



A Study on Convergent Action at the Grassroots during COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic brought certain circumstances which were never witnessed at such a scale. The response to this Pandemic was with strategically choreographed convergent action across different levels of both the government sector and non-government sector. This paper examines and documents the experiences of field functionaries like Anganwadi Workers, ASHA workers and Field Functionaries of State Rural Livelihood Mission during this Pandemic. This paper is based on Qualitative Research conducted with the tool of Narrative Analysis where the experiences of respondents from Fatehabad District, Birbhum, and Uttar Dinajpur Districts in West Bengal were documented. The sampling process done to select specific respondents was done purposively (purposive sampling). Anganwadi Workers and ASHA Workers under usual circumstances do practice convergent action among themselves but during the process of institutional quarantine in rural settings, the inter-departmental convergence was evident because field functionaries of various in-line departments have proven to be a significant success. Moreover, the service-delivery component under different schemes has been modified relatively. SHG Groups which has been primarily viewed concerning micro-finance or credit has played a role in multiple domains with service delivery, market production. Convergence has been a contemporary highlighted concern in social work and development practice.

Keywords: Convergence, Convergent Action, Field Action & Practice, SHG, COVID-19 Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Convergence as a concept is a contemporary concern and thematic area which is visible concerning practice and research. Convergence or Convergent Action in various realms has been directly visible across the world. In this paper, we initially examine the trajectory of conceptual mooring of convergence and convergent action. Also, this paper focuses on the concepts of convergence and associated insights from practice in the Indian context. Finally, the paper documents the convergent action and the associated application and experiences of field functionaries during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Convergence as a theme or concept in both theory and the academic realm is an old and evolving phenomenon. Convergence in Public Policy has been an underlying tenant in public policy formation and implementation over the years, the associated tag or effective terminology of convergence might have missed thus the formal recognition of convergence is lacking. Bennett argues that Convergence can be defined as the tendency of societies to grow more alike, to develop similarities in structures, processes, and performances. Convergence was often viewed as a position of the depths of sociological and political inquiry and raise the most pro- found theoretical concerns. On a macro-level, convergence is normally associated with the range of social and economic forces produced by industrialism. Moreover, with time and change Convergence was more of an ideological position or a theoretical predisposition to how public policy should be drafted and effectively implemented (Bennett, 1991).

The associated changes in public policy can be studied in contention with political, economic approach-based changes and shifts between schools and theories. As Hall points out, the central contention is that the state, broadly understood as the executive, legislative, and judicial apparatus of the nation, has an important impact of its own on the nature of public policy and considerable independence from organized social interests and the electoral coalitions that might otherwise be said to drive policy. The process whereby policy changes into three subtypes according to the magnitude of the changes involved and by invoking the concept of policy paradigms, we can discern more variation in social learning. The process of learning associated with important third-order changes in policy can be a much broader affair subject to powerful influences from society and the political arena. The focal aspect is the process of implementation public policy (Hall, 1993).

Convergence has evolved significantly with time from the initial conceptual mooring to more of a functioning paradigm and guideline. The concept of Convergence has often been argued

to be about the process of harmonization and collectivism or collective action. Convergence in contention with practice and action can be understood in these terms that different stakeholders coordinating together for collective targeted action is essential for practice. Convergence further needs to be horizontally and vertically which mainly linked to coordination between diverse specializations and the vertical levels system of implementation. This will be further explained later with examples as the argument progresses. Convergence and Convergent Action has been more highlighted in relatively recent periods thus central focus is being provided as an approach or functioning paradigm, but its predisposition has been existent in various forms and theoretical implications.

In India, Convergence can be traced back to the Community Development Programmes (CDP) which were the foundations of public policy and welfare service delivery from the beginning of Independent India. The concepts of coordination and inter-dependence and self and mutual help can be traced within the components and functioning of the CDP. But there was a lack of recognition of these components. Moreover, the concept of convergence on paper, in a plan can be explained with the landmark example of the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP). The case of IRDP specifically provides multiple learning outcomes in contention with convergence because the objectives and target beneficiaries of the program ranged across different compositions of the Indian society. IRDP although implemented by the Department of Rural Development, had concepts of environment, sanitation, health, infrastructure, and women & child development which provided significant scope for convergence to be displayed in practice among all the in-line departments to work in tandem towards horizontal convergence. IRDP also provided outcomes in terms of complexity and challenges of convergence in practice. As per the 9th Five Year Plan Volume 2, There has been a poor convergence of TRYSEM with IRDP which has also been reflected in the Fourth Round of the Concurrent Evaluation of IRDP (1992-93). Only 3.88 percent of the IRDP beneficiaries had received training under TRYSEM. It was also observed that the rural youth trained under TRYSEM were only interested in the stipendiary benefits they received during training and therefore, had not utilized the knowledge gained under the program for furthering their self-employment prospects. In practice, therefore, such expenditure on training had become infructuous because of an absence of linkages between the employment opportunities available and training provided. (9th Five Year Plan, 1997) Furthermore, the components of IRDP DWRA, Integrational Poverty Alleviation Schemes displayed the specific challenges in convergence in practice and the technological gap. It displayed the dichotomy existing between

convergence as a concept and operationalizing it into practice thus provided as a source of learning outcome.

