

# Total Quality Management in Local Governments of Kerala, India: Some Insights for Replication

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J. B. Rajan<sup>1</sup>  and S. K. Biju<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This article discusses the initiation and implementation of a total quality management (TQM) approach in local governments (LGs) in Kerala, India, with a view to promote its replication in similar contexts. Drawing on the secondary data and authors' experiences of and reflections on conceptualising and implementing the TQM, it presents the initial process of TQM on pilot basis, the front office management (FOM) and scaling up of the FOM, and experience to implement TQM involving 14 steps in LGs. Their observations and reflections suggest that the TQM approach in LGs enhances citizens' satisfaction and engagement. However, physical infrastructure aspect of the TQM is relatively easier to achieve than the soft aspects of the TQM. It argues that though TQM is important, it is a means and not an end. Continuous capacity building, simultaneous focus on hard and soft elements, presence of change agent and peer learning are necessary in LGs to ensure quality service delivery and citizen satisfaction. Experiences and insights shared in this article may be of help to enhance quality service delivery and citizen satisfaction in similar LG contexts and communities.

## Keywords

Citizen satisfaction, decentralisation, local government, service quality, TQM

## Introduction

Decentralisation has attracted increasing attention in the past few decades across the world, especially in developing countries. The aim of decentralisation is to

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<sup>1</sup> Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

<sup>2</sup> Government College, Nedumangad, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

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### Corresponding author:

J. B. Rajan, Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala 680581, India.

E-mail: [jbajan@kila.ac.in](mailto:jbajan@kila.ac.in)

re-design the governmental system in such a way that it can deliver services efficiently and effectively to the citizenry (Olum, 2014). The government being closer to the people, local governments (LGs) across the world are expected to deliver services with quality and provide citizens satisfaction.

Frannie A. Leautier, rightly remarked “In Western democracies, systems of checks and balances built into government structures have formed the core of good governance and have helped empower citizens for more than two hundred years. ... Many developing countries, however, continue to suffer from unsatisfactory and often dysfunctional governance systems ... Such poor governance leads to unwelcome outcomes for access to public services by the poor and other disadvantaged members of the society, such as women, children, and minorities. (Frannie, 2006)

The role of LGs is more relevant in developing countries as their civic functions directly touch upon the everyday life of the common people. Moreover, the local communities in developing countries are deprived of basic amenities and commonly characterised by low income, low levels of living, poor health, inadequate education and so on (Pawar, 2014). Irrespective of whether *Gram Panchayats* in India, *Union Parishads* in Bangladesh, Village Development Committees (now called *Gaunpalika*) in Nepal, *Burangay* in Philippines, *Soums* in Mongolia and so on, the LGs in developing countries play a pivotal role in local development. The improved quality of service delivery will lead to increased citizen satisfaction and thereby an equitable local economic development. In the Indian context, it was argued that Gram Panchayats is the best institution for ensuring the last-mile delivery of services and governance to the village community (Kumar, 2019). Compared with the central government, LG activities are run more on administrative than political logic since the latter is responsible for delivering services directly to the citizen (Im & Lee, 2012). Considering the interface of multiple stakeholders in local governance, the emerging trend is to ensure quality in service delivery and satisfaction of citizens. Total quality management (TQM) is one such widely applied management tool and it proved successful in almost all sectors (Rajan & Biju, 2013). TQM, a management tool widely applied in corporate world, is also relevant in LGs.

The Indian democracy attracted the international attention with the 73rd and 74th Amendments to Indian Constitution, which paved the way for third-tier governance—LG system—in the country with good governance features. Among the states, the legislations on LG in Kerala, southern State of India, is considered a role model, as it implemented decentralisation in accordance with the letter and spirit of the Indian Constitution and covers almost all features of good governance. One of the unique good governance initiatives of LGs in Kerala is implementation of TQM and availing International Organization for Standardisation (ISO) 9001:2015 certificate. This is aimed to make the LGs people-friendly by ensuring quality in the service delivery mechanism, thus ensuring citizen satisfaction.

The LGs in developing countries have commonalities with respect to service delivery, and improving the mechanism has been a growing concern (Smoke, 2015). The scaling up of Kerala's experiences on TQM and ISO 9001:2015

certification process benefits the LGs in developing countries to improve the quality of service delivery mechanism and thereby citizen satisfaction. There exists a lack of sufficient information on TQM implementation with special reference to LGs in developing countries. Therefore, this article tries to explore the adaptation strategies for citizen satisfaction in developing countries, taking cues from the unique experiences of Kerala.

## *Total Quality Management in Local Governments*

### *Concepts of Total Quality Management*

The concepts of TQM have come to the fore in the eighties, being adopted by organisations as a means of understanding and satisfying the needs and expectations of their customers (Pun, 2002). TQM represents an integrative approach to pursue customer satisfaction and has generated a huge amount of interest in many sectors of the economy, such as manufacturing, service, government, and education, in many countries around the globe (Chin et al., 2001). With the industrial revolution and consequent changes, attention of management was more on supply side focusing on production and productivity, while the advent of behavioural theories shifted the pendulum towards the demand side focusing on clientele; this led to concepts on TQM. The success of TQM in private sector was gradually assimilated by government sector, too (Robert & Leighton, 1993). The main objective of government is to fulfil people's aspirations through better service delivery mechanism (Government of Nepal, 2004).

