



Water and Sanitation Program

An international partnership to help the poor gain sustained access to improved water supply and sanitation services

a rural think tank

jal manthan

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INTRODUCTION

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DECENTRALIZED

RWSS MANAGEMENT

Gram Panchayats vs Village Water and Sanitation Committees

It is now internationally accepted that rural water supply and sanitation (RWSS) services are best managed at the lowest appropriate level. But what is the most appropriate level? In the Indian context, the question usually opens up the Gram Panchayat (GP) versus Village Water and Sanitation Committee (VWSC) debate.

In its second meeting, Jal Manthan chose to focus on the comparative advantages of these two institutions in the management of RWSS services.

The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution has put enormous political power in the hands of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Its lowest rung, the Gram Panchayat (GP), has been mandated for service delivery of RWSS.

In many villages, VWSCs co-exist with GPs, sometimes as sub-committees and at times independently. VWSCs are user groups of a particular RWSS service and they are meant to maximize user involvement in all phases of a water and sanitation project.

This has generated a debate as to which is the most appropriate and sustainable institution at village-level for delivery of RWSS services.

In reality there is a complex relationship between these two village-level organizations and it may not be an 'either-or' situation but rather a 'both' relationship.

Participants in the first Jal Manthan at Delhi wanted a debate on this issue and Kerala, with its strong GPs, agreed to host the event at Cochin.



A meeting of a Kerala Gram Panchayat.

The Jal Manthan, meaning "churning of water", is a Rural Think Tank. It is a travelling forum that aims to be an open network encouraging frank and informal policy-level dialogue between sector practitioners and professionals. The focus of each meeting is determined by the demand of stakeholders such as State Governments, NGOs, External Support Agencies, etc. It also seeks to promote exchange of ideas on best/new practices in the RWSS Sector.

Hosted by: Government of Kerala and the Water and Sanitation Program -South Asia (WSP-SA) at Cochin, Kerala on July 28, 1999.

WSP-SA/GUY STUBBS

The SWAJAL VWSC Model

THE SWAJAL village institutional model is aimed at implementing a decentralized and demand responsive approach to water and sanitation service delivery. The Government of UP decided that a specialized user group at the village level, which focused only on water and sanitation, was the most appropriate institution to plan, implement and manage a project.

The GP was not used for this as it had many other responsibilities and it was also more politicized. To give it legal status, the VWSC was made a sub-committee of the GP. In reality, however, the VWSC has little to do with the GP.

The number of members in a VWSC varies from 7-12, including the chairperson and the treasurer. The VWSC must have representations from every ward of the village.

Given the freedom to elect persons of their choice, only 10 out of 300 VWSCs created so far have chosen the GP chairman to be chairman of the VWSC as well. A 30 percent quota for women and another 20 percent for backward castes ensures that the VWSCs are representative and include members from socially and economically backward groups. In addition, about 73 percent of

VWSC members are below the age of 35 and only 19 percent are illiterate. This indicates that the VWSC attracts committed and capable individuals and is more representative than the GP.

In the planning phase, the VWSCs have the responsibility of community mobilizing, choosing the technology, seeking the entire community's endorsement for the choice, participating in the engineering design process, collecting community contributions and signing the Implementation Phased Tripartite Agreement (IPTA).

In the implementation phase, they purchase all the material and provide labor for construction. Once construction is over, they operate and maintain the system, funded by user charges, which they levy and collect.

Involved in planning, implementation and O&M, the VWSCs truly represent the aspirations of the community and their composition tends to make them apolitical.

The main question about the VWSC is whether it is a sustainable institution. While it is still too early to comment on this issue, this is a genuine concern.

The Kerala PRI Management of RWSS

KERALA in the Ninth Five Year Plan has allocated 40 percent of development funds for Panchayats. Here the GP plays an integral role in the planning and management of RWSS services. This model of decentralized management is part of the State's policy as laid down in the People's Plan. While responsibility for the implementation of RWS schemes is given by the GP to beneficiary groups, it is overall in charge and monitors the work closely.