During the change of the century, Convergence as an approach might not have been directly present but the thought of the efficacy of the self-help groups (SHGs) would be considerably enhanced if a symbiosis could be worked out between the SHGs and the PRIs. The space for development administration and political processes at the sub-district levels is limited now, the PRIs are competing with the SHGs for such space. Establishing a system through which the SHGs and the PRIs interface efficiently, is eminently possible because by nature and mandate both these institutions have the same objective, viz, of ushering people-centred development and through it to empower the disempowered. In the concept of enhancement of responsiveness, accountability, and transparency, there should be an institutional and functional linkage with the SHG. Effecting convergence of development programs and initiatives being implemented in the state by different agencies and line departments (Bandhyopadhyay, Yugandhar, & Mukherjee, 2002).

Another significant example of the convergence can be drawn from law and yet another government policy Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). This approach primarily laid the foundation of convergent action into practice. It specified the need for convergence as an approach and implementing mechanism that to effectively address the issue of poverty alleviation, there is a need to optimize efforts through inter-sectoral approaches. The convergence of different programmes like Watershed Programmes, National Agriculture Development Programme (Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana), National Horticulture Mission, Scheme of Artificial Recharge of Ground Water through Dug well, BRGF, with NREGA will enable better planning and effective investments in rural areas. This convergence will bring in synergies between different government programmes/schemes in terms of planning, process, and implementation. This will also facilitate sustainable development.

After the formation of NITI Aayog in 2015 mainstreaming of Convergence as an approach and a tool for practical implementation took place. The Socio-Economic Caste Census 2011 was taken as the basis for determining beneficiary level entitlements for several programs. Given that the SECC started as a census, a mechanism for updating the data regularly was institutionalized. The effective practice of convergence in contemporary times can be displayed

from various government mission mode programmes among which a few examples will be discussed and explained.

Primarily, while talking about the National Rural Livelihood Mission with the Deendayal Antodaya Yojana displays direct implementation and practice of convergence.

The provisions and practices about Convergence are listed below:

- Entitlements – PDS, MGNREGS, Right to Education, etc.
- Improving Quality of life – Health & nutrition, clean drinking water, sanitation
- Capacity Building – Elementary education, vocational, technical education, skills development, etc.
- Sustainable Livelihood – Institutional and Micro Finance, Agriculture, animal husbandry, watersheds, MSME development, food processing, etc.
- Infrastructure Schemes – Roads, electricity, telecommunications, etc.

The effectiveness of programmes can be vastly enhanced with linkages between the institutions and the beneficiaries through the Panchayat Raj institutions and the respective line ministries. The convergence and partnerships would enable them and us to develop different models for service delivery. NRLM/SRLMs would work on developing these partnerships and build synergies.

National Health Mission also talks about sufficient focus on and convergence with programs addressing the key social determinants of health (nutrition, drinking water, and sanitation). Also, The PM Nutrition Council set up to address malnutrition in 200 high-burden districts convened in 2010 but there was no follow-up. A National Nutrition Mission (NNM) was launched in 2018 under the Ministry of Women and Child Development with representation from allied in-line Ministries. There is a full-fledged and web-enabled Nutrition Information System which is synergized with the Health Management Information System and the mother and Child Tracking System. For optimal nutritional outcomes, NITI Aayog recommended coordination among different frontline workers (ASHA, ANM, and AWW) is essential. The Take-Home Ration (THR) component of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) converged with the Maternity Benefit Programme (MBP) and efficacy of implementing the ICD Supplementary nutrition component through a conditional cash transfer route (transferred directly into the mother's Jan Dhan account). The Village Health and Nutrition Day now constitutes the core of convergent action at the state, district, and panchayat levels. Also, under the National Nutrition Mission at the state level, this convergence is facilitated through the state, district, and block-level convergence committees that have been constituted, each led by

the senior-most administrative head of that level. At the village level, the Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Day (VHSND) provide the convergence platform for service delivery by frontline functionaries of the two most critical departments – health and family welfare, and women and child development.