There are myriads of TQM models with varying degree of its components. The proponents include Edward Deming, Joseph Juran, Philip Crossby, Armand Feigenbaum, Kaoru Ishikawa, Richard Schonberger, Genichi Taguchi and so on (Beckford, 1998; Besterfield et al., 2011). Although the number of TQM components varies, the crux of all these models remains more or less same. In the context of local governance, Rajan and Biju (2015) attempted to define TQM as:

The concept of TQM is revealed by its name itself viz. 'Total', 'Quality', and 'Management'. 'Total' indicates total involvement of all stakeholders; i.e., collective involvement of elected representatives, officials, and citizens. 'Total' also means quality in all functional domains of local governments. 'Quality', denotes quality – in all respects – in delivery of services so as to attain citizen satisfaction. 'Management' reflects the mechanism to attain the organizational objectives. Hence TQM is an instrument to ensure complete quality for citizen satisfaction through a proper mechanism. (Rajan & Biju, 2015)

'TQM is an approach to improve the effectiveness and flexibility of business as a whole. It is essentially a way of organising and involving the whole organisation...' (Oakland, 2011). TQM creates an organisational culture that fosters continuous improvement in everything by everyone at all times and requires changes in organisational processes, strategic priorities and individual belief, attitudes and behaviours (Shin et al., 1998). Since the diffusion of the TQM concept in the mid-1980s, many organisations all over the world have adopted it. TQM is the only

approach for companies to attain superior and sustainable operational performance (Spitzer, 1993). Having widely applied in corporate sector, TQM is now implemented in LGs too.

#### *Soft and Hard Elements of Total Quality Management*

TQM has two elements, namely, 'soft' and 'hard' (Fotopoulos & Psomas, 2009; Sisnuhadi, 2014). Soft and hard aspects are sometimes called the management system and the technical system, respectively (Evans & Lindsay, 1999). In other words, soft elements are behavioural aspects and hard elements are technical aspects. The 'soft' factors such as leadership, human resource management, suppliers' relations and customer focus are long-term issues and cannot be switched on or off (Lewis et al., 2006). On the other hand, the 'hard' factors are tools and systems that lend support to the implementation of the 'soft' factors (Black & Porter, 1996; Oakland, 2000; Quazi et al., 1998). The 'hard' part of TQM deals with the infrastructure facility, benchmarking of services, preparation of checklists and so on; while the 'soft' part envisages initiatives for continuous improvement, continuous evaluation and monitoring, involvement of all functionaries, continuous training, support from all sections, unity, integrity and teamwork. The 'soft' factors are generally difficult to implement and not apparently visible, but assessed only through close observation of behaviour. However, soft factors can be measured by applying scaling techniques. The hard factors of TQM are easier to implement and more visible too. For example, the infrastructure facility can be ensured through an investment decision. But the proper maintenance of infrastructure facility as tidy requires positive attitude of stakeholders—management, employees and customers. It is worthy to note that the effectiveness of hard elements of TQM is coupled with soft elements.

#### *ISO 9001:2015—Hallmark of Quality Management*

ISO 9001:2015 certificate is the hallmark of quality management in an organisation. For standardising the parameters of production and services, the ISO Technical Committee (TC) developed a series of international standards for quality systems, which were first published in 1987. The standards (ISO 9000, ISO 9001 and ISO 9004) were intended to be advisory and were developed for use in two-party contractual situations and internal auditing. However, with their adoption by the European Community (EC) and a worldwide emphasis on quality and economic competitiveness, the standards have been universally accepted (Besterfield et al., 2011). The fundamentals and terminologies of quality management system (QMS) are specified in 'ISO 9000'. The 'ISO 9000', known as family of standards, is being renewed regularly. ISO is not a permanent certificate. Quality audit (QA) will be done once in every 3 or 6 months. QA methods will be reviewed once in every 3 years (Bagchi, 1994).

#### *Total Quality Management and Quality Management System*

The two nomenclatures—TQM and QMS—need further clarity. In the management literature, TQM is widely used and there are plenty of literatures too. ISO standards uses the terminology QMS. Reading literature, it is found that the

TQM advocated by the management experts has highly relied upon the principles of good governance. TQM is an organisation-wide challenge that is everyone's responsibility (Besterfield et al., 2011). This 'everyone's responsibility' is underlined in 'total' of TQM. TQM also focuses on attitudinal change. It is the soft element of TQM, which ensures the attitudinal change towards value systems and ethics.

A QMS constitutes a formal record of an organisation's method of managing the quality of its products or services (Beckford, 1998). Construction of a QMS relies upon the use of the ISO 9000 series to provide guidelines and instructions adherence to which ensures that the system will meet accreditation standards (Beckford, 1998). QMS, envisaged by ISO 9000, intends for standardisation of quality management that is more in the corporate or government framework where a hierarchical system prevails. The decision of the top management for quality management would be adhered to by the people, whether or not their attitude has changed. The QMS relies mainly on the hard aspect, based on which ISO certification is issued. TQM, on the other hand, advocates for soft aspects too and envisages systems for the same. This is made possible by citizen engagement and collective action. The missing of 'total' may lead to the absence of a sense of ownership. Hence, the sense of ownership among people, as envisaged by TQM, is more important.

#### *Limited Application of Total Quality Management in Local Governments*

The literature on TQM in general and private sector in particular is plenty, whereas the literature on TQM in the context of LGs is scanty.

Adrian Wilkinson et al., rightly remarked that,

Much that is written about quality and TQM relates, either implicitly or explicitly, to the private sector and in particular to manufacturing industry. To some extent this is understandable given that most models of TQM are drawn from manufacturing, and many of the tools and techniques have a specific resonance with the processes practiced there. (Wilkinson et al., 1998)

However, there are a few authors who emphasise the importance of TQM in LGs. According to Jonathan P. West, et al., 'Local governments may find TQM attractive because it helps departments better understand the needs of their communities' (West et al., 1993). Adopting TQM strongly and positively influences the quality performance of the local authorities and also citizen and employee satisfaction (Psomas et al., 2017). To promote the quality of LGs' output, various principles of TQM can be applied (Islam, 2006).

