



A participatory approach to watershed development programmes: understanding constraints and exploring solutions

All photos have been taken by Y. V. Malla Reddy

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The Rural Development Trust (RDT) is a voluntary organisation working in Anantapur District of Andhra Pradesh, India. There has been a committed effort within the RDT to follow the participatory approach to watershed development in the true spirit of the government-funded new Guidelines. The following reflections are based on their experiences through working with people and the Government administration.

People as the main actors

Hitherto, by and large, the planning and execution of all rural development programmes, including agriculture and watershed related programmes, have been undertaken by government departments and contractors. Thus the Government has been the main actor and the people passive recipients or spectators.

Now the new guidelines of India on watershed development envisage people as the main actors. However, there are obstacles to this major shift in the development paradigm. In Andhra Pradesh, where watershed development has followed the new guidelines for the past 5 years, obstacles have been observed at both the village and government functionary levels. These have to be recognized and addressed in order to create a conducive social environment in which the people take centre stage.

People's attitudes

In the past 5 decades governments have been promising that development will be delivered by the Government at the dining tables of the villagers. This meant that rural development is the sole responsibility of the Government with the people having no role to play. Though this could not happen, this paternal approach has killed the initiative and responsibility of rural people; causing the breakdown of community managed systems and conservation traditions in villages.

The passive and recipient attitudes adopted by the rural people are important

obstacles to a participatory approach to watershed development. Such attitudes have to be broken, and initiative and responsibility rekindled through a concerted and well thought-out strategy for attitudinal change among people in the villages.

Paternal attitudes of government functionaries

The paternal attitude of 'tell' rather than 'listen' used by government functionaries, along with a hierarchical and authority-driven relationship with the people represses social equality. Their 'I know what is best' attitude does not promote initiative, participation and responsibility amongst the community.

Such attitudinal problems from government functionaries at various levels are obstacles for participatory approach to watershed development. A de-learning and re-orientation towards social equality and mutual co-operation would tackle these attitudes held by government functionaries.



Working together will help change paternal attitudes

'In the past 5 decades governments have been promising that development will be delivered by the Government at the dining tables of the villagers'.



Male villagers work on a trench in the watershed village of Mucluikuatapalli

Appropriate training and practice will change these paternal beliefs.

Divisive and party-political leadership

The so-called leaders at the village level, be it formal or informal, are essentially party-political or factional in nature. The resultant relationships between 'leaders' and 'people' are generally divisive, exploitative, coercive and vested-interest based, either for personal gain or party benefit, and therefore not suited for participatory watershed development.

Such leadership is to be contained (it cannot be ignored) and a more development oriented, objective, democratic, village-centric, non-party collegial leadership has to be nurtured. Only then would the community be freed from vested interests and able to meaningfully participate in developmental programmes.

Corruption

Corruption exists within some government functionaries. The only lasting solution to this problem is a transparent and meaningful participatory approach to watershed development and rural development in general.

Inadequate involvement of personnel

The personnel at the District Rural Development Authority (DRDA), Drought Prone Area Programme (DPAP) and Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs) are inadequate in number for the herculean task on their hands. PIA personnel are expected to cover about 10 watersheds, whilst most live 50 to 150 kms from each watershed village. Villagers are generally available early morning and late evening.

It is rarely practical for personnel to be in the village at convenient times given the distance and transport facilities. What has proved more effective is to train para-professionals

in technical, participatory and conceptual aspects of watershed development. They should have a rural background as well as educated to a plus 2 level. They interact closely with people and are prepared to live in the village. Adequate female staff should be employed to promote women's active participation and gender equity.

This inadequacy of trained personnel is a serious handicap in implementing participatory watershed development. So, an adequate and competent, full-time staff-structure has to be evolved to match the challenge of participatory watershed development.

Centralized philosophy of management

The existing mode of management means the Director is expected to be the repository of all knowledge and power. Subordinates are expected to comply with the Director's orders. This philosophy and approach is generally practised at all levels of government functioning. The result is a greater power-distance between cadres. Thereby, the decision-making is centralized and top-down at every level.

