

# Implementation of Panchayati Raj in Assam: Issues and Challenges

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**Abstract:** The Panchayati Raj system, envisioned as a decentralized framework of governance, plays a critical role in empowering rural communities and promoting participatory democracy in India. In Assam, the implementation of this system has witnessed both structural progress and persistent challenges. This paper seeks to examine the current status and effectiveness of the Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) in the state, focusing on their role in rural governance, service delivery, and grassroots development. The research explores the functioning of the three-tier structure, financial and administrative devolution, and the extent of public participation in local decision-making processes. Drawing from both primary and secondary data, the study also identifies major obstacles that impede the optimal functioning of PRIs in Assam, such as lack of adequate funding, political interference, limited autonomy, and capacity constraints among elected representatives. The findings highlight a gap between policy design and ground-level implementation, stressing the need for policy reforms, better accountability mechanisms, and capacity-building measures. The study contributes to the broader discourse on decentralization by offering insights specific to Assam's socio-political context, and suggests actionable recommendations to strengthen Panchayati Raj governance in the state.

**Keywords:** Assam, decentralization, governance, grassroots, Panchayati Raj, rural development.



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## I. Introduction

The Panchayati Raj system in India was institutionalized with the objective of decentralizing governance and empowering rural communities through local self-government. Rooted in the ideals of participatory democracy, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 provided a constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and mandated a three-tier system of governance at the village, intermediate, and district levels. These institutions are expected to play a pivotal role in rural development, local planning, social justice, and public service delivery. Assam, being a socio-culturally diverse state with a significant rural population, adopted the Panchayati Raj framework in alignment with the national vision, but its implementation has witnessed both progress and persistent challenges.

The unique historical, political, and ethnic landscape of Assam poses specific complexities in the functioning of PRIs. While the state has made efforts to empower local bodies through legislation and policy, the actual execution often falls short due to various structural and administrative constraints. In many areas, the functioning of Panchayat is hampered by inadequate financial resources, limited administrative autonomy, political interference, and lack of capacity among elected representatives. Moreover, the uneven socio-economic development across districts and the presence of Sixth Schedule areas and Autonomous Councils further complicate the uniform implementation of the Panchayati Raj system.

Despite constitutional and legal provisions, the decentralization process in Assam has not fully translated into genuine grassroots empowerment. The devolution of functions, funds, and functionaries — popularly known as the 3Fs — remains incomplete and inconsistent. Panchayati Raj Institutions often depend heavily on state machinery for basic operations, which undermines their autonomy. Furthermore, lack of awareness, insufficient training of Panchayat members, irregular elections, and poor infrastructure have weakened the decision-making and service delivery capacity of the local bodies.

This research paper seeks to critically examine the implementation status of the Panchayati Raj system in Assam. It aims to explore the effectiveness of PRIs in achieving their intended goals and to identify the key challenges that obstruct their proper functioning. By drawing insights from policy reviews, secondary data, and field observations, the study intends to contribute to the understanding of decentralized governance in Assam and recommend policy measures for strengthening the Panchayati Raj framework.

The paper examines the current status and effectiveness of the implementation of the Panchayati Raj system in Assam, and to identify the key challenges and issues hindering the proper functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions in the state. In doing so, it provides a contextual and analytical perspective on local governance in Assam, focusing on the gaps between policy and practice.

## **II. Objectives:**

- 1. To examine the current status and effectiveness of the implementation of the Panchayati Raj system in Assam.**
- 2. To identify the key challenges and issues hindering the proper functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions in Assam.**

## **III. Methodology**

This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design to assess the current status and challenges in the implementation of the Panchayati Raj system in Assam. Both primary and secondary data sources were utilized. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) representatives, government officials, and community members. The secondary data were gathered from government reports, Panchayati Raj Ministry documents, Assam State Institute of Rural Development (ASIRD) publications, and relevant academic journals. Four districts—Kamrup (M), Dibrugarh, Kokrajhar, and Dhemaji—were selected purposively to represent both plain and tribal areas. Within each district, 2 Zilla Parishads, 2 Anchalik Panchayats, and 4 Gaon Panchayats were chosen for field data collection.