TQM delivers the performance improvements expected of LG (Boyne et al., 2010). The implementation of TQM eliminates poor service delivery by LGs (Mabele & Singh, 2018). Celik and Sasic examined the idea of improving the quality of service in LG through the application of TQM based on ISO 9000 standards (Celik & Sasic, 2021). Governance for local economic development and social justice is mandated with the Panchayat Raj institutions—Grama (Village) Panchayats, Block Panchayats and District Panchayats; but the

governance at the grassroot levels is vested with the *grama* panchayats (GPs). Considering overriding concern for quality on service delivery mechanism of LGs to ensure citizen satisfaction, management tool like TQM is relevant and useful.

## **Objective**

This article aims to discuss the process of initiating and implementing TQM and the 14 steps followed in LGs and the authors' observations and reflections on the implementing process. Further, it identifies the key factors that facilitate TQM in LGs.

## **Research Method**

By following the qualitative research method, this article examines relevant documents (Bowen, 2009; Pawar, 2004) relating to the application of TQM in LGs and draws from the authors' observations of and reflections on implementing TQM in LGs. The data were collected from the secondary sources such as books, reports and articles written on TQM experiments in Kerala. Qualitative analysis includes the main summary of documentation of pioneering attempt on TQM, previous evaluation/studies relating to the FOM, the 14 steps of TQM and the identification of key factors that facilitate quality service delivery and citizen satisfaction in LGs.

## ***Background: Local Governments in Kerala***

India had a two-tier system of governance, namely, the Union Government and the State Governments. A third-tier of governance—local governance—came into force with the 73rd and 74th Amendments to Indian Constitution in 1993. Since the local governance is a State subject, the Constitutional Amendments envisage the State Governments to enact conformity Acts to devolve power to LGs. The XIth and XIIth Schedules of the Indian Constitution lists the subjects that need to be devolved to the LGs by the states through the enactment of conformity Acts (Government of India, 1993a, 1993b). The State of Kerala enacted Kerala Panchayat Raj Act and Kerala Municipality Act in 1994, which paved the way for constitutionally recognised LGs in the State. The LGs in Kerala numbered 1,200, comprising of 1,107 rural and 93 urban LGs (Government of Kerala, 2020). The rural LGs comprise 941 GPs, 152 Block Panchayats and 14 District Panchayats, and the urban LGs comprise 87 municipalities and 6 corporations; all these tiers function independently based on subsidiarity principle.

Kerala has made noticeable contribution in strengthening decentralisation and acclaimed it as 'Kerala Model of Decentralisation' (Vijayanand, 2016). The State has also introduced decentralisation through participatory planning methodology,

what is well known as 'People's Plan Campaign' (PPC). Through PPC, Kerala could engage local community in planning and generate social capital. (For the concept on 'social capital', see Pawar, 2006). Kerala has formulated policies and programmes to ensure self-governance and good governance. As part of the institutionalisation of PPC, there has been serious discourse on good governance. Despite the progress on PPC, the quality in service delivery of LGs was one of the grey areas in Kerala. This has paved the way for alternative thinking towards TQM. The introduction of TQM by LGs in Kerala is a leap towards good governance.

### *Total Quality Management by Local Governments in Kerala*

The implementation of TQM by LGs in Kerala has a history of 15 years. It has spiralled through a long process of theoretical input in the training, experiment, documentation, studies, policy formulation and scaling up. These are briefed hereunder.

#### *Initiative in the Training*

The TQM initiative in Panchayats of Kerala dates back to 2006. The Certificate Course conducted by Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA)<sup>1</sup> for elected representatives of GPs in Kerala included a module on TQM (Rajan, 2006, 2008a). Mr. K.P.A. Hashim, one of the participants of the certificate course and elected representative of the Cheruvannur-Nallalam GP,<sup>2</sup> was highly inspired by the concept of TQM. Thus, he opted to do his project work of the course on TQM and evolved an action plan. This GP prepared an action plan to be implemented in three phases. First stage involved orientation of functionaries, formation of sub-committees and quality circle (QC), citizen survey, renovation and upgradation of infrastructure, setting up record room, updating record management and state-of-art facilities for the public and the officials. Second stage included capacity building of functionaries through continuous training and strategy for recognition of best performing staff members. Third stage focused on creating a work environment through beautification, re-aligning the office premises, responsibility mapping, better lighting, clean and tidy environment, installing display boards, preparing plan for continuous training and grievance redressal mechanism. This action plan has provided cues for preparing the guidelines on TQM in GP of Kerala.

#### *Pioneering Attempt in a Local Government*

Mr K. P. A. Hashim convinced the action plan on TQM to the President and the Vice President of the Cheruvannur-Nallalam GP. As a result of series of discussions at various levels (Standing Committees, Steering Committee, Panchayat and Officials), the Panchayat decided to implement TQM. Through concerted effort and teamwork, TQM was launched in Cheruvannur-Nallalam GP in 2007.