In 2018, NITI Aayog recommended ensuring convergence of provisions under the National Urban Livelihood Mission, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, Construction Skill Development Council of India, and MGNREGA (for rural areas) for large-scale training of masons to meet construction targets.

Convergence has gradually become mainstream and has received full due recognition as an approach and as the approach for the future. When the COVID-19 Pandemic set in and the existing conditions for the public specifically impacting the under-privileged, the field functionaries, and grassroots workers of all the in-line departments, the general administration department faced a challenge of a particular scale that was unprecedented. Convergent Action was displayed significantly, it was the chosen approach for the relief, welfare service delivery both pre-existing and emergency to meet the conditions and circumstances about the COVID-19 Pandemic. This paper will now look to present the methodology of the study and further document the finding of experiences from the field functionaries about the work done and convergent action during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In this study, the research design followed was descriptive in nature. The specific approach of research undertaken during this Study was narrative analysis. The rationale behind the narrative analysis was to describe in detail the concepts and findings that arise from it. Furthermore, the specific tools of data collection administered were semi-structured interviews. There were two major sources that this research study based upon Primary Data- Collected from the field site through tools of data collection (semi-structured interview and observation). The primary data collected from the field was supported by Secondary Data in the form of the existing literature. The primary data collected was transcribed and assigned thematic codes (thematic coding) accordingly through the thematic codes and based upon these codes along with the sectional division of the interview guide, the primary data analysis was undertaken. The research was conducted in the Birbhum and Uttar Dinajpur Districts of West Bengal and Fatehabad District, Haryana, India. The sampling strategy that was followed and used in this study was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was used because of the method of sampling because the target

respondents were Field Functionaries which acted as pre-selected criteria, helped in explaining the purpose of to study to the respondents of the Field Functionary respondent profile. The sample size was a total of 10 respondents distributed as 2 Young Professionals (HSRLM), 2 Self Help Group (SHG) Members and 2 Anganwadi Workers in Fatehabad and 2 SHG Members under West Bengal State Rural Livelihood Mission (WBSRLM) in Prantik, Birbhum, and 2 Anganwadi Workers of Kaliyaganj Block in Uttar Dinajpur. The ethical consideration which followed are informed consent and anonymity.

RESULTS

The insights obtained from the study will be presented thematically about the work done and the experiences of convergent action among field functionaries. Initially, findings will be presented in detail and further, they will be discussed and summarized. The frontline grassroots workers during the initial onset of the pandemic experienced a specific nature of work that was relatively new to them. There was a large-scale movement of significant waves of human movement in terms of migrant workers and families returning to natives. As the respondents provided the perspective that the set-up of quarantine centres was the priority of the general administration department, and most field functionaries were directly involved in the maintenance of the quarantine centres. Members of SHG from Haryana provided direct insight into how the community canteens and village canteens were set up where members of the SHG cooked food in relatively larger quantities and transported it to the village schools and community centre which had been converted into quarantine centres. Anganwadi Worker and Helper from the village explained that they were assisting the SHG Members in the community kitchen as well as teaming up with Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) to follow up with the beneficiaries and people who were in quarantine, significant amounts of surveys and data management and entry in addition to the basic Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme service delivery. The critical understanding here is that Anganwadi Workers being the field functionary of ICDS and ASHA and Auxiliary Nursing Midwife (ANM) representing the Department of Health as the field functionary converging is not convergence at its first because even in the pre-COVID19 period on various occasions like Vaccination and Immunization Drives for children, Village Health Sanitation Nutrition Day (VHSND) meetings these functionaries do come across each other and often work in tandem with each other and that skill set came into significant use while working field functionaries and under emergency circumstances. Anganwadi Worker respondents from West Bengal provided insights that were supplementary and further went on to explain how the THR service delivery became doorstep

delivery as well as the eggs and milk which the beneficiaries of the Anganwadi Centre get. The focal problem or challenge which the respondent pointed out that there was extensive documentation that was being provided from the Block Development Office as well as Panchayat Samiti whereas Anganwadi Workers were relatively less used to large surveys because they perform specific data recording and entry required for ICDS.

The SHG Member respondents from West Bengal responded that immediately at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as the government realized the shortage in supply-side for masks comparatively with the demand side, they were instructed that there was a significant scope and mask making became a direct activity for all group members. Initially, they were making basic masks but later from the department, they were provided 3 ply mask-making training by the master trainer thus the quality of mask-making also increased. They received market linkage in Bolpur and Santiniketan but later the market linkage spread across the Birbhum district as well as consignments were shipped to Kolkata. The members said that groups earned monetary benefits of 20000 and 26000 respectively and have been constantly engaging in the activity.

