

Strengthening Participatory Processes in Watershed Development Program in India

Background

Recurring droughts and land degradation ravage large parts of the country, particularly the 77% of geographical area under Arid, Semi-arid and Dry Sub-humid climatic zones. Estimates of the magnitude of land degradation in India vary considerably, one estimate puts the figure at 107.43 million ha (or 32.75 per cent of the total geographical area) affected by various forms and degrees of land degradation, another estimate by the National Remote Sensing Agency, estimates it at 75.70 m.ha. Of the latter estimate, degraded forest areas constitute 16.30 m.ha and non-forest degraded areas account for 44.39 m.ha. Of the estimated total of 75.50 m.ha, about 58 m.ha are treatable and can be restored to original productivity levels. In 1993 only 5.70 m.ha were reported to have received any restorative treatment. If one million hectares were successfully treated every year, it would still take more than fifty years to resuscitate all the affected areas. Such is the magnitude of the problem!

A much more serious problem is the lack of sustainability of the restorative treatment efforts. The Technical Committee on Drought-Prone Areas Programme and Desert Development Programme suggested a process oriented, people centred approach to watershed development. Subsequently, the watershed guidelines of 1994 made the first radical departure in the development of dry lands and drought-prone regions of India. It has envisaged a participatory *process oriented approach* centred on the communities with intensive external facilitation. Organising community into sustainable institutions of primary stakeholders, building their capacities and intensive facilitation to help these CBOs to plan for the development of their natural resources, facilitating appropriate technical choices and evolve sustainable management systems are the major processes envisaged.

As in any process-oriented programs, the impacts of watershed development primarily depend on the rigour with which the envisaged participatory processes are operationalised. Since its inception in 1994-5, there is no comprehensive review of how these processes are operationalised in the watershed program in India, in spite of nearly 7 years of experience. A preliminary survey of the experience suggests a varied and divergent experience across the states in the country. A re-look into the program would help in identifying the variations and/or deviations in the processes, major gaps and innovations at various levels. Such a process would help in improving the program design and taking the watershed movement ahead.

WASSAN has been actively working at various levels (field support services, training, research and policy formulation) in the watershed program as a support organisation. Its process evaluation studies in two districts of Andhra Pradesh has yielded substantial

results in identifying the process and policy gaps and raised several issues. A methodology for conducting such studies has also evolved in this process.

These studies in a sequel have contributed to evolving an 'operational process guidelines' for watershed program adopted by the government of Andhra Pradesh. These process guidelines are a result of several consultations on the issues raised in the process evaluation studies anchored by WASSAN. The present proposal draws from this experience and the expertise.

Objectives

The broad purpose of the study is to strengthen the participatory processes in the watershed development program in India to make the watershed development programs more community controlled and managed, equity and gender focussed, technically appropriate with institutional mechanisms in place for environmentally sound farming systems and sustainable livelihoods.

The study would broadly analyse the following aspects in the watershed program viz.,

- The processes of facilitation and capacity building
- Rigour and relevance of the technical plans
- Sustainability of farming practices and systems
- Equity and gender issues with focus on the landless, dalits and marginalized farmers
- Adequacy of fund allocation for
 - Per hector cost support in watershed projects in different eco zones
 - Adequacy of allocations for treating common property resources, ridge lands/ assigned waste land
 - Community Mobilization and Capacity Building
 - Gender and Equity Issues
- Financial Issues such as cost sharing, cost effectiveness of different interventions, revolving funds, bankability of different components and shifts from grants to loans of some components
- Examination of relevant policies (relating to water, forests, livestock, energies, etc) on watershed process
- Post-project sustainability through institutional development

The specific objectives are at three levels as follows:

At the Watershed Level:

- To detail the processes of organising community, participatory planning, technology choice, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the watersheds in each state
- To map and assess the variations and innovations in these participatory processes across the states with the principles of equity and gender, sustainability and poverty focus envisaged in the guidelines as a bench mark
- To understand the current practices in management of funds, accounts, participatory decision making regarding expenditure and auditing
- To assess how the factors of social exclusion and unequal land distribution influence the participatory processes.
- To assess the process of treating/ inclusion of forest land in watershed area
- To assess how convergence has taken place and identifying issues there of

At the PIA and District Levels:

The enabling environment received by the communities partly explains the variation in the participatory processes observed at the watershed level. The facilitation processes at the Program Implementing Agencies level and administrative procedures at the district level constitute the enabling environment.

To assess the enabling environment provided to the sample watersheds in terms of

- Capacity building inputs (methods, coverage of different interest groups and effectiveness)
- Facilitation processes and role analysis
- Monitoring systems
- Analysis of funds allocations and flows for different components of the program.

. At the State level:

- To assess the facilitation/ enabling processes to improve the attitudes and skills of district level functionaries and PIAs
- To analyse the impact of natural resource policies (water, land, animal, forestry, etc) on watershed processes.

- To map the best practices in policy making and institutional arrangements across the states

At the National Level:

- To compile a report on the status, variations and innovations in the processes across the states in the country
- To suggest ways of strengthening
 - Participatory processes at the watershed community level/ PRI level and in line department.
 - Enabling environment (procedures and administrative practices) at the district level
 - and the policy spaces at the state and national level

In addition, the study would potentially result in a consultative process and a network of NGOs articulating for effective decentralisation of decision making into the hands of the primary stakeholders, Community Based Organisations and Panchayat Raj Institutions. Towards this end, the proposal intends to propose a strategy and follow up action at state/ national levels. In this background, the final objective would be to : ***Propose a strategy for collective action and initiate a follow-up action plan at state/ national levels*** All the objectives are in a continuum and in a hierarchical manner influence the existing practices at the watershed level.

Methodology:

The study looks at the participatory processes on ground in the implementation of the watershed development program and reasons the status with respect to the enabling environment available in the district and the policy space in the state.

Sample selection

The states and districts for the study will be identified based on semi arid and sub humid regions/ protected areas/ buffer zone areas/ highly stratified societies. It is proposed to select eight watersheds in each state appropriately distributed on the basis of above criteria. Some of the ICEF projects in operation in selected state would be included.

The selection of these watersheds would be based on the ‘best cases’ perception within the state to be identified by the state department managing the watershed program. The districts where these watersheds are located will be automatically selected for the study.

The processes envisaged in the watershed guidelines would be the bench mark for assessment. However, it is also proposed to include one watershed even outside the government program as a 'best case example' to serve as a reference point.

The variants of government implemented and NGO/ CBO implemented watersheds will be considered in the sample. Completed watersheds or those nearing completion would only be considered in the sample.

The states of Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Meghalaya, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh are tentatively identified for the purