowerment, decentralisation, delegation and capacity building – all with the aim of improving the delivery of public utility systems. In institutional terms, it involves transfer of government assets and power to the community, empowerment of community through delegation of governmental powers of management and the supervision of day-to-day functioning of public employees to village committees, which also are responsible for the maintenance and improvement of the assets and services. One of the expressions used to explain the approach is that of the three 'T's: Trust the user community; Train them to discharge their newfound responsibilities; and Transfer

governmental powers and management of resources.

The implementation of *Communitisation* took place through three policy initiatives by the Nagaland Government. The first was to provide the institutional framework for the Committees and Boards; the second was to provide for the delegation of powers to the Committees and Boards in order to manage public utilities, transfer assets and funds and require government to provide supervision and support; the third enacted specific *Communitisation* acts for the individual fields of Primary Education (2002), Community Health Services (2002), Electricity Management (2003), and Water Supply and Sanitation (2005).¹

A number of new mechanisms for community management of public services have been established through the *Communitisation* process. These amount to new spaces for community engagement with governance. Table 1 summarises the features of these new governance spaces. Three features of these new committees are worth noting. First, their membership is drawn from a range of actors, including those with a stake in the service as a result of their professional or administrative position; actors from within the core village governance structures of the Village Council and the Village Development Board, and from 'ordinary' citizens and members of civil society (in this context, mainly the Church). This suggests that there are likely to be multiple pressures and mechanisms for accountability to promote the performance of the service, including the following:

- Professional responsibilities, with official public service providers monitored and held to account by other committee members
- Local political pressures on Village Council and Village Development Board members to ensure adequate services
- Mechanisms for accountability between village governance structures and the State Government and higher-level administration, including district-level authorities
- Incentives of citizen-members of committees to ensure adequate service provision.

Second, membership selection processes depend to a significant degree on selection by village

governance authorities, through the authority of Village Councils to hold or to select and nominate most discretionary positions within the committees. This entails that the democratic accountability of these new governance spaces will depend substantially on the extent to which the Village Councils and Development Boards are themselves accountable and responsive to the communities they serve. It may be too early to judge whether a reliance on customary political and governance norms and institutions is adequate to ensure that level of accountability and responsiveness, or whether powerful groups may eventually dominate.

Third, the scope of the responsibilities and activities of the committees is wide enough to permit a significant degree of local ownership of the service delivery process. This includes the scope for generating additional resources to improve services, and to manage revenues for the direct benefit of the community.

3 Outcomes: what difference has Communitisation made?

3.1 Service delivery outcomes

Based on the field studies in the three districts, and interviews with representatives of civil society organisations, the chairman and secretary of village councils, citizen-beneficiaries, community and political leaders, and policymakers, there appears to be a consensus that *Communitisation* has already some significant impacts on people's everyday lives in Nagaland. In relation to primary education, in the three districts these were reported to include:

- Increased enrolment rates
- Increases in the proportion achieving pass marks
- Decreased dropout rates
- Improvements in teacher attendance
- Reduction in the numbers of 'ghost' teachers
- Better discipline among students
- Promotion of extra curricular activities
- Better student–teacher interaction
- Increased and better infrastructure and school facilities.

In relation to electricity management, the following gains were identified:

- A drastic improvement in revenue generation, by a startling 86 per cent, through improved

collection of electricity bills by the Power Department (see also Prabhu and Suresh 2004)

- Rebates on the electricity consumed by users. Users commonly reported rebates of 20 per cent on the total bill
- Re-investment of rebates in the provision of new public goods, such as streetlights and additional power amenities
- Greater convenience and ease in the monthly payment of electricity bills
- More regular payment of electricity bills
- New employment opportunities created at the local level from the rebate obtained
- A sense of energy conservation promoted among the community members.

With respect to health services, the following were reported:

- Improved staff attendance
- Improvements in the availability of medicines
- Regular payment of staff salaries
- More regular reporting from Health Units
- Greater understanding of health issues among community members, including the need for participation and collaborative efforts to promote health
- Increased numbers of children and adult patients seeking treatment, including a more than 50 per cent increase in the numbers of girls and women seeking treatment
- Improved punctuality of health workers
- Improvements in healthcare facilities.

On water management, respondents noted the following gains:

- Assured and adequate water supply round the year for all community members
- Availability of better quality, safe drinking water
- Improved physical access to water
- New assets created in the form of water reservoirs and water tanks
- Sanitary toilets provided free of cost
- Community members are sensitised towards water conservation
- Employment generated through the need to repair and maintain pipelines
- The sense of community management of water resources strengthened.