At the first stage, a semi-structured meeting of the GP is held in which need identification of potential RWS schemes is undertaken. Then the GP constitutes Task Forces for each sector, including water and sanitation. The Task Force for water and sanitation initiates the planning process by preparing a shelf of water and sanitation projects on the basis of discussions with the communities at ward level, and then again seeks endorsement of the community. Any alterations to the Task Force's plan is then discussed at a development seminar, and endorsed by the GP and approved by the Block-Level Panchayat Committee (BLPC) and the District Panchayat Committee (DPC). This planning process can take up to three months. Once the plan is approved, a Beneficiary Committee (BC) is constituted, and funds are

transferred to the BC for implementing the project. Works are undertaken through open tenders or community contracting. The GP monitors the BC's functioning and is responsible for O&M of the completed scheme.

The GPs are essentially political bodies which have now been given significant financial powers. The Kerala government is trying to maximize transparency in their functioning so as to make this model successful. To further the process, the government plans to:

- Create new systems for public works and procurement.
- Improve financial management.
- Create more checks and balances to minimize misutilization of funds.
- Build capacity.
- Improve long-term planning methods.

The Kerala model follows a truly participatory process in the planning stage. Though the GP is a sustainable institution and here to stay, the quality of service delivery and O&M of water supply schemes has not yet been fully tested.

GPs vs VWSCs Strengths and Weaknesses

THE group exercise compared the performances of VWSCs and GPs vis-à-vis the main activities in a typical RWSS scheme cycle. This was to be done through a point-scoring system. The following stages of the scheme cycle were taken into consideration:

- Capacity Building
- Planning
- Implementation
- O&M
- Monitoring



Community members in Kerala taking their own decisions.

| | VWSCs | GPs |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Total | Total |
| CAPACITY BUILDING | | |
| Community Mobilization | 6 | 5 |
| Awareness Building | 7 | 5 |
| Total | 13 | 10 |
| PLANNING | | |
| Voice to Women and Poor | 8 | 4 |
| Focus on Water and Sanitation | 8 | 5 |
| Informed Choice of Technology | 5 | 6 |
| Preparation of Engineering Design | 2 | 3.5 |
| Less Politics | 7.5 | 0 |
| Inclusion* | 7 | 3.5 |
| Total | 37.5 | 22 |
| IMPLEMENTATION | | |
| Fund (Construction) Management | 5.5 | 5 |
| Transparency in Procurement | 8 | 2.5 |
| Construction Quality | 6 | 5 |
| Total | 19.5 | 12.5 |
| O&M | | |
| Management Capacity | 6.5 | 5 |
| Tariff Setting and Collection | 7 | 4.5 |
| Full O&M Cost Recovery | 7 | 4.5 |
| Preventive Maintenance and Repair | 7 | 3.5 |
| Total | 27.5 | 17.5 |
| MONITORING | | |
| Quality of Construction & Design | 7 | 5 |
| Full Recovery of O&M Costs | 6.5 | 5 |
| Total | 13.5 | 10 |
| GRAND TOTAL | 111 | 72 |
| * Involving all sections of society. | | |

The Table here shows the cumulative scores given by the four groups for each activity. The maximum score for each activity is $2 \times 4 = 8$ and the minimum $0 \times 4 = 0$

These stages of the project cycle were further divided into key activities undertaken during each phase.

The group discussions for the exercise were quite heated. This was both because of the strong views the participants held as well as the pressure to arrive at a group decisions on the score to be given to the GPs and VWSCs for each scheme cycle activity. Each of the four groups did this exercise, giving a score between 0–2 for each activity (see table).