A total of 160 respondents participated in the study, including 40 PRI officials, 80 elected members (with a focus on women and SC/ST representatives), and 40 local community stakeholders. Quantitative data were analyzed using percentage analysis and bar charts, while qualitative responses were examined through thematic analysis. Tools like Microsoft Excel and SPSS were used for basic tabulation and coding. The research focused on key indicators such as

the frequency of Gram Sabha meetings, fund utilization, training and capacity of members, and participation of marginalized groups. This mixed-method approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the structural and functional dimensions of PRIs in Assam.

#### IV. Result and Discussion

##### Current Status and Effectiveness of the Implementation of the Panchayati Raj System in Assam

The Panchayati Raj system, a cornerstone of decentralized governance in India, was constitutionally formalized through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992. This act sought to empower rural local bodies by establishing a three-tier structure—village, intermediate, and district levels. Assam, adhering to this national directive, implemented the **Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1994**, aiming to promote participatory governance, grassroots development, and local accountability. The structure in Assam comprises: **Zilla Parishads** at the district level, **Anchalik Panchayats** at the block/intermediate level and **Gaon Panchayats** at the village level.

However, despite the constitutional mandate and legal provisions, the practical implementation of the Panchayati Raj system in Assam is riddled with inconsistencies. A range of **administrative, political, and socio-ethnic complexities** hampers the proper functioning and effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the state. Particularly in ethnically sensitive and autonomous regions, the jurisdictional overlaps between PRIs and **Autonomous Councils under the Sixth Schedule** have created dual governance structures that often contradict each other.

##### *Structural Framework and Coverage*

As of the Government of Assam's 2023 records; Assam has **21 Zilla Parishads, 185 Anchalik Panchayats**, and over **2200 Gaon Panchayats**. This widespread structure reflects the state's commitment to decentralized governance in principle. However, the **coverage of PRIs is not uniform across Assam**. In hill districts such as **Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao**, areas governed by Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) under the **Sixth Schedule of the Constitution**, PRIs either do not exist or are functionally irrelevant. These ADCs exercise legislative, administrative, and financial control over their respective areas, often leading to **exclusion of PRIs** from critical developmental activities. This **jurisdictional conflict** undermines policy uniformity and creates administrative confusion. For instance, developmental schemes and fund allocation frameworks often face hurdles in coordination and implementation due to this **duality of governance**. As a result, PRIs are effectively excluded from performing their constitutionally mandated roles in large parts of the state.

##### *Functional Effectiveness*

While structural expansion is evident, **functional efficiency remains a significant concern** for PRIs in Assam. The **Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDs)** are intended to be participatory, village-specific, and need-based development plans formulated by the Panchayats. However, studies (Kalita, 2021) show that Only **38% of PRIs** in Assam actually prepared annual development plans. Among them, over **60% relied heavily on block-level officials** or consultants for formulation, indicating a lack of in-house technical capacity and planning skills. This dependency reflects poor institutional capacity at the grassroots level. Many Panchayats lack trained staff, technical experts, and necessary support to independently undertake developmental planning. Consequently, the development plans often do not reflect the **actual needs of the local population**, undermining the core objective of **bottom-up planning**.

##### ➤ Citizen Participation

Another pillar of effective Panchayati Raj is the **Gram Sabha**, which serves as a platform for villagers to voice opinions, approve plans, and hold Panchayat officials accountable. Unfortunately, Assam's performance in this area is also disappointing i.e. **67% of Panchayats**

failed to conduct regular and mandatory **Gram Sabha meetings** (Talukdar & Hazarika, 2020). The reasons cited include **low public awareness**, **poor community mobilization**, and **political indifference**. The failure to conduct Gram Sabha meetings regularly leads to a **democratic deficit**, where decisions are made without consulting the people, thereby reducing transparency and accountability. Moreover, this weakens trust in the Panchayati Raj system and distances citizens from the developmental process.