The SHG Member respondents from Haryana provided insights about various work that was carried out by them during the pandemic times ranging from mask making, running the block canteen among others. As the respondents pointed out that in Haryana there was significant coordination across all levels from the district, block, cluster for the Haryana State Rural Livelihood Mission and in specifics at the village level. As per the findings from the respondents, SHG Members have conducted mask making and sanitizer making as an exercise and generated revenue ranging around 16000-17000 with the help of market linkage provided through the project. Moreover, the experience of community kitchens led to large-scale SHGs run canteens to provide free food cooked to underprivileged sections of the population funded by the District Collector which was replicated in other districts as best practice. Also, SHG Members directly participated in the awareness and social behaviour change communication in the village, distributing masks and sanitizer along with talks to generate awareness and help the best practices for the prevention component of COVID-19.

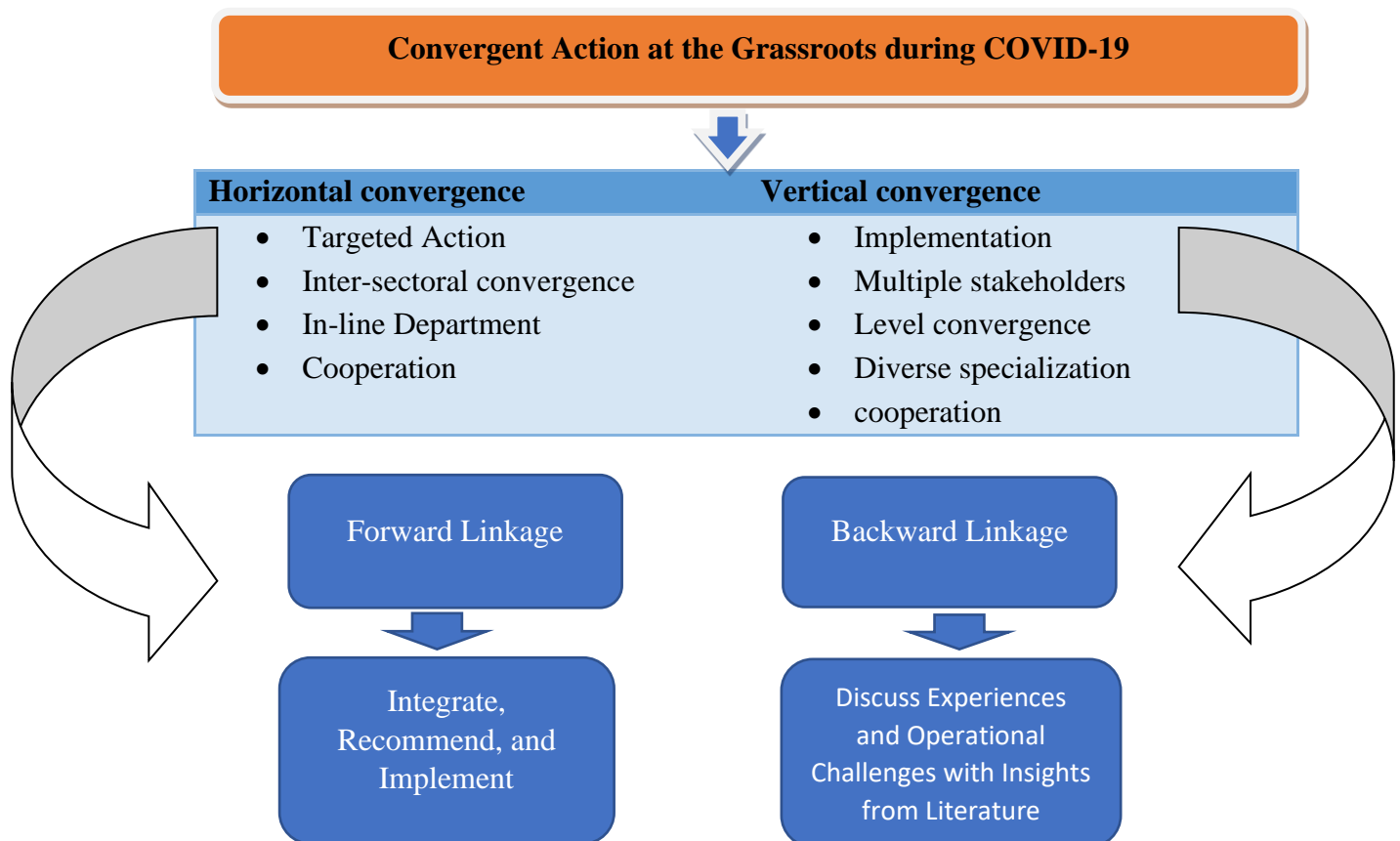


Figure 1: Convergent Action – The Practical Approach

DISCUSSION

The concept of convergence can be historically traced in various forms like political development theory or from concepts of public policy theories. Convergence might not have been expressed in specific terminology, but the sub-concept was often individually context. Initially, because of the practical challenges like convergent action in practice among line departments, it was not considered as an approach for development or welfare service delivery. With the onset of specifications and specializations, convergence did find potential obstacles but fundamentally the conceptual theme was always there, and it was an approach that was aimed at the future. As discussed earlier, Convergence in one of the older programs IRDP it did not fare well in terms of practice, but the theoretical mooring was laid down and it provided multiple learning outcomes that helped to understand the difficult complexities of convergence in practice and move forward to correct them. Gradually, convergence started being placed as specific components in different schemes as part of the broader package and that is what laid the foundation of convergent action in practice. The fundamental argument that needs to be encompassed in that convergence is more than a way or strategy it is an approach which to

encompasses multiple-stakeholders both vertically across different levels and horizontally along with the in-line departments.

Over time convergence has been relatively mainstreamed in becoming the core operational pillar of the MGNREGA to provide meaningful employment in collaboration with all in-line departments and various other government schemes. In the recent past, Convergence has been upscaled to all welfare service delivery and development whether it be central sector schemes like Namami Gange-National Ganga Plan which has displayed large-scale convergence across multiple different states where and different stakeholders for a targeted approach. In Centrally Sponsored Schemes the concept of convergence becomes practically challenging because there is an increased need for convergence between in-line departments at centre, between centre and state, and the implementation of correct and effective convergent action among implementing state government in-line departments and panchayats. But there have been multiple cases where convergence has been the core approach in Swachh Bharat Mission, National Nutrition Mission, Smart Cities Mission among others. The argument that convergence as a gradually