A system of participatory decision-making uses the knowledge and experiences of all actors concerned. The promotion of a participatory approach in watershed development requires the promotion of a participatory approach in management within the Desert Development Programme (DDP), DRDA, DPAP and down the line.

Physical and Financial Monitoring

The current monitoring systems are essentially physical and financial. The monitoring of people's processes and social indicators, where village-based 'watershed organizations' are being facilitated cannot be measured by these indicators. Socio-political dynamics in villages, conflicting interests and democratization all play a role in the participatory process. It is time that attention is paid to develop appropriate, simple and measurable social indicators. Monitoring participatory process should have the same value as physical and financial indicators.

Cost-sharing

Activities being undertaken under watershed development are intended to stabilize the carrying capacity. This is long-term and indirect benefit to the people. Activities, such as rainwater harvesting, have been implemented in the villages in an unintegrated manner by the concerned

Villagers in Nelkivaram Palli are led through a village map exercise



line departments for the past 50 years. Until now farmers were never asked to share the cost of these activities nor even asked for a token contribution. Suddenly now, when farmers were asked to pay 10% cost as contribution, they were quite confused as to why they should pay, when the same activities have been done in the next village without any contribution.

This reluctance to share the cost or pay a contribution is in consonance with their accumulated attitudes towards participation as explained earlier. The affordability is also in question, particularly for small and marginal farmers given the frequent crop-losses due to droughts. Having said this, it is absolutely necessary to incorporate an element of cost-sharing into watershed development, to whatever degree it is possible.

The barriers to cost sharing have to be broken steadily. Initially a 10% contribution made by farmers may be too high. To change people's attitudes, a lesser percentage has to be insisted on and pursued. A Watershed Development Fund (WDF), a village common fund into which people's contributions are paid could be used for management of natural resources in the future. The concept of cost sharing will succeed only with building meaningful peoples' participation.

Criteria and process in selection of a watershed village:

The criteria followed at present for selection of a watershed village are biophysical indicators, rainfall, vegetation mapped by NRSA data and social indicators such as literacy, landlessness and problems of drinking water. Additionally and more importantly the choice of a village should also be based on whether the people in the village are willing to take the initiative and participate in watershed development. Unity and collective leadership in a village are critical 'success criteria' for participatory watershed development.

The first generation of participatory watershed development should have a motivating effect on neighbouring villages and create peoples' demand for replication.

Pre-conditions for village selection

There must be some pre-conditions that the people in the village have to fulfil if that village is to be considered for watershed development. Generally the following are expected:

- A well attended and organised *Gram Sabha* (Village Assembly) resolves unanimously to take-up watershed development
- Pledges to work together in unity

beyond party and socio-economic divisions for the development of the village

- Pledges to arrange Watershed Committee representatives on a consensus basis
- Pledges to pay cash or material contributions to match the costs as per guidelines
- Pledges to actively participate in the planning, implementation and financial management in a transparent manner
- Pledges to maintain the assets and resources created in the post-programme period

Provision for de-selection and penal action

It is equally important to cancel a watershed programme in a village as and when the people are not adequately responding to the participatory approach. The process of de-selection involved in cancelling has to be transparent. The deselection of uncooperative villages and reasons made explicit for de-selection would have a positive impact on co-operating villages.

The future

Watershed programmes have followed the new Guidelines since 1995. It is important that lessons are constantly drawn and incorporated into the future strategy. The immediate future objectives should be twofold for participatory watershed development:

1. to develop replicable model watersheds in terms of their sustainable impact - both in short and long-term
2. to develop replicable participatory methodologies for implementation of integrated watershed development - with people as the main actors

In every Mandel (block), a few model watersheds combining the above two objectives, would act as a role model to neighbouring villages, as communities would be more easily convinced by evidence of a successful watershed in their own surroundings.

Essentially there are three constituents in watershed development. They are the people, the Government and non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Each of these constituents has certain strengths such as local knowledge, technical competence, financial resources, and awareness and skills in participatory approaches. It is necessary to converge these strengths in every Watershed Programme Management System.

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about the author

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