The office arrangements of the GP were organised in such a way that the self-esteem of officials enhanced, resulting in people-friendly approach of staff members. Moreover, the office layout was realigned to ensure a better interface between the staff members and between staff and the people. Earlier, the



Panchayat office premises were dusty and unclean. It is cleaned and maintained well collectively by the staff and elected representatives. The office building was cleaned and removed all unwanted materials, painted and furnished with state-of-art facilities. Waiting space with seating facility was provided to visitors in the Panchayat office. A reading corner for public was formed near the waiting place by the GP and provided newspapers and magazines. In order to cater to the needs of people coming to Office with children, student comic books were also supplied in the reading corner. Seating and writing facilities to complete the various applications for services, office stationery required for submitting application and box for dropping applications coming after regular working hours were arranged. Wash basin, washroom, breastfeeding corner, telephone coin box, office stationery, drinking water, complaint box and first aid box are arranged and maintained for the public. The display of functional map, citizens charter and attendance register was a radical step by the GP, which ensured accountability and transparency. The opening of movement register of files helped to trace the current status of files, reasons for delay if any, persons responsible for such delay and so on. This helped to reduce the evils of bureaucracy and red-tapism. Set up a record room, arranged records and files in a user-friendly manner, and continuous updation enabled efficient record management system. Opened a counter in front of the GP known as *Jana Sevana Kendram* (which means Service Centre for People) to collect applications and provide information to public. Issue of acknowledgement receipt to the applicants for service enabled them to know the exact day of availing service. This has resolved the issue of unwanted travel by the public.

The reasons for the success of the initiative and sustainability can be summarised in three core aspects. First, the changes are made with the active participation of all officials and elected representatives. Constant efforts were made for team building and to ensure sense of ownership. Second, continuous trainings conducted to capacitate the functionaries. Third, these efforts were made after hearing the people's expectation about the service delivery (Rajan, 2008b).

Cheruvannur-Nallalam GP has ensured both hard and soft elements of TQM, which helped its successful implementation. According to Mr. K.P.A. Hashim, 'The soft elements than the hard elements is the determining factor for the sustenance of TQM'. On this, he recalled an intervention too. One of the elected representatives was negative towards TQM and non-cooperating initially. Realising this, Hashim had a friendly visit to his home, spared one day with the family members and developed a good rapport. This had changed the attitude of that elected representative. After this, he became positive and active in the TQM process. Thus, the active involvement of all on TQM in its letter and spirit was ensured. After the launching of TQM in this Panchayat, there has been positive behavioural change among the functionaries. The Panchayat became a talk of that time. The cohesion between officials and elected representatives improved, the approach of functionaries became people-friendly. The time lag in the delivery of services reduced substantially. The RTI applications could be processed as early as possible due to efficient record management. The up-to-date accounting enabled smooth conduct of audit, which is a tool of accountability.



### *Front Office Management*

*Jana Sevana Kendram* was one of the key initiatives of Cheruvannur-Nallalam GP, as part of TQM. Taking cues from it, KILA initiated 'Front Office Management' (FOM) and piloted in the GPs of Wayanad district of Kerala. As this pilot initiative became a success, FOM was scaled up in the GPs of entire State in 2009 (Government of Kerala, 2009). KILA organised massive training to the functionaries on FOM.

### *Study on Front Office Management*

KILA realised the fact that the initial vibrancy of FOM declined over the period. In that context, a study was conducted on FOM in 2013. One of the major findings was that there is a tendency of FOM towards setting up of physical facilities alone, thus reducing it as cosmetic beauty. It revealed that the FOM which was originally envisaged as a system for improving the service to the people is now functioning as gizmo for restricting their entry inside office premises. There is no organic linkage between front office (FO) with that of main office. The e-Governance, the crux of efficient service delivery, is yet to be picked up. Also, the base of service delivery mechanism—record management—is weak in many panchayats. Teamwork that synergises the whole process is almost missing. The attempt for enhancement of knowledge and skill through continuous capacity building is also not evident. Facilities to public were generally neglected and systems were misplaced. In many of the GPs, drinking water facility is not provided and there are GPs installed water can, but no water! Citizen Charter were not publicly displayed. Even if they are displayed, it was not in the proper manner. Above all, the Citizen Charter displayed in all the GPs were old, which means that there was no updating. The study also revealed that the soft elements of TQM are not being considered with due importance (Rajan & Biju, 2013). The average score computed based on 46 indicators relating to the facilities of FOM was 61 percentage (Rajan & Biju, 2013).

The absence of the soft elements of TQM leads to the apathy of FOM. That study also documented an initiative by Kumbla GP in Kasaragod district of Kerala, which availed ISO 9001:2008 certification—a hallmark for QMS. The inspiration behind this effort is the experience and expertise of then President of Kumbla GP who was a businessman with exposure to Gulf countries. The office systems in Gulf countries and exposure to ISO-certified enterprises influenced him to conceive the idea of ISO certification for Kumbla GP. The GP upgraded the infrastructure in par with the standard of corporate offices and adopted technological improvements. The introduction of electronic token system has enabled to deliver services on first-come, first-serve basis, avoiding unwanted congestion and often quarrels. The standard time for service delivery reduced substantially.

### *From Practice to Policy—FOM to TQM*

As pointed out above, FOM mostly focused on only the components of physical facilities to be arranged in LG offices and it did not look at the process of setting vision and mission for quality management, formulating quality policy and determining quality objectives (Rajan & Biju, 2013). To address this gap and

related issues, KILA submitted a proposal to the government for scaling up of TQM in the GPs in Kerala. Accepting it, the government issued guideline in 2013 for implementing TQM and availing ISO 9001:2008 by all GPs in the State (Government of Kerala, 2013a). Government also earmarked a budget of Indian Rupees 5 million (US\$ 83,000) for its promotion (Government of Kerala, 2013b).

#### *Capacity Building for Scaling up TQM*

In order to implement the guideline on TQM (Government of Kerala, 2013a), KILA formed a three-member core team, comprising (a) a senior faculty from KILA specialised in TQM (the first author of this article), (b) an academician whose PhD thesis was on TQM in GPs (the second author of this article) and (c) a practitioner who spearheaded the piloting of TQM in Cheruvannur-Nallalam GP (Mr. K.P.A. Hashim) and the core team prepared Capacity Building Plan (CBP) captioned as 'People-friendly Panchayats'. This core team trained 20 master trainers, identified from among the officials of Panchayat. The master trainers, led by the core team, imparted training on TQM-ISO to GPs by following the 14 steps summarised below.