**Table-1 Effectiveness in Panchayati Raj Institutions**

Component	Kamrup	Dibrugarh,	Kokrajhar	Dhemaji
Devolution of Powers	40%	60%	50%	70%
Financial Autonomy	35%	45%	33%	25%
Training of Members	30%	39%	40%	50%
Infrastructure	25%	55%	35%	45%
Social Inclusion	20%	28%	40%	30%

Source: Author, Primary source

Table-1 presents a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in four districts of Assam—Kamrup, Dibrugarh, Kokrajhar, and Dhemaji—based on five key components: devolution of powers, financial autonomy, training of members, infrastructure, and social inclusion. The data is derived from a primary source and reflects field-level realities. It (based on field data estimates) provides a quantitative assessment of the functional aspects of PRIs in Assam across key components. The effectiveness is measured as a percentage out of 100%:

### Devolution of Powers

Dhemaji leads with 70% effectiveness in the devolution of powers, indicating a higher level of functional autonomy at the grassroots. In contrast, Kamrup shows the lowest at 40%, suggesting centralization of authority and weaker local governance mechanisms. The low score indicates that the State Government still retains significant powers over planning, execution, and budgeting. Devolution remains **partial and fragmented**, especially in decision-making and implementation of schemes. PRIs are often reduced to **execution bodies** rather than independent planning and governance institutions.

### Financial Autonomy

All four districts display low levels of financial autonomy, with Kamrup (35%) and Dhemaji (25%) at the bottom. This suggests that despite some devolution of functions, the lack of financial control limits PRIs' ability to execute plans independently. PRIs in Assam largely depend on **state and central grants**, with minimal own revenue generation. This undermines their autonomy and delays development projects due to fund constraints and bureaucratic procedures.

### Training of Members

Training is crucial for informed decision-making. Here, Dhemaji again performs best (50%), while Kamrup (30%) lags behind. This gap could contribute to inefficient governance and poor planning outcomes. Most elected members lack formal training in governance, budgeting, digital tools, or scheme execution. Capacity-building programs are sporadic and inadequate, limiting effective performance.

### Infrastructure

Dibrugarh shows notable strength in infrastructure (55%), supporting efficient PRI operations, while Kamrup (25%) reflects poor facilities, which may hamper administrative functioning. Basic office infrastructure such as computers, meeting spaces, electricity, and digital access are lacking

in many Gaon Panchayats. Poor infrastructure limits administrative efficiency and public service delivery.

### Social Inclusion

Social inclusion remains the weakest component overall, particularly in Kamrup (20%) and Dibrugarh (28%). Kokrajhar leads with 40%, indicating relatively better representation and participation from marginalized groups. Women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and other marginalized groups often face exclusion in planning and decision-making processes. Although reservation exists on paper, **active and meaningful participation** remains low due to social hierarchies, lack of awareness, and cultural barriers.

The table-1 highlights inter-district disparities in PRI effectiveness. Dhemaji emerges as the most balanced in terms of power devolution and training, whereas Kamrup faces significant structural and institutional weaknesses. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions, especially in financial empowerment, inclusive governance, and capacity-building initiatives.

The Panchayati Raj system in Assam, despite being institutionally established, suffers from **ineffective implementation** on several fronts. While the **structural framework** is in place with a wide network of PRIs, **functional inefficiencies** significantly limit their ability to deliver on their constitutional and developmental promises.

Key challenges which have been observed are basically -Inadequate devolution of power and finance, Poor planning capacity and over-reliance on block officials, Low levels of community participation in governance, Overlapping jurisdiction with Autonomous Councils in tribal areas, Marginalization of vulnerable social groups, Lack of infrastructure and trained personnel etc. To truly empower Panchayati Raj in Assam, the state needs **systemic reforms** focusing on **capacity building, financial decentralization, technological integration, and community mobilization**. Only then can the vision of "**democracy at the grassroots**" be realized in its true spirit.

Key Challenges and Issues Hindering the Proper Functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Assam

The Panchayati Raj system in Assam, while constitutionally and institutionally in place, suffers from a series of deep-rooted challenges that hinder its effectiveness and sustainability. These challenges are both structural and operational, ranging from inadequate financial resources to social exclusion, administrative weaknesses, political interference, and a growing digital divide. Understanding these issues is vital for proposing sustainable reforms that can strengthen grassroots democracy and governance in the state.

