



Strengthening Panchayat Governance through Peer Learning among Ward Members



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A Policy Brief for the Secretary, Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Bihar
December 2025



Pic.1: Ward members interacting at Vikas Bhavan, Chhapra, Saran.
(In-person Meeting 3 October, 2023)

Executive Summary

Ward Members (WMs) are the frontline of Bihar’s Panchayati Raj system, directly representing citizens and playing a critical role in identifying needs, implementing schemes, and ensuring accountability at the village level. Yet, most Ward Members are first-time elected representatives with limited prior exposure to government processes.

Between 2023 and 2024, a research team comprising Apurva Bamezai, Siddharth George, Siddharth Hari, M. R. Sharan, and Munish Sharma, in partnership with the Rural Development Department, Government of Bihar, implemented and evaluated a peer-learning programme for Ward Members using a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) design across 10 districts of Bihar, covering nearly 8,000 Ward Members.

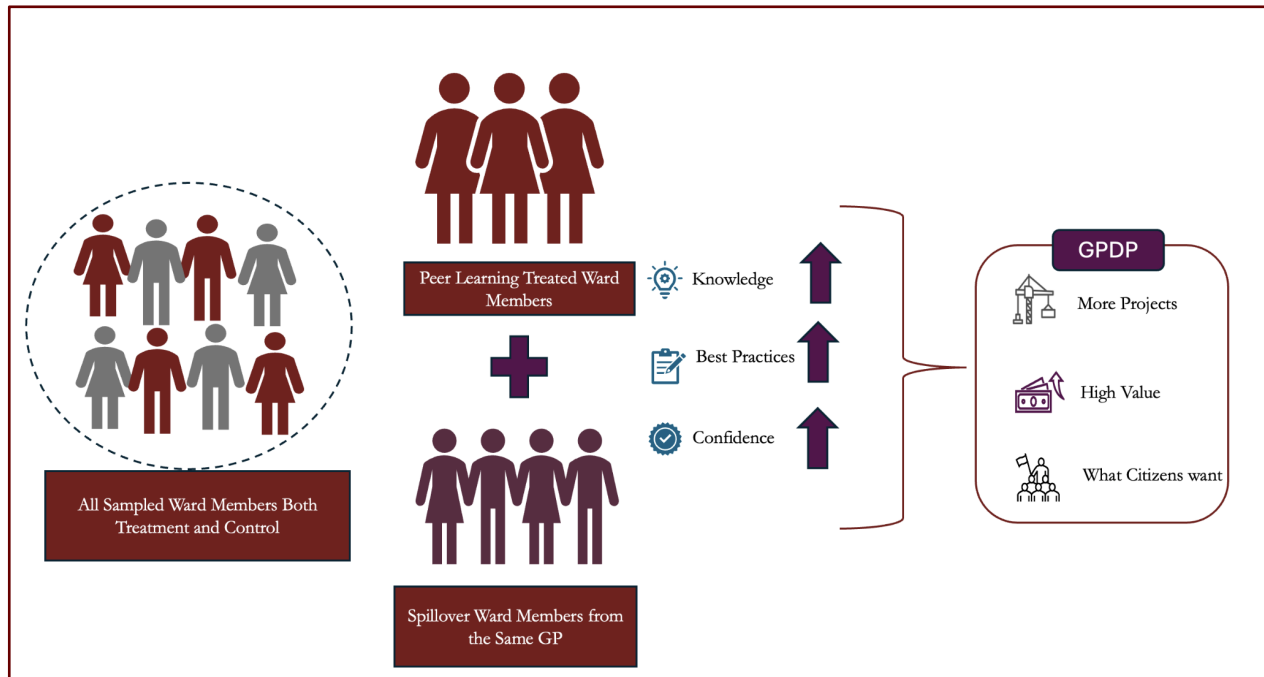
Under this programme, small groups of 10–12 Ward Members from different Gram Panchayats within the same district met regularly (six times) to discuss practical governance challenges, implementation bottlenecks, and locally workable solutions.

Key messages for the Panchayati Raj Department:

- Peer learning is a low-cost, scalable tool to build the capacity of Ward Members.
- Ward Members who participated showed better understanding of schemes, clearer procedural knowledge, and higher confidence in implementation.

- Learning did not remain limited to participants - knowledge spread to other Ward Members within the same Gram Panchayat.
- Peer learning helped Ward Members engage more actively in Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GDPs), resulting in demanding more and higher-value development projects.

These findings suggest that structured peer learning can complement formal training and strengthen last-mile governance under the Panchayati Raj system.



1. Why Focus on Ward Members?

Bihar has over one lakh elected Ward Members, each representing around 1,000 citizens. They are often the first point of contact for villagers seeking access to:

- Welfare schemes (Pensions, PMAY, Ration cards)
- Local infrastructure (NalGali, NalJal, LSBA)
- Grievance redress and coordination with block-level officials

However, our baseline survey (2023) highlights three structural challenges:

- 68% of Ward Members were first-time elected representatives.
- More than 80% had never interacted with Ward Members outside their own Panchayat.
- Knowledge of scheme rules and procedures varied widely, often depending on informal exposure rather than formal training.

As responsibilities have increased under decentralisation, these gaps limit the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

2. The Peer Learning Intervention

To address these gaps, we introduced a peer learning model inspired by how learning happens informally in other sectors.

What was done?

