



A woman's place is in... watershed development

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In this article we describe the participation of women in the watershed programme in India and look at some ways greater opportunities for women's participation are being introduced. While things are changing, we are cautious about painting too over-optimistic a picture of the scope for ensuring equal opportunities, given the constraints placed on the participation of many women because of the cultural, social, political and economic setting in which they live.

Gender in Watershed Development

In a recent *Waterlines* Jennifer Francis et al. (2000: 25) reported on the 'gender and water session' at the 2nd World Water Forum and the Ministerial Conference held in March 2000 where six organizations¹ involved with water and gender joined together with a common objective. Their aim was to achieve 'equal opportunities for women and men in dialogue and decision-making as an integral dimension of all design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of legislation, policies and programmes for integrated water resources management'.

The watershed development programme in India originally focused on 'erosion control' of large and medium river valleys to slow down the siltation of reservoirs and limit flash floods (Paul 1997). Over the last decade watershed development has evolved into an approach to rural development which is concerned, not just with stabilizing soil and vegetation and managing

water, but with 'enhancing the productivity of resources in ways which are ecologically and institutionally sustainable' (Farrington et al. 1999: 1). Those resources, notably the land, are owned, controlled and worked by a range of different people. Water resources are also controlled, but since water resources move and vary over space and time they are not as easily owned and controlled as land. But when a farmer digs a well or drills a borewell on their land the water extracted is theirs, for their use. Particular communities may control the use of wells in their areas, and deny use to outsiders (often other castes).

Women and men use water and manage water in different ways. In many places it is the women and girls who are seen to use water for domestic purposes, while men and boys may compete for the same water for farming purposes. But it is often not so simple: gender relations in all aspects of water and land management need to be understood as context specific. Agriculture in India accounts for 37% of India's GNP and according to National Sample Survey data, employs 70% of the working population and about 84% of all economically active women. Yet, 84% is probably an underestimate. There are few women in rural areas who are not 'farmers' of one type or another – working on the family farm, working as wage labour, working as share croppers. Women's involvement with natural resource production and management is not confined to agriculture; women depend heavily upon forests, water bodies and other common property resources as well, to manage their livelihoods and the

1. IRC, IUCN, ILAV, IWMI, Both Ends and UNIFEM.

The water used by farmers irrigating land in Madyar Pradesh manage water in a different way to women



Sean Sprague/Panos Pictures



Sanjay Acharya/Panos Pictures

Women in India collect domestic water from wells, their needs for water need to be taken into account with watershed development

2. The Ministry of Rural Development is not the only Ministry that has a watershed development programme: the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environment and Forest have similar schemes. There have been efforts in recent months to draw the various schemes together.

livelihoods of their households. But women control a small fraction of all agricultural land and have in the past been systematically ignored by all institutions, households, community and government bodies, in planning for natural resources.

In 1994 the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) of the Government of India, produced a new set of guidelines for implementing its watershed programmes². This was a progressive piece of official policy and incorporated many of the good practices developed in non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and government projects. The Guidelines state the objectives of each watershed development project: promoting economic development, the restoration of ecological balance and, giving 'special emphasis to improve the economic and social condition of the resource-poor and the disadvantaged sections of the watershed community such as the assetless and women'.

But it takes more than policy statements and the aims espoused at international fora to change the way resources are managed and controlled. Given the traditional land-based focus of watershed development in India, and despite the attempt in the Guidelines to shift some of the focus to the assetless, tensions continue to exist among those involved in the programme over who should be participating. Some people in Government Departments and in NGOs continue to view watershed development as exclusively a private land-based programme leading to productivity enhancement and conservation. Land-based watershed projects are often perceived by the agencies involved as 'men's' projects and consequently not women's concern. Men, who have title to much of the productive land, are

perceived to be the natural target-group because watershed-work is often viewed as a private land-based programme. This is reinforced by the budgetary allocations, the normal engine driving any programme, in the Guidelines. While private landowners have to contribute 10% of their land development cost through voluntary labour, the community as a whole is expected to contribute 5% of the cost of developing common lands such as grazing and forest lands. The development of local organizations, also envisaged in the Guidelines, is either ignored or, at best, used as an instrument for achieving the physical targets.