#### Financial Constraints

One of the foundational requirements for any institution to function effectively is financial autonomy. However, PRIs in Assam are plagued by severe financial constraints.

- Most Panchayats generate **little to no independent revenue**. Their capacity to impose and collect taxes, service charges, or rent is underutilized or non-existent. A majority of them rely solely on grants-in-aid from the central or state government.
- A study by **Bora (2020)** highlighted that **over 90% of PRIs in Assam** depend almost entirely on intergovernmental fiscal transfers. This excessive dependence weakens their planning autonomy and delays service delivery.

Even when allocations are made, **bureaucratic bottlenecks in fund release and utilization** cause major inefficiencies. For example, although the **15th Finance Commission** recommended the transfer of ₹ 1300 crore to Assam's PRIs in 2022, **only ₹ 700 crore was utilized** by the end of the fiscal year. This discrepancy was largely due to poorly prepared project proposals, inadequate



administrative support to process fund usage, delay in technical approvals and audits. As a result, PRIs are unable to execute critical development programs on time, thereby losing the confidence of the local populace and undermining grassroots planning.

### *Administrative Challenges*

Administrative capacity is the backbone of effective governance. However, PRIs in Assam face a **crippling shortage of trained staff and technical support**. Most **Gaon Panchayats function with just one secretary**, who is expected to handle all tasks — administrative, financial, reporting, and even technical documentation. This makes quality governance nearly impossible, especially in large Panchayat jurisdictions. According to **NIRDPR (2021)**, **over 75% of Panchayats** do not have access to a **dedicated technical cadre**—such as engineers, accountants, or IT personnel. The lack of professional staffing severely impairs the ability of Panchayats to Formulate detailed project reports (DPRs), Maintain accounts and transparency registers, Monitor implementation of centrally-sponsored schemes. Furthermore, **capacity-building and training programs** remain grossly inadequate. According to the Assam Rural Development Department, Only **28% of PRI representatives** received any form of training between **2020 and 2023**, Most training sessions were generic, lacking hands-on or scheme-specific modules. Consequently, elected members often remain **unaware of their roles, powers, and responsibilities**, limiting the overall institutional performance.

### *Political Interference and Bureaucratic Dominance*

While PRIs are elected bodies, their functioning in Assam is often compromised by **bureaucratic overreach and political interference**. **Block Development Officers (BDOs)** and other district-level officials often exercise overriding authority over Panchayat decisions. This limits the **autonomy of elected representatives**, reducing them to mere implementers rather than decision-makers. Development schemes are frequently chosen and prioritized not based on community needs but on **political favoritism** or pressure from higher-ups. In a study by **Bhattacharya (2019)**, over **60% of Panchayat members surveyed** reported feeling like “**rubber stamps**”, lacking meaningful participation in planning or budget decisions. This erodes democratic decentralization and discourages active involvement by sincere representatives. Political affiliations also impact **the flow of funds and approvals**, where Panchayats aligned with ruling parties receive preferential treatment. This kind of favoritism skews the very spirit of equitable and participatory governance.

### *Social and Gender Exclusion*

Despite progressive constitutional provisions like **reservation of 50% seats for women** and mandates for SC/ST representation, **social exclusion** remains a significant issue in Assam’s Panchayati Raj system. In many cases, **women representatives are mere proxies**, with real control exercised by their husbands or male relatives. The phenomenon of “**sarpanch pati**” is prevalent, especially in rural and traditional settings. Even when women are educated and capable, **socio-cultural barriers** restrict their ability to assert themselves during Gram Sabha meetings or Panchayat sessions. Participation by **Scheduled Castes (SCs)** and **Scheduled Tribes (STs)** is also limited. The lack of awareness, education, and community backing often prevents members of these groups from **raising their voices or influencing decision-making**. In tribal-dominated areas such as **Dhemaji and Kokrajhar**, studies (Saikia, 2022) reveal that **less than 10% of tribal women** attended any **Gram Sabha** in the last year, indicating deep-rooted alienation. This exclusion not only reduces the representativeness of the system but also leads to **inequitable development**, where the needs of the most vulnerable are often ignored.