Some participants raised rather fundamental issues about the problem of comparing these two types of organizations, as VWSCs were, in some cases, sub-committees of the GPs. Furthermore, some participants felt that the appropriateness of an institution depended on numerous regional and local factors and it was difficult to generalize. There was also some discussion on whether the comparison was of existing “real” VWSCs/GPs or hypothetical “ideal” VWSCs/GPs. It was finally agreed that the participants would take an overall view and compare activities performed by each type of institution. This would highlight their strengths and weaknesses at various stages of the project cycle, and on that basis some conclusions could be drawn.

After the results of the group exercise came in, Mr G.V. Abhyankar, Senior Sanitary Engineer at the World Bank, summed up the proceedings. The results showed that overall the groups ranked the VWSC ahead of the GP.

CAPACITY BUILDING

In the first phase of the project cycle, the VWSC scored higher than the GP. While both had similar scores in terms of ability to mobilize the village community, the VWSC scored higher on generating awareness regarding water and sanitation in the village. One possible reason for this was that VWSCs were doing the task full time, while GPs were undertaking many other activities.

PLANNING

Under planning, too, the VWSC scored much higher than the GP. The VWSC scored maximum points on both 'focus on water and sanitation', and on 'voice to women and poor'. Being more representative and "inclusive", the VWSC had an edge over the GP when it comes to involving all sections of the village community in RWSS activities. As far as choice of technology and preparation of engineering design were concerned, GPs had the edge over VWSCs. The ranking also indicates that GPs are considered more resourceful in getting the necessary technical assistance for this. VWSCs are usually highly dependent on support organizations in this regard, while GPs have access to other agencies. All groups considered GPs highly politicized. The VWSC's relative apolitical nature is a possible reason for its

A group discussion in progress at the Jal Manthan.



cohesiveness and its ability to give a voice to the weaker sections of the village community.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of a RWSS scheme is a rigorous process and it involves dedication and hard work on the part of the village community. The VWSC seems to be in a far better position to fulfil this role. VWSC got full points for transparency at the time of procurement for the construction activities. This seems to be a grey area for the GPs. The transparency element seems to be a major reason for the community's confidence in the VWSC, in spite of the fact that the ranking shows that GPs got similar points in terms of ability to undertake construction activities and the management of the construction fund.

O&M

In the O&M phase, the VWSC scored higher than the GP. The motivation of the VWSC was again possibly the reason for this. VWSCs scored higher in terms of their ability to set and collect tariffs, to recover full O&M costs from the consumers, and to undertake repair and maintenance. Under managerial capacity, both the VWSCs and GPs had similar scores.

MONITORING

The VWSC's score was far higher than GPs in terms of monitoring the quality of the construction and design, and taking into consideration views of all sections of the society. In terms of monitoring and recovery of O&M costs, both had similar scores.

OVERALL OBSERVATIONS

While it was difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the scoring exercise, it was clear that neither VWSCs nor GPs were perfect institutional models. Each had relative strengths and weaknesses and perhaps the best institutional arrangement was for them to work together, each utilizing its comparative advantage. It was clearly apparent, for instance, that the VWSC had the edge in the planning and implementation stages while the GPs had the advantage of accessing engineering skills in the post-implementation or O&M stages. It was, therefore, not an "either-or" situation but a "both together" one. The relationship between the two institutions, however, needs to be explored further.

MANTHAN ON RWSS: The Process

Welcome and Introduction: Mr Parameswaran Iyer, Team Leader of the WSP-SA's India Country Team, welcomed the participants to the second Jal Manthan. He mentioned that this Jal Manthan would focus on the role of Gram Panchayats (GPs) and Village Water and Sanitation Committees (VWSCs) in the management of RWSS services. The objective of the exercise was to discuss the comparative advantages of GPs and VWSCs in the management of RWSS service delivery. Mr Iyer introduced Mr Jeremy Collins as the facilitator for the workshop.

Group Discussions: After an introduction and a brief ice-breaking exercise, the participants were divided into four groups and discussed their diverse experiences of water and sanitation projects in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka, Assam, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.