developing approach has significantly helped field functionaries at the grassroots level. The associated utility was displayed at an unprecedented scale during the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic and enhanced nationwide lockdown leading to an unprecedented scale of relief, welfare service delivery, and development work required across the country. The study primarily found from respondents (which ranged from field functionaries Anganwadi Workers and Young Professionals) and field functioning units like the SHG and members who were usually beneficiaries from the scheme on this occasion have stepped up to be significant stakeholders for implementation. As the perspective from findings of the study has arisen that gradual convergence in different work and activity has helped during an emergency to tackle with a complete vertically and horizontally convergent and targeted action. SHG Members have directly contributed to making a difference by production in masks and sanitizers to meet the initial essential workforce demand and then the immediate surge in market demand. Thus, in due process, they have earned potential meaningful sources of livelihood as well. Also, the concept of community kitchens which have been successful with the implementation by the SHG Members has been used to tackle the humanitarian crisis during the lockdown. Anganwadi Workers who have been relatively more used to convergence with their allied field functionaries of the health department were effective in coordinating the entire umbrella banner of ICDS Services except for Anganwadi Centre not functioning and have also converged with SHG members to help set up and functioning of quarantine centres which were setup in village

community centres and schools for quarantine of the multiple waves of migrants that took place.

While tracing the backward linkage from the literature suggests that convergence as an approach needs to be integration of vertical structure of levels convergence and horizontal structure of inter-sectoral or inter-departmental cooperation which will enhance relative effectiveness and efficiency of field action and practice in the grassroots. The discussion can be summarized into fundamentally four imperative themes that convergent action will require: a) Change in Conceptualization from Terminology to Independent Approach, b) stakeholders, c) participation and d) cooperation (both in vertical system level & horizontal sector level).

CONCLUSION

While summing up the arguments the learning outcome in terms of perspective is that how convergence has undergone change and has had a trajectory from being classified in componential parts to a unit as a collective and from being parts of a broad programme to an individual approach and that also one for the future. Convergence in the contemporary world is an approach that looks at the future and possesses significant scope for the future in terms of practice and research in public policy. Convergence needs to be understood in contention with the historical predispositions for learning outcomes for the future to be generated. Convergence as a strategy involves multiple stakeholders and needs to bridge the gap between vertical levels and systems as well as horizontal structures like in-line departments. Convergence needs to be viewed as the essence of coordination and information sharing for mutual benefits and positive outcomes. Convergence as a theme does not have a specific end because it is a contemporary and relatively less explored field in research that provides significant scope for further information generation which will potentially provide significant input and enhancement to practice.

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