'A woman member of the watershed committee in the tribal district of Surguja in eastern Madhya Pradesh was asked how women's priorities had been incorporated into the watershed plan. She said that she knew nothing about the plan or its contents. She complained bitterly about all the women in the village being debarred from wage employment on the watershed works. The agricultural officer present, the person responsible for the watershed project, explained to the visitors that women did not qualify for membership of land based 'user groups' because only men owned land.

Quota Women

Women are often not recognized as members of the 'watershed' community in their own right as farmers and resource decision-makers, but are seen as 'quota women' (there to fill a quota). Women on watershed committees, and involved in other village institutions, are often not given a chance to voice their opinions, or lack the self confidence and access to information to participate in informed decision making. A number of commentators have expressed the view that the token participation of two or three individual women in a watershed committee is not working. Instances have been recorded in a number of places in India, where male members on committees take all decisions (often at meetings which women cannot attend because of the inconvenient time or social restrictions) and send the final resolution

to the women members for their signature. Such women are not in a position to question the decision, or worse, if non-literate, they place their thumb-print on the document without knowing what they have agreed to.

Sharing Decision Making

The role of user and self-help groups as 'building blocks' in the process of developing broad-based participation in decision-making in the watershed programme remains poorly understood. This is because the Watershed Guidelines do not specify any mechanism or institutional arrangement for ensuring and sustaining the involvement of the poor and women in the programme on the basis of their resource use and dependence and ensuring equitable entitlements for them. 'In the beginning of the project itself, women and resource poor people are formed into self-help groups in order to meet the target and distribute the revolving fund of Rs 50,000 among them. Thereafter, they are totally forgotten'³.

Where effort is put into facilitating

women-only fora for confidence building and overcoming cultural inhibitions, and men are motivated to support creating such spaces for women, the women often begin to share decision-making and even asset ownership. Benefits delivered through women are reflected in better health, education and the overall standard of living of the family.

Many of the ideas contained in the Guidelines were drawn from the experience of NGOs in watershed development. Many NGOs continue to introduce, often through their involvement as 'Project Implementing Agencies' in the Government programme approaches, which aim to address gender and equity disparities in the watershed programme. OUTREACH, an NGO working in South India, is one such organization.

Gender Sensitive Planning

While some Government and NGO programmes, are promoting gender-sensitive micro-planning more needs to be done to mainstream this approach into the whole programme. Empowered and self-

3. Comment during a workshop for the design of the Andhra Pradesh Rural Livelihoods Project.

Experiences from OUTREACH's Madanapalli project

As a matter of policy, strategy and practicality, OUTREACH follows an approach of working mainly through women in various developmental projects. Self Help Groups of women are primarily organized around savings and credit activities. Clusters of SHGs are federated to form Cluster Level Associations or CLAs. The CLAs cover a wide range of activities from training, micro-credit management, supply of inputs and marketing to community-led social and developmental action programmes. OUTREACH implements watershed development through the CLAs. The Madanapalli project recently had an opportunity to interface with the Drought Prone Areas Programme in Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh, when OUTREACH was invited to become a Project Implementing Agency and take up the implementation of 11 micro watersheds (MWS) covering an area

of 5500 ha. In 8 out of 11 MWS locations, OUTREACH already had in place SHGs and CLAs that had been functioning for 3 years. However, as soon as it was known that these watershed projects were allocated to OUTREACH, there was a rush of the local elite to 'capture' the programme. Programme staff made it clear that the watershed programme was to be implemented by women's groups. Local male leaders, on hearing this said 'All right then let our wives be on the Watershed Implementation Committee'. The women SHG members then listed the criteria for selection of Watershed committee members. They noted down: 'she should be healthy, she shouldn't be too old, she should be willing to travel, she should have an attitude of service towards the community, she should be able to attend frequent meetings and training programmes, she should be a member of a group, she should

know accounting and book keeping...'. On hearing this many of the wives decided that they didn't want to be members and women rapidly filled these spaces from the SHGs.

The next group of stakeholders who approached OUTREACH were the contractors (many of whom are from the local elite). They were interested in contracts for check dams and forestry. This group too was politely told to approach the watershed committees. The women, however, decided to do the work themselves and not hire out any contractors. They had the self-confidence to assert themselves having come out of a process of SHG organizations and savings on an average (each SHG has around Rs.50,000/-, which is a tremendous psychological boost). As one of the WIC members put it 'we suddenly realized that we had almost 300 members and that gave us confidence to speak boldly'.