## Digital Divide and Infrastructure Deficit: A Barrier to Effective e-Governance in Assam's PRIs

With the advent of the Digital India initiative and an increasing thrust toward e-governance, the role of digital infrastructure in strengthening local self-governance has become more critical than ever. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), as the first point of contact for rural citizens in governance processes, are expected to adopt and operate digital tools that ensure transparency, accountability, and efficient delivery of public services. However, in Assam, a significant **digital divide and infrastructural deficit** has emerged as one of the most serious bottlenecks in the smooth functioning of PRIs. This divide manifests in the form of poor internet connectivity, lack of digital literacy, non-functional hardware, and absence of trained staff—all of which adversely impact e-governance and decentralization.

### *Digital Platforms Expected to be Used by PRIs*

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has introduced several digital platforms to ensure uniformity and transparency in planning, financial reporting, and beneficiary management across the country. These include:

- **eGramSwaraj Portal:** An integrated platform that records the development activities and expenditures of each Gram Panchayat. It is designed to enhance transparency and enable real-time financial tracking by both citizens and monitoring agencies.
- **Online Beneficiary Portals:** These are used to manage the list of beneficiaries under schemes such as PMAY-G (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin), MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), NSAP (National Social Assistance Programme), etc.
- **Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) Systems:** These systems are designed to transfer funds and subsidies directly into the bank accounts of beneficiaries, thereby reducing corruption, delays, and leakages.

While these platforms represent a significant step toward digitizing governance, their effective implementation is highly dependent on digital infrastructure, which is severely lacking in Assam's rural governance landscape.

### *Current Digital Readiness of Assam's PRIs*

Several recent assessments, including those cited by **Sharma (2023)**, paint a concerning picture:

- **Over 70% of PRIs in Assam lack stable internet connectivity**, particularly in remote and hilly regions where even mobile networks are unreliable.
- **More than 60% of PRIs do not have functional computers** or any basic hardware infrastructure to access government portals or maintain digital records.
- In many Gaon Panchayat offices, even where computers are available, **staff are not adequately trained** in the operation of digital systems or in data entry and portal navigation.

This lack of digital readiness is not just a technical gap—it is a governance gap that significantly affects the core functions and responsibilities of PRIs.

### *Consequences of the Digital Divide*

The digital divide in Assam's PRIs has multiple consequences that undermine the effectiveness, transparency, and inclusivity of local governance:

#### **1. Inaccurate and Delayed Reporting on e-Portals**

Due to lack of internet and skilled operators:

- Many PRIs fail to update the **eGramSwaraj portal** regularly.

- This leads to **mismatches in financial records**, incomplete documentation of development plans, and poor data monitoring by the state and central governments.

The very purpose of eGramSwaraj—ensuring real-time reporting and accountability—is defeated when Panchayats are unable to comply with digital requirements. As a result, delays in project approval, fund release, and audits become common, further paralyzing the system.

## 2. Inaccessibility of Beneficiary Lists to Common Citizens

Under schemes like PMAY-G and MGNREGS, **digital beneficiary lists** are intended to be publicly accessible so that citizens can verify their inclusion and raise objections if needed. However, in areas without computers or internet access, **citizens are unable to view these lists**. This increases the possibility of **exclusion errors**, where genuine beneficiaries are left out without recourse, and **inclusion errors**, where ineligible names go unchecked. The absence of digital access also means that **Gram Sabhas cannot function effectively**, as members cannot cross-verify online data or participate meaningfully in decision-making.

## 3. Hindrance in DBT Implementation and Service Delivery

Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) is a cornerstone of India's welfare delivery mechanism. PRIs are required to

- ✓ Identify eligible beneficiaries,
- ✓ Upload verified data,
- ✓ Facilitate the opening of bank accounts, and
- ✓ Track payments made to households.

Without digital connectivity and proper equipment:

- **Beneficiary details cannot be uploaded on time.**
- **Payments are delayed or misdirected**, defeating the purpose of DBT in eliminating middlemen and corruption.
- Field-level grievances cannot be resolved efficiently, leading to disillusionment among rural communities.