#### *Steps for TQM*

The implementation of TQM and availing ISO 9001:2015 involves application of its principles in the organisational setting of LG (Rajan & Biju, 2015). The following are the sequential steps for the same.

**Step 1: Induction training**—Induction training is to orient the elected representatives and officials of LGs on the concept, importance and steps of TQM. This training would be attended by all together. At the end of the training, an action plan would be evolved through participatory process. This would ensure a sense of ownership among the participants to pursue the TQM process collectively.

**Step 2: Status analysis**—This is to assess the current status of the LGs, its service delivery mechanism and deliverables. The status analysis is made with the help of a checklist. A status analysis report is prepared and circulated among the functionaries. This would help the LGs to evaluate the actual position and thereby decide on the further direction. Also, status analysis report helps to assess the improvements in the service delivery mechanism, once the TQM is implemented.

**Step 3: QC**—QCs were originally associated with Japanese management and manufacturing techniques. QC is a platform, comprising group of officials in the LG for discussing and finding solutions to work-related problems. The QC shall be constituted in the meeting of officials and only the officials are the members of it. The Consultant has to equip the QC for preparation of a guideline for its *modus operandi* and training plan for the functionaries.

**Step 4: Sub-team formation**—Sub-teams may be formed for implementing TQM in LGs. The sub-teams may be on (a) capacity building, (b) FO, (c) record room, (d) infrastructure and (e) documentation. The formation of sub-teams is optional, but desirable. Also, there is flexibility with regard to sub-teams, depending on the tasks to be fulfilled.

The Consultant has to equip each sub-team to prepare and implement action plan on the areas concerned so that the tasks can be accomplished on time-bound manner.

**Step 5: Citizen survey**—The focus of every activity of the LG should be to provide services in tune with the needs of the people. The citizen survey, using a pre-tested questionnaire, would help identify the people's needs and aspirations. A report, consolidating the data, is to be prepared. Based on the Citizen Survey Report, Citizen Charter—written commitment regarding the service delivery mechanism—can be prepared.

**Step 6: Visioning**—Visioning involves the process of formulation of quality vision, quality mission, quality policy and quality objectives of the LG. This is done through a participatory workshop involving elected representatives and officials. The Citizen Survey Report can be presented in the workshop to ensure the visioning in tune with the people's needs. The quality vision, mission, policy and objectives should be displayed in the important office premises of the LG.

**Step 7: Record management**—Record management is the systematic process used to maintain documents and records in such a way to identify and make use of them within the least possible time limit. It includes setting up of record room, maintain documents and records with user-friendly retrieval system, entrust a custodian with responsibilities, maintain an updated record register and conduct continuous assessment of record management. For effective record management, 5 'S' framework can be applied. The term 5 'S' represents five words in Japanese: *Seiri*, *Seiton*, *Seiso*, *Seiketsu* and *Shitsuke*. The English equivalents for these words are Sort, Set in Order, Shine, Standardisation and Sustain (Singh et al., 2014).

**Step 8: Quality manual**—Quality manual is an authoritative document of the LG, containing its responsibilities, quality vision, quality mission, quality policy, quality objectives and mechanism for quality management. It serves the purpose of guidelines to the LG on TQM. It shall be the responsibility of documentation team to prepare this with the handholding support of the Consultant.

**Step 9: Standard operating procedure**—Standard operating procedure (SOP) is the process map which serves as the stage-by-stage process of activities related to service delivery. Every service of the LG passes through a series of inter-related processes. The progress of these processes can be assessed only if these processes and their inter-relations are properly mapped. SOP is also to be prepared by the documentation team, with the handholding support of the Consultant.

**Step 10: Infrastructure**—The infrastructure facilities required for an LG needs to be planned. A master plan, covering spatial design, with inclusive approach needs to be prepared. Both hardware and software facilities required for officials and public should be planned. The LG shall ensure the work environment needed to achieve conformity to service requirements. A suitable atmosphere conducive to the smooth and efficient functioning is to be created and maintained. To ensure better work environment, 5 'S' framework can be applied.

**Step 11: e-Governance**—For smooth and timely service delivery, e-Governance system should be in place. Adequate computer terminals and required software for effective management should be installed. The working condition, timely servicing and their updating must be ensured. All functionaries must be trained on e-Governance and software.

**Step 12: Competency mapping**—Human resource is the crucial element in any organisation. In organisations like LG, human resources form a major component of the service delivery process, as the LGs are the governments closer to people. The capabilities of the personnel should be strengthened to attain the quality objectives. The competency mapping helps to assess the expected and actual competency of functionaries. Based on competency mapping, the competency gap on knowledge, skills and attitude can be identified and steps should be taken to enrich the competency through capacity-building programmes.

**Step 13: Quality audits (QAs)**—The successful sustenance of TQM depends on the continuous efforts for improving quality. To confirm this, QAs must be conducted. There are different types of QAs such as first-party audit, internal audit, pre-assessment audit, third-party audit and surveillance audit.

1. *First-party audit (management review)*

First-party audit is the continuous evaluation made by the LG on quality improvement. This audit measures the performance of each section and suggests preventive and corrective actions. As per ISO terminology, it is known as management review.

2. *Internal audit*

As the name suggests, it is to be performed by a group of officials from the LG, may be two or three selected from among the employees. This audit ensures that each and every section of the LG is working properly, quality of inter-related activities, and suggests corrective actions. At least two internal audits may be conducted before the third-party audit.