'Women need to be involved in planning and implementation at district, state and national levels if they are to have any influence upon the programme as a whole'.

4. Experience has shown that promoting income-generating activities for women at the village level is very complex. Too often schemes have encouraged all women to produce pickles or table cloths... and there is a limit to how many of those products a market can absorb.

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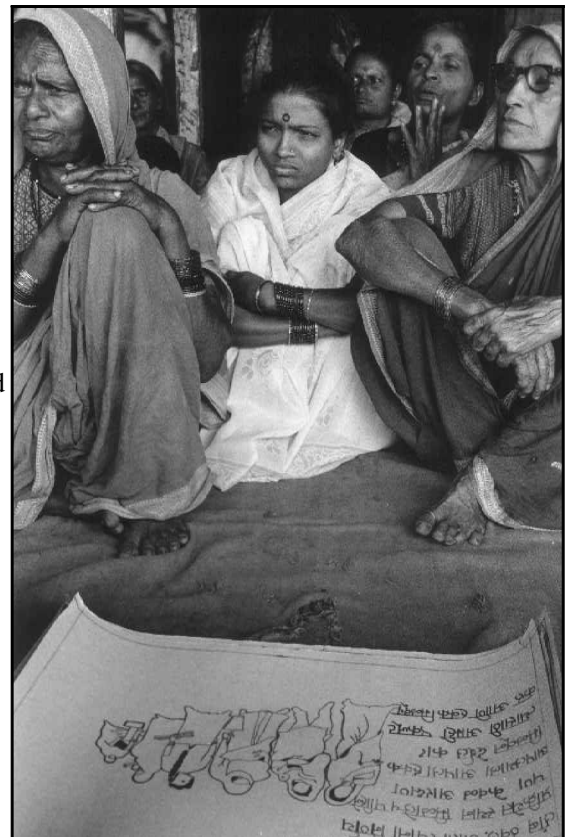
confident women are likely to articulate their livelihood strategies and allow an exploration, with them, of how these can be strengthened and support the promotion of new, appropriate⁴ income generating activities. Separate micro-planning exercises with informed women and marginalised groups, which are then fed into a larger group process, are likely to ensure that their views are articulated and included, but this must be facilitated by field functionaries (WDT social mobilisers or village professionals for example... but they themselves need attitudinal change; gender and equity sensitization and skill training in order to be able to do this). But women's involvement is not just needed at the village level. Women need to be involved in planning and implementation at district, state and national levels if they are to have any influence upon the programme as a whole.

It is clearly essential to warn against being over-optimistic about the prospects for ensuring an equitable resource management in the watershed development programmes as currently formulated and implemented. One may question whether an 'improved' natural resource base can provide adequate livelihoods for a growing rural population, without negatively impacting the livelihoods of those currently dependent on them. There is also no certainty that benefits will be equitably distributed without a clear policy of entitlements to the enhanced resource productivity accompanying watershed development. There is always a trade-off in switching from one resource use to another, in both social and economic terms, which needs to be recognized. Where land and water are involved, local politics invariably plays a part because of the considerable economic gain that can be made from the exploitation of the resources. The watershed development programme itself is seen by some as a 'money-making scheme' that attracts political interest. That interest can then influence the way the resources are dispersed.

We would argue that while the largest budgetary provision under the Watershed Guidelines continues to be for land development, these measures might not receive the attention they

deserve. If more time and resources are assigned in the cost norms to the development of the participatory skills of both implementing agencies and communities, and greater provision is made for investment in non-land based and land-based activities which are attractive to, and lucrative for, women, then there is a greater chance that women will be seen as valued and equal members of the village community developing the watershed. It may also mean that more women will see value in investing their time in watershed and livelihood development programmes and projects. Strong budgetary support for such activities in the Guidelines would provide a platform from which to mainstream the experience learnt from the many small initiatives being tried by NGOs and some government officials.

But at the end of the day is too much of the burden of development being placed on women? There is a need, of course, to ensure that women do not become overwhelmed by schemes and programmes focused at them, and are not persuaded to participate simply for short-term incentives (wage labour), but are able to make informed choices about what is best for them and their families. That



Women discuss empowerment in a Maharashtra village