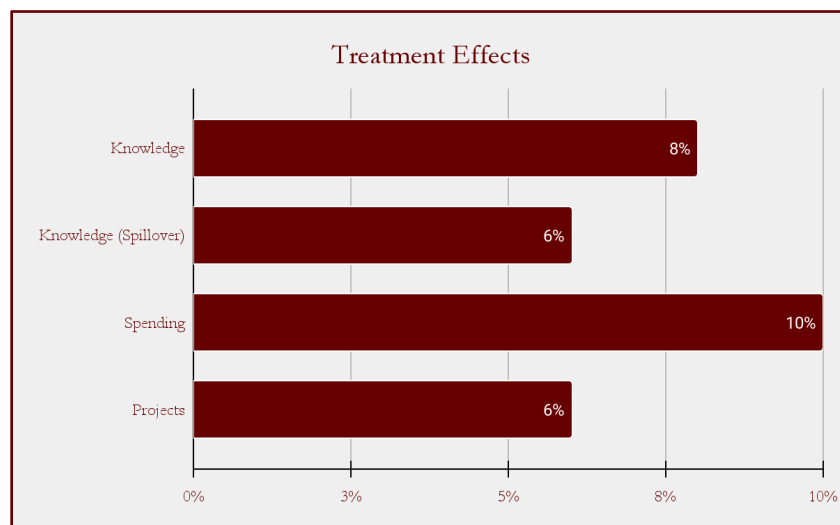
- 7,719 Ward Members from 2,213 Gram Panchayats across 10 districts were selected.
- Out of them 2,424 were organised into 206 peer groups of 10–12 members.
- Each group had a mix of Ward Members from different GPs but the same district, ensuring relevance and administrative comparability.
- Groups met six times over 18 months:
 - Two in-person meetings at the district headquarters
 - Four structured conference calls
 - Continuous interaction through WhatsApp groups

What happened in meetings?

- No lectures or top-down training
- Moderators only facilitated discussion
- Ward Members discussed real issues:
 - How to implement Nal Jal, NREGA, LSBA, Nali-Gali, Solar lighting
 - How to deal with delayed payments or unclear roles
 - How to coordinate with Panchayat Secretaries, BPROs, and line departments

Participation was strong: on average, Ward Members attended five out of six meetings, and more than 35,000 messages were exchanged across WhatsApp groups.

3. What Did We Find?



3.1 Improved Knowledge and Confidence

Compared to Ward Members who did not participate:

- Participants demonstrated better understanding of scheme guidelines.
- They provided more practical, context-specific solutions to common implementation problems.
- Overall knowledge scores were around 8 percentage points higher.
- Confidence in handling multiple schemes increased significantly.

In simple terms, Ward Members became more sure about:

- *What needs to be done*
- *Who to approach*
- *How to move things forward*

3.2 Learning Spread Within the Gram Panchayat

Only 2–4 Ward Members per GP directly joined peer groups. Yet:

- Non-participating Ward Members in the same GP also showed improvements.
- Informal sharing during ward meetings, GP discussions, and daily interactions helped spread knowledge.
- Learning extended beyond direct participants: Ward Members who did not attend peer meetings but worked in the same Gram Panchayat also showed improvements, suggesting that capacity gains spread organically within Panchayats.

Implication: Exposure to peers for a few Ward Members can raise the overall capacity of the entire Panchayat.

3.3 Stronger Engagement in Panchayat Planning

After May 2023, Ward Members no longer directly controlled funds for Nal Jal and Naali Gali yojanas. Their main influence shifted to Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs).

We find that GPs with peer-group Ward Members:

- **Proposed more development projects:** Gram Panchayats with peer-learning Ward Members proposed about 5% more development projects in their GPDPs.
- **Proposed projects with higher estimated budgets, indicating more ambitious planning:** The total estimated value of projects proposed in GPDPs was about 9–10% higher in Gram Panchayats where Ward Members participated in peer learning, indicating more ambitious planning.
- When **citizens prioritised a scheme**, treated GPs proposed **substantially more projects and higher spending** under that scheme.
- When **Ward Members had campaigned on an issue**, treated GPs responded much more strongly in GPDPs

This suggests that peer learning helped Ward Members move from problem identification to formal planning processes.

“The intervention created an additional 751 projects and 20 crores worth spending across the 10 districts.”

3.4 What Did Not Change (Yet)

- Citizens did not immediately report large improvements in service quality.
- This appears linked to timing: many projects approved in GPDPs were implemented after the citizen survey.

This highlights that capacity building effects take time to translate into visible outcomes.

4. Why Peer Learning Works for Panchayati Raj

From a governance perspective, peer learning has three advantages:

1. Practical and grounded
Ward Members learn from others facing the same administrative realities, not from generic manuals.
2. Low-cost and scalable
No large training infrastructure required; small meetings and digital platforms suffice.
3. Creates informal support systems
Ward Members gain networks beyond their GP, helping them navigate bureaucracy more effectively.

5. Policy Implications for the Panchayati Raj Department

Based on this evidence, we suggest the following actionable steps:

1. Institutionalise Peer Learning at the District Level
2. Use Peer Groups to Complement Formal Training
 - Use peer learning to reinforce induction and refresher training.
 - Focus peer discussions on schemes where implementation gaps are largest.
3. Leverage Peer Groups for GPDP Quality Improvement
 - Encourage peer discussions before GPDP preparation cycles.
 - Share examples of well-prepared plans across Panchayats.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that Ward Members are capable of learning, adapting, and improving governance when given the right platforms. Peer learning is not a replacement for formal systems - but it is a powerful complement.

For the Panchayati Raj Department, peer learning offers a practical way to strengthen decentralised governance, improve planning quality, and support Ward Members in fulfilling their constitutional role.

GRAMA would be happy to discuss how this model can be adapted to departmental priorities and ongoing reforms.



Pic.2: Moderators are facilitating ward member meeting at Vikas Bhavan, Purnia.
(Physical Meeting 1 March 2023)