## 4. Undermining Transparency and Accountability

Transparency is one of the key objectives of digitizing governance. However, in Assam:

- ✓ Where manual systems prevail, there is **greater opportunity for manipulation of records**, forging of bills, and misappropriation of funds.
- ✓ The lack of digital audit trails makes it harder to trace financial flows and detect anomalies.

This **weakens public trust** in Panchayats and perpetuates the cycle of inefficiency and corruption. Transparency tools such as **online asset disclosures**, **social audit portals**, and **public dashboards** remain underutilized or entirely absent.

## 5. Lack of Real-Time Monitoring and Participatory Oversight

Effective local governance relies on the ability to monitor project progress in real time and incorporate citizen feedback. This is only possible through:

- ✓ GPS-tagged photographs of completed assets,
- ✓ Online work progress reports,
- ✓ Live grievance redressed systems.



However, in Assam, **lacks of digital capacity means PRIs are unable to feed real-time data**, and higher authorities are forced to rely on delayed or offline reports. This makes it difficult to:

- ✓ Detect implementation lapses,
- ✓ Evaluate scheme performance,
- ✓ Involve the community in planning and oversight.

This breaks the very spirit of **participatory democracy**, which is the foundation of the Panchayati Raj system.

### *Compounding Factors*

Several interrelated factors aggravate the digital divide in Assam's rural local bodies:

- **Geographic Isolation:** Hilly, forested, and flood-prone areas make physical internet infrastructure hard to install and maintain.
- **Budgetary Constraints:** There is no dedicated budget for digital equipment or training under many rural development programs.
- **Low Digital Literacy:** A significant portion of PRI staff are unfamiliar with basic computer operations, and training programs are either infrequent or ineffective.
- **Absence of Technical Support:** Even if hardware is available, technical issues often go unresolved due to lack of dedicated IT personnel or service networks in rural areas.

### *Recommendations for Bridging the Digital Divide*

To overcome these challenges, the following steps are recommended:

1. **Infrastructure Investment:** Provide each Panchayat with high-speed internet connectivity and at least one fully functional computer system, UPS, and printer.
2. **Capacity Building:** Conduct hands-on training for all PRI members and staff on digital literacy and portal usage.
3. **Dedicated IT Support:** Establish a technical cadre or helpdesk team at the block level to assist Panchayat with troubleshooting and updates.
4. **Mobile Governance Units:** Deploy mobile digital vans with satellite connectivity in remote areas as interim solutions.
5. **E-Governance Budget Allocation:** Mandate earmarked funds under Finance Commission grants for digital tools and training.
6. **Community Access Points:** Set up kiosks in Panchayat offices where citizens can view scheme details, beneficiary lists, and lodge complaints.

## **V. Conclusion**

In the digital age, governance without digital readiness is incomplete and ineffective. The **digital divide in Assam's PRIs is not merely a technological gap**; it reflects deeper issues of inequality, exclusion, and weak institutional capacity. Unless robust efforts are made to bridge this divide, the ideals of transparency, accountability, and participatory development will remain elusive for millions of rural citizens in the state. The Panchayati Raj Institutions in Assam face a wide array of challenges that obstruct their ability to function effectively. From inadequate financial resources and poor staffing to political interference, social marginalization, and digital backwardness—the system is far from realizing the vision of empowered grassroots governance.

These challenges are interlinked-**Financial weakness** limits planning capacity, **Lack of staff and training** results in poor execution, **Bureaucratic and political control** stifles local democracy, **Social and gender exclusion** limits representativeness, **Digital gaps** weaken accountability etc.

To address these issues, a **holistic reform strategy** is needed that emphasizes-Financial devolution and incentivized revenue generation, Professional staffing and capacity-building, Stronger legal safeguards against political manipulation, Active inclusion of marginalized voices, and Investment in digital infrastructure and literacy. Only through such comprehensive efforts can Assam's Panchayati Raj system evolve into a truly participatory, effective, and democratic institution serving the grassroots.

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