The findings of the present research are in line with the results both of a UNICEF-sponsored

evaluation and an evaluation carried out by the Government of Nagaland. The UNICEF study similarly noted impressive and rapid gains in primary education provision in more than half of the villages studied, including increased enrolment rates, significant improvements in teacher attendance and declines in unauthorised teacher absence in just over half of the communities' schools, as well as improved educational attainment levels in most. The UNICEF study also noted a shift away from private and towards government schools. Similar gains in health-seeking behaviour, particularly among girls and women were noted, as were improvements in health centre staff attendance and improved availability of quality medicines (NENA 2007; also Prabhu and Suresh 2004).

3.2 Impacts on poverty and inequality

Although *Communitisation* was not primarily or directly intended to impact on poverty and inequality in Nagaland, there have been gains for the poorest and most marginal sections of the community. Critically, the *Communitisation* programme has strengthened community participation at the most local of levels, engaging ordinary citizens and community representatives in planning, monitoring and the detail of service delivery implementation. Consultative meetings between line departments, citizens and committees have facilitated community ownership in the creation of assets as varied as school buildings, computer facilities, toilets, electrical transformers, provision of streetlights, community health centre buildings, water harvesting structures, reservoirs and tanks, and new or improved services such as free textbooks, school bags, midday meals, quality medicines, and transport for medical emergencies and for pregnant women. The close engagement at the most local levels has created opportunities for the poor and marginal to influence service delivery for the first time, and this has helped to reduce inequalities. This has been most notable with respect to public health and education services, for which improved quality has led to a measurable increase in demand among both better-off and poorer citizens.

Similar gains have been identified with respect to electricity provision, which greater efficiency in both the collection of dues and the delivery of power has enabled more responsiveness to the needs of poorer electricity consumers. Previously

electric bills were allowed to accumulate for several months before being presented, making it difficult for consumers, particularly the poorest, to pay at one time. The regular payment of bills has eased the need for such bulk payments. In addition, total bills are divided more fairly among users, so that poorer citizens are now better able to access electricity in smaller amounts and at lower per unit costs. Greater responsiveness to local electricity users has been helped by the fact that meter readers have been recruited at village level, and are remunerated locally, as is also the case with those charged with maintenance of water pipelines.

In addition to services being more responsive at the local level, information and transparency about services and programmes have also increased. Respondents reported that wide consultation takes place in advance of important decisions around service provision. In line with customary norms around local governance practices, such consultations are considered crucial to achieving the consensus on which such decisions are ideally supposed to be based.

3.3 New roles and relationships between citizens and local government

Before the *Communitisation* programme, the Village Council and the Village Development Board handled most administrative and developmental functions at the local level. At that time involvement of the government departments, political leaders and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) was more visible, and local citizens were more dependent on government initiatives. The *Communitisation* process appears to have deepened and activated local level citizenships, so that community members are reportedly now more aware of their own roles, responsibilities and rights, and are seen to approach government officials to discuss development programmes and resource allocations. With greater accountability and transparency has also come stronger faith in local representatives to manage public resources of their villages. The different committees have also increased the solidarity of the community members in working in unison with each other.

The Village Councils and Development Boards have gained extra support and coordination from the committees that are managing the public institutions. The transfer of new resources and funds has empowered the Councils and Boards at

the same time as they have become subject to stronger mechanisms of local accountability and more pressures for transparency both upwards, to government departments and downwards, to citizens.

While the Village Council Chairman takes the first step by constituting the respective committee on *Communitisation*, it is the Chairman of the committee that takes the lead, along with committee members, in implementation. The case study research found that these actors perceive the community to be the building block of the *Communitisation* programme, and view the citizens' role as a permanent one. As members of the committees, church leaders often act as facilitators in the interface between community and committee, while State government officials provide logistic support and guidance. Bureaucrats and policymakers perceive the actors at village level as dynamic implementers and as facilitators between the community and the department.

One important outcome is that many citizens have now started to learn about official procedures, planning processes and maintenance of financial accounts, as a result of a growing sense of the need for accountability. However, while this development may prove to be an informal means of strengthening accountability to ordinary citizens, some local political leaders felt that low literacy levels among the rural poor were likely to limit the programmes' success, by limiting their capacities to hold their leaders, representatives and administrative officials to account in a formal manner.

Key actors summarised what they had learned from the *Communitisation* experience as including the need for better coordination among different stakeholders, including careful programme planning and resource management. The benefits of participatory approaches to public decision-making had been made clear to many, and across the communities a stronger sense of accountability and transparency was felt to have been instilled. The *Communitisation* strategy was believed to have provided a new and more effective means of resolving local conflicts, fairer means of sharing resources and benefits across the community, managing human resources, and mobilising community resources. Overall, there was a sense of greater confidence in community capacities to manage their own concerns.

