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Q17

Do you agree with the view that increasing dependence on donor agencies for development reduces the importance of community participation in the development process ? Justify your answer.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · GS II · 15 marks · Development Processes and NGOs

Development processes and the development industry - the role of NGOs, SHGs, various groups and associations, donors, charities, institutional and other stakeholders.

Core demand of the question

- Do you agree with the view that increasing dependence on donor agencies for development reduces the importance of community participation in the development process? Justify your answer

Revision summary

Donor agencies operate on disbursement cycles and headquarters standards.

Those rhythms often turn gram sabhas into consultation checklists rather than decision-makers.

Parallel PIUs drain staff and legitimacy from constitutional local bodies.

Some donor projects did spread **social audit** and PRA; that is the exception to design for, not the default.

FCRA and NGO chains can shift accountability away from the neighbourhood.

Agree with the view as a default risk; reverse it only if the community can change the project.

Introduction

Donor agencies - multilateral banks, bilateral aid, and large philanthropic funds - bring money, procurement rules, and logframes. Community participation brings knowledge of the watershed, the slum, and the caste veto that no consultant captures. Dependence on the first often thins the second, unless the project is deliberately designed the other way round.

Body**Why the view is largely right**

- Donor cycles run on appraisal, disbursement, and closing dates. Gram sabhas and ward committees run on seasons, funerals, and harvests. When the cycle wins, meetings become attendance sheets for a mission, not decisions.
- English logframes, environmental and social standards written in headquarters, and fly-in experts shift agenda-setting to those who can write a "results framework," which is rarely the self-help group that will maintain the handpump.
- Counterpart funding and conditionalities can turn the panchayat into a contractor of a pre-decided package, which is the opposite of **Article 243A** gram-sabha primacy and of PESA's resource consent in scheduled areas.

- **FCRA** and domestic NGO funding chains can make local organisations more accountable to a Delhi or foreign compliance unit than to the neighbourhood they claim to represent.

Mechanisms that crowd out participation

- Parallel project implementation units pay better than the panchayat secretary; talent and information leave the constitutional local body.
- Consultations are front-loaded to tick a safeguard box, then design is frozen; later "participation" is unpaid labour for a scheme the village did not choose.
- Success is measured in kilometres of pipe and number of trainings, not in whether the user group still meets after the donor leaves.

Why the view is not always right

- Some donor-funded projects introduced **social audit**, community scorecards, and participatory rural appraisal into Indian practice, which State departments then copied.
- Money with a participation condition can force a reluctant line department to sit with women and Dalits it would otherwise skip.
- Community participation without resources can be empty ritual; a well-governed external fund can finance the tank the gram sabha already voted for.

Justification and the design test

- The statement should be accepted as the default risk of dependence, not as a metaphysical law.
- **The test is who can change the project:** if the gram sabha cannot drop a component, participation is decorative.
- Indian development already has constitutional community institutions - panchayats, municipalities, forest rights gram sabhas, cooperatives. Donors should finance those institutions' choices, not replace them with PIUs.
- Domestic resource mobilisation (SFC devolution, property tax, user charges with accountability) is the structural alternative to a permanent donor hinge.

Justify in one line of policy

- Increase community power first (information, veto, maintenance funds), then take donor money as a servant of that power; reversing the order does reduce participation, and that is why the view deserves agreement with the caveat above.

Flow diagram

Donor logframe and PIU -> Upward accountability
 Gram sabha panchayat -> Local agenda
 Upward accountability -> Participation becomes attendance
 Local agenda -> Donor as financier not principal
 Donor logframe and PIU -> Gram sabha panchayat

Conclusion

Yes, increasing dependence on donor agencies tends to reduce real community participation, because time, language, and accountability shift upward. The tendency can be reversed only when constitutional local bodies hold the agenda and donors fund that agenda, rather than the other way around.

Facts & figures

Article 243A

Gram sabha at the village level; the constitutional site of community participation in panchayat raj.

PESA Act, 1996

Requires gram sabha consultation and consent in scheduled areas on specified resource and land matters, which donor projects can sideline if they deal only with departments.

FCRA

Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, which regulates foreign funding of associations and has tightened compliance, altering NGO-community relations.

Social audit

Community verification of works and muster rolls, used in MGNREGA and some donor-supported livelihoods projects; a participation tool when it is independent.

Project Implementation Unit

Parallel cell common in externally aided projects; often better paid than the line panchayat office, which is how dependence hollows local government.

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