Presentations: The two main features of this Jal Manthan were the presentations by Mr S. Raju, Director of SWAJAL, UP, and Mr S.M. Vijayanand, Secretary, Local Self Government, Government of Kerala.

While UP's World Bank-assisted Rural Water Supply & Environmental Sanitation project, SWAJAL, brings out the comparative advantages of the VWSCs, a good example of the strengths of the GPs is that of Kerala, which has greatly empowered the PRIs in all rural development programs, including RWSS services.

An attentive audience at the Jal Manthan.



Both models are highly participatory and involve the community extensively in planning, implementation, O&M and the monitoring stages of a project.

Mr K.M. Minnatullah, Senior Program Officer, WSP-SA, made a presentation on village-level organizations managing water and sanitation service delivery in other countries of South Asia.

The Debate: The Kerala and the UP experiences generated interesting discussions. Opinions varied with some participants favoring the VWSC type model, while others championed the GP model. Some participants suggested a middle path between both models.

During the lunch break it was decided that strengths and weaknesses of the GP and the VWSC in running RWSS services should be assessed against the five stages of a project scheme cycle – capacity building, planning, implementation, O&M and monitoring.

Assessment: After lunch, the participants were divided into four groups. VWSCs and GPs were separately ranked on a scale from 0-2 on activities of the scheme cycle.

The exercise generated heated debate in all the groups. The scoring system forced the participants to decide one way or the other and it took time for the groups to arrive at a consensus on the marks to be awarded for each activity. After the discussion, each group presented its findings to the plenary.

Summing up: Mr G.V. Abhyankar, Senior Sanitary Engineer at the World Bank, summed up the broad outcome of the proceedings and presented an analysis of the scores given by each group.

He discussed the comparative advantages of each organization at different stages of the project cycle and concluded that there was no “right” or “wrong” model and felt that a “situational” approach was the best bet. VWSCs had a comparative advantage in the capacity building, planning and implementation stages, while GPs seem to be ahead in the O&M and monitoring stages. He concluded that the most appropriate institution for delivering decentralized RWSS services may not be either the GP or the VWSC but perhaps a combination of both.

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DECENTRALIZED RWSS MANAGEMENT The South Asian Experience

AS in India, problems related to water supply and sanitation service delivery are widespread in South Asia. Over the last decade, village-level organizations have increasingly come to the forefront in RWSS management.

In *Pakistan*, the Union Councils, which were established in the 1960s, were initially responsible for the management of RWSS service delivery. Over time, these bodies became highly politicized and were not responsive to users' needs and demands. Pressing problems related to water supply and sanitation finally forced the communities in most villages to take matters in their own hands and the Union Councils were abolished. Consequently, in most rural areas, separate village-level organizations were set up. While these village organizations have no legal status, they are usually representative and fairly transparent in functioning. They have reportedly brought down the cost of construction of the RWSS schemes by over 30 percent.

Bangladesh has a similar Union Council structure. These Councils have their own water and sanitation committees, which usually implement the schemes of the Central Government. Recent large projects with financial aid from the Swiss and IDA, have had VWSCs as implementing agencies. In addition, the draft Bangladesh Gram Panchayat Act, once ratified, would give a new perspective to the GP vs VWSC debate in Bangladesh.

In *Sri Lanka*, Water and Sanitation (W&S) projects are implemented through Community-Based Organizations (CBOs). This is now the case in all new W&S projects. These CBOs are registered with the Social Welfare Ministry.



A community initiative in the middle Himalayas.

The O&M fund mobilization (including 20 percent of capital cost) is entirely the CBOs responsibility. Construction and fund administration is a joint responsibility of the CBO and a local NGO.

The main weakness in many of the CBOs in Sri Lanka is their inability to take punitive action against free-riders, as they are informal bodies. This lack of clarity regarding their legal status has caused problems when tackling issues such as raising tariffs. In addition, there is no mechanism to provide credit to such informal entities like CBOs.