3. *Pre-assessment audit*

The pre-assessment audit is conducted to confirm that the quality mechanism is in place and to smoothen the third-party audit. This is carried out by the selected officials of the LG, just prior to the third-party audit. In other words, it is an audit to get ready for third-party audit.

4. *Third-party audit (certification audit)*

As the name indicates, the third-party audit is the external audit conducted by the lead auditor, a certified auditor on quality management. Third-party audit is conducted once the first party audit and internal audits are over. Once the lead auditor certifies the satisfactory fulfilment of the certification audit, the accredited organisation releases the ISO 9001:2015 certificate.

5. *Surveillance audit*

The surveillance audit is conducted for ISO-certified organisations by the lead auditor on yearly basis. The ISO certificate has to be renewed once in 3 years. The lead auditor conducts this audit after the completion of 1 year and after the completion of second year of initial certification. This is mandatory for the renewal of the ISO certification.

**Step 14: Continuous improvement**—The implementation of TQM is not an end in itself. The TQM is a means to fulfil citizen satisfaction. For this, continuous efforts are required to ensure improvement in quality of service delivery. In this context, ISO certificate is given for a period of 3 years and must be renewed once in 3 years. The continuous improvement is accomplished through feedback assessment (citizen satisfaction survey), continuous training (facilitated by QC), continuous monitoring (internal audit and surveillance audit) and grievance redressal mechanism.

## *Monitoring*

The master trainers, led by the core team, monitored the progress over telephone enquiry and conducted a field study. The field study revealed that the service of ISO Consultants is not satisfactory. Hence, KILA submitted a proposal insisting the mandatory tasks of consultants and government issued a modified guideline in 2015 (Government of Kerala, 2015). Till 2016, KILA has trained more than 300 GPs on TQM-ISO (KILA, 2015, 2016). Among these, 120 GPs availed ISO 9001:2008 certificate. There are anecdotes on efficient implementation of TQM in GPs across Kerala, irrespective of her regional differences—south, central and north. A few of such anecdotes were Kolayad GP in Kannur district, Meenangadi GP in Wayanad district, Aymanam GP in Kottayam district, and Mudakkal GP and Manikkal GP in Thiruvananthapuram district. The main reason for successful implementation of TQM in these GPs is the collective leadership of the secretary (who heads the officials) and President (the chief functionary of GP). With their collective leadership, cohesion between the elected representatives and officials ensured in effectively implementing action-oriented plan. However, it was noticed that many of the GPs implemented TQM mechanically for the sake of availing ISO certificate. This apathy is found across the State, and the main reason was that an over-emphasis was given on the hard elements of TQM, even by the consultants. This compelled KILA to undertake consultancy service directly.

## *Consultancy Service*

In order to expedite the implementation of TQM in GPs and availing ISO certificate, the Directorate of Panchayats (DoP) has initiated a project under *Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan* (RGSA).<sup>3</sup> In this context, KILA submitted a proposal offering consultancy service so as to enable the GPs to implement TQM and to avail ISO 9001:2015 (old version 9001:2008). Upon agreeing this, MoU between DoP and KILA was signed in 2017. For the effective implementation of the project, a faculty of KILA (the first author) who pursued TQM ever since the certificate course was entrusted as the nodal officer. The team of resource persons was also expanded by engaging TQM Coordinators in the districts. The TQM Coordinators were trained by the core team. KILA provided consultancy service to the GPs, through the TQM Coordinators. By January 2020, 939 out of 941 GPs<sup>4</sup> in Kerala have implemented TQM and availed ISO 9001:2015 certificate (KILA, 2020) (The two panchayats have not yet implemented because the office building

of one GP was destroyed during flood in 2018 and the other GP is Edamalakkudi in Idukki district. The Edamalakkudi GP is a tribal panchayat situated in remote area inside dense forest, which is not easily accessible).

There are many success stories on TQM in GPs. One such case of Aymanam GP in Kottayam district is given in Box 1. However, an informal enquiry reveals that the hard elements of TQM have improved in almost all GPs such as state-of-art infrastructure facilities, well-arranged record room, display boards and so on. This is because hard elements are comparatively easier to implement and visible too. As mentioned elsewhere, implementation of TQM in its entirety depends on the collective leadership and cohesion, irrespective of the regions in the State. But how far the soft elements of TQM have improved needs an in-depth study.

**Box 1. Case Study.**

**Aymanam Grama Panchayath (GP): Role Model on Total Quality Management**

After attending training on TQM by KILA, Aymanam GP in Kottayam district of Kerala evolved an action plan for TQM that includes awareness training, status analysis, citizen survey, formation of sub-committees and QC, visioning process, upgradation of infrastructure, record management, 5-S framework, capacity-building plan, formation of internal audit team, training on internal audit, internal audit and management review, certification. The status analysis was made with the support of *Kudumbasree*.<sup>5</sup> The needs and aspirations of people were identified through citizen survey based on which visioning workshop was conducted in a participative manner. The vision, mission, policy and objectives for TQM were evolved from the workshop.

**People-friendly panchayat**

As imparted in the training by KILA, the president and the secretary worked collectively and ensured the sense of ownership among the functionaries. The vision was people-friendly panchayat. The employees shouldered the responsibility of commencing the FO functioning from 9 a.m. (as against the usual office time of 10 a.m.) for the benefit of manual labourers who will not lose the day's work.

A checklist of documents to be produced is given along with all applications. This expedites the process of application submission. In order to prevent corruption, the applicants are given details of the panchayat president, secretary and vigilance in case the service is not provided within the stipulated time mentioned in the receipt of application. A citizen feedback form is distributed to evaluate the performance of the officials. The feedback obtained so are evaluated in the meeting convened every Tuesday and the suggestions and grievances addressed.