3.4 Enhancing local governance

The involvement of community members in local governance was negligible before the introduction of *Communitisation*. Practices in many areas are now subject to technical and social control, which in the past had been subject to political consideration. This was most notable in the past in the posting and transfer of school teachers. Similarly, whereas the Department of Power previously struggled – and largely failed – to collect electricity bills and control the theft of electricity, representatives of the community are now on the management board mandated to monitor, supervise and implement electricity service delivery. Direct participation in service delivery has also exposed citizens to some of the real challenges of public services, whereas before *Communitisation* of community health services villagers tended to be suspicious about the release of funds for developing infrastructure, and about the limited availability of medicines. Now community members themselves manage health centre funds, and implement various healthcare schemes. With strong support from the Department of Health and Family Welfare, some communities have also initiated gardening activities to generate community funds with which to supplement healthcare facilities and medicines.

Communitisation has worked on strengthening accountability relations at a very local level, driven by powerful champions at State level. It seems likely that it is this focus on re-shaping power relationships at such a local level that explains why the study could identify no signs of interference or influence by either political actors or NGOs into governance at this level. This may be mainly attributed to the traditional village administrative structure, through which local decisions emerge from processes of consensus building within community meetings comprising committee members as well as community members of the concerned village. This has meant there has been little space for external political leaders or NGOs to intervene.

Nevertheless, there are challenges for the *Communitisation* process. Interviewees noted the need to sustain a high degree of transparency and accountability within the *Communitisation* committees, as the chairman, secretary and other members have active relationships with the different government departments, which may in turn lead to traffic of influence. Over the

longer term, it remains to be seen whether the strengthening of local level accountability relationships will prove to be adequate to protect against corruption or bias in local service delivery. A second critical area of challenges to *Communitisation* is that technical departments are constrained in the support they are able to provide, especially in the area of capacity building. The greater the effective control taken by communities over public service delivery, the more illiteracy and low managerial capacity among the rural communities will need to be addressed.

4 Conclusions

This case study has attempted to contribute towards understanding why *Communitisation* of public services appears to have achieved such impressive gains for communities in Nagaland. These gains have included both stronger local governance through direct citizen engagement in the ‘co-production’ of public services, and concrete material outcomes in terms of better, more responsive and more efficient public services.

However, the unique features of the Nagaland context suggest that the conditions under which *Communitisation* came about may not be replicated elsewhere. The legal and constitutional framework that enabled *Communitisation* originated in Nagaland’s distinctive political history, including the ongoing conflict. The failure to achieve much economic development in the wake of a peace agreement since the 1970s, and the persistence of inter-group conflict within Nagaland, helps to explain the motivations behind the high-level championing of local governance reforms within Nagaland. These reforms driven from the top deliberately sought to re-shape local governance at the very local level of community institutions, leaving little space for the politicisation of institutions and actors.

A second feature unique to the Nagaland context is that of strong customary local governance institutions. This has included norms and practices of community-wide deliberation to achieve ‘consensus’ over local concerns. While there is a danger of over-romanticising the democratic aspects of customary Naga governance systems, there do appear to be some impacts on contemporary Naga political culture at the local level which have supported the

Communitisation process, through the acceptance of a role for ordinary citizens. To date, the new governance spaces created by the *Communitisation* committees in education, health, electricity, water and sanitation appear to have acted as an effective check on the Village Councils and the Village Development Boards. Supported by their mandates from within the communities and through technical support and official guidelines from the centre, these committees have enjoyed a degree of autonomy, authority and power from which to set priorities, monitor and correct for service delivery failures.

Nevertheless, some lessons from the Nagaland *Communitisation* experience are of direct relevance for other contexts. The first of these is the importance of establishing clarity around the new roles and responsibilities involved in a deep-seated reform of this nature. This clarity has been achieved in part through investments in capacity building. The establishment of new roles and responsibilities was not necessarily easy to achieve: initial suspicion among Naga citizens with respect to official motives to do with *Communitisation* took time to dispel, as people gradually recognised a difference between privatisation and the government off-loading its own responsibilities, as was feared to be the case, and a process of empowering communities to act, on the other. Nevertheless, as has been noted, the need to build local capacity to manage and monitor services remains a severe challenge.

Note

1 Based on research undertaken for the present case study, including interviews with officials and other stakeholders, as well as a review of official documentation.

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A second broader lesson is that the Nagaland *Communitisation* process centrally involved a significant transfer of resources and assets to community management. This has sharply shifted power relations away from the official administration and to communities. This transfer of authority and power through the transfer of assets and resources may be the critical factor explaining the success of the *Communitisation* committees, the core institutional innovation of the initiative. In other contexts, similar new governance spaces have often proven to be toothless talk-shops: by contrast, in Nagaland these new committees have wielded new control of vital resources and assets. This helps to explain some of the successes in terms of local mobilisation of resources to support public services: a relatively strong sense of local ownership has been achieved.

Third, the Nagaland *Communitisation* experience points to the importance of high-level champions of change. In this case the former Secretary R.S. Pandey spearheaded the process of *Communitisation* reform. Again, the urgency of the context of conflict and the related failure, to date, of conventional public administration systems to deliver adequate services to the people of Nagaland must be recognised as an important factor explaining the conception and effective implementation of *Communitisation*.

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