**Continuous monitoring**

The whole hearted involvement and cohesion between the elected representatives and the officials helped attain the vision. The state-of-art

facilities set up. A vision document and SOP was prepared, with the support of the TQM coordinator from KILA, for the efficient functioning. And against these documents performance were monitored continuously and QAs conducted. After completion of the QAs, the GP was certified with ISO 9001:2015 in May 2017.

### **Innovative projects**

With the collective efforts of the officials and elected representatives, the GP implemented the following innovative projects. This is the outcome of the synergy generated through TQM.

#### *Aymanam: India's first fully digital panchayat*

For the comprehensive development of a GP, the dynamic database about the people is inevitable. It is for this reason that the Aymanam GP conducted a survey of people and created a database. The software is being designed in such a way to generate query-based information.

#### *Help desk and snacks bar*

It is common in front of government offices that the service providers help to fill application forms. Most often, they charge exorbitant service charge. To avoid this, Aymanam GP has set up a Help Desk and Snacks Bar with the support of Kudumbashree.

#### *Green panchayat*

Aymanam introduced green protocol in view of environment protection and waste management. Any person giving copy of identification proof is given vegetable seeds free of cost with the intention to have vegetable garden in every home.

#### *Aymanam lake-canal tourism project*

In the Chippunkal region of the GP, there is 2.5-km length of lake shore. Aymanam GP conserved this shore for the benefit of the people to enjoy the beauty of the lake. Established a walkway, cycling path, boating cruise, cafeteria, park, three-storied watch tower and a hanging bridge. This project also generated employment for the local community.

#### *Vigilance committee*

Aymanam GP has set up vigilance committees at the panchayat and ward levels to redress the issues of women and children. The Committee also provides counselling service.

#### *Woman police assistance on all Tuesdays*

The assistance of woman police is made available on Tuesday at the panchayat office. This is to avoid the difficulty of women to go police station and file complaints.

#### *Smart GP*

A mobile app that gives all details regarding notices, Grama Sabha, Employment Guarantee Scheme, services, functionaries and so on. The application forms



can be down loaded from the app. The people's suggestions/complaints to the panchayat can be sent through this app.

*Computerised record rooms*

Computerised record rooms enable officials to trace records quickly. Thus, the delay can be reduced substantially.

*Air-conditioned rest room for applicants*

The applicants need not stand in queues. They can rest in the comfortable air-conditioned room, where amenities such as TV, newspapers and magazines, drinking water and washrooms. Breastfeeding mothers have special rooms.

*Village court*

The Village Court was started with the objective of making the panchayat litigation free. The intention to reduce the number of court/police cases. The public grievances redressed at the Panchayat level Complaints Redressal Committee. The cases that remain unresolved are taken up in the Village Court on the first Wednesday of every month.

*Attendance board for employees*

The details of employees, designation or mobile number present in the office or in the field are displayed in the attendance board.

**Source:** Compiled by the authors (2021), based on the inputs from Mr. Arun Kumar N, Former Secretary of Aymanam Grama Panchayat.

## Discussion

The major analysis of TQM experiment in the LGs suggests the role of four key factors that enhance the quality of services and citizen satisfaction: (a) capacity building, (b) hard and soft elements, (c) powerful change agent and (d) horizontal learning process (HLP).

### Capacity Building

'People-friendly Panchayat', the caption of the capacity-building programme by KILA on TQM itself, reflects the advantages of TQM in LGs (Rajan & Biju, 2015). The advantages of implementing TQM in LGs are as follows:

1. The LGs would be able to deliver services by duly addressing the needs and aspirations of citizens. This results in increased citizen satisfaction.
2. The democratic and collective leadership ensure cohesion and teamwork among the functionaries. Also, there will be a unified direction towards the attainment of organisational goals.
3. The active engagement of people boosts the morale and ensures sense of ownership and commitment.
4. The collective action is required in an organisation like LG where multiple players involved with inter-related processes. TQM brings role clarity and makes the functionaries realise the need for collective action.

5. There will always be a quest for improving quality of services, which increases the efficiency and effectiveness. The resources of the LGs would also be effectively utilised.
6. The evidence-based decision-making enables the LGs to make factual decisions that ensure transparency and accountability.
7. The cohesion between the elected representatives, officials and citizens creates excellent work environment.
8. The quality in service delivery mechanism of the LG enhances its goodwill.

The implementation of TQM in LGs ensures citizen satisfaction and also better morale among the functionaries.

Even though TQM offers many advantages, implementation of it in LG context is not so easy. Convincing the elected representatives and officials about TQM itself is a major task as TQM envisages attitudinal change. Ensuring the cohesion between the stakeholders is easier to say but difficult to ensure. This challenge is seen across the State, irrespective of geographic regions and/or political party in reign. The well-known saying in training parlance, ‘you can train a horse how to drink water, but you cannot make a horse to drink water’ is very much applicable in TQM implementation too.

### *Hard and Soft Elements*

Another challenge is tackling the perceptual difference of TQM elements—hard and soft. There would be a temptation for the LGs—irrespective of different geographical regions in the State—to focus more on hard elements than soft elements. As mentioned, the former is visible and easy to implement too, while the latter is not visible and takes time even to conceive its spirit.

ISO 9001:2015 certificate is only the hallmark of TQM, indicating that the service delivery mechanism maintains international standards. The ISO certificate is means to an end, not an end in itself. Many of the LGs think in reverse order. There would be a misnomer that availing ISO certificate itself is the ultimate aim. Hence, there is a need for behavioural change and moulding the human resource with virtue ethics. (For details on virtue ethics, see Pawar et al., 2020).

### *Powerful Change Agent*

Many of the government functionaries carry the legacy of ‘government official’, without realising the fact that they are ‘public servants’. And they are tempted to become bureaucratic than people-centric in functioning. The ego status may also adversely affect the smooth implementation of TQM, as some of the functionaries think that the credit will go to the chief functionary. Inculcating the ‘we’ feeling and making all the functionaries in the same platform by breaking the ‘status quo’ is a herculean task in TQM process. The Cheruvannur-Nallalam GP proved that attitudinal change of functionaries is possible through concerted efforts. Those GPs implemented TQM effectively, including the GP given in Box 1, were also

able to implement TQM in its letter and spirit and functioned as a change agent. The influential factor for this seems to be the collective leadership of the GP President and the Secretary—elected official and appointed official respectively—along with the cohesion generated between the functionaries. In the LG context, these are more important. Hence, the capacity building on TQM should give emphasis to this aspect than a mere knowledge sharing.

The absence of powerful change agents in the organisation may also hinder the process. TQM is not a one-time approach but a continuous improvement process (Lascelles & Dale, 1990). The capacity-building and implementation process is not a one-time approach. What needed is a systematic approach in which activities and objectives of quality improvement process are to be divided into concisely and clearly defined and segmented in manageable way according to the nature and size of the organisation. This requires changing the entire organisation culture towards excellence, which is a major challenge in TQM. The gravity of this challenge would be more in the LGs as the elected officials and appointed officials need to involve together in day-to-day affairs of the institution. Hence, inculcating the collective leadership and cohesion should be given most priority.

### ***Horizontal Learning Process***

HLP is a suggestive tool for ensuring sustainability of TQM in GPs. HLP is an outcome-based, non-classroom and peer-to-peer learning initiative, which aims to enhance the capacity of LGs by encouraging identification, documentation and dissemination of good practices among peers (LOGIN Asia, 2015). The HLP helps to capture the innovations generated by current development activities, unbundle good practices and share the learnings with peers in a sustained manner (Lahiri & Rajan, 2020). HLP, along with TQM, can be one of the ways to tackle the challenges of its implementation. The initiative of Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC) and JICA is worthy of mention here. BPATC and JICA attempted to scale up TQM through HLP. The HLP is an outcome-based peer-to-peer learning initiative, which aims to enhance the capacity of LGs by encouraging identification, documentation and dissemination of good practices among peers (Lahiri & Rajan, 2020). The good practices on TQM, facilitated by BPATC and JICA, were shared among the sub-districts for replications and helped to sustain TQM. Once TQM is implemented and success stories are surfacing out from the LGs, HLP can be initiated for scaling up of good practices. Moreover, innovative ideas would emerge from the peer learning process.

### **Conclusion**

As the government is closer to people, there has been an increasing concern for improving the service delivery mechanism of LGs and thereby citizen satisfaction. The LGs have been recognised as one of the platforms for ensuring good governance with economies of scale. TQM would be a steppingstone for this, as

revealed by the experience of Kerala State in India. However, 'TQM is a journey, not a destination'. It is a continuous process towards the quest for improving quality in service delivery. As stated earlier, TQM is also a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is a means to ensure quality in service delivery, leading to citizen satisfaction through collective action. The soft elements of TQM, namely, team building, continuous capacity building, continuous monitoring, cohesion and collective action, are the crux for the sustenance of TQM. Though hard elements such as quality infrastructure, SOP and facilities for public and officials are essential, installation of these facilities with its usefulness and aesthetics, maintenance and sustainability can be ensured only through the soft elements. Those GPs in Kerala who have successfully implemented TQM—across the State, irrespective of regional peculiarities—have able to capitalise the social capital generated through the internationally appreciated PPC. The participatory platforms of PPC form impetus for effectively implementing TQM. These, coupled with collective leadership and cohesion, are crucial for TQM in GPs.

The lessons learned from the State of Kerala in India provide food for thought to the LGs in developing countries to implement TQM and to avail ISO 9001:2015 certificate. The lessons such as application of TQM in the LG context, conceptual difference between QMS and TQM, and hard and soft elements of TQM are vital in this saga towards quality improvement in service delivery. In order to implement TQM in its letter and spirit, the possible challenges have to be addressed. The main challenge, among other things, is to keep a balance between soft and hard elements of service delivery mechanism. The hard elements like physical amenities are easier to implement and visible too. While the soft elements like behavioural change among functionaries are difficult and not apparently visible. But the sustenance of TQM to a great extent depends on soft elements. The approach of TQM should be change management, which is beyond just availing ISO certificate. But ultimately to ensure citizen satisfaction especially that of marginalised through change management. Hence, care should be taken at every stage of TQM in that soft elements like behavioural change are ensured. The participatory effort for continuous improvement and continuous training will ensure sustenance of TQM in the long run and helps to keep a balance between hard and soft elements. Although it has to be fine-tuned against the country situation, the article provides the instructional needs for TQM in LGs.

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## Notes

1. KILA, an autonomous institution under Government of Kerala, is mandated to strengthen LGs in the state through capacity-building programmes.
2. GP refers to the village-level local government (LG), that is, the LG at the cutting-edge level.
3. Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), a flagship programme of Government of India.
4. The LG in Kerala is broadly categorised as rural and urban. The LGs in rural are named Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs)—*grama* (village) panchayat, block (intermediate) panchayat and district panchayat. But each of these tiers is independent and follows subsidiarity principle in their functioning. The average population size of a GP is 22,500 persons.
5. *Kudumbashree*: The network of Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) federated at ward and panchayat level.

## ORCID iD

J. B. Rajan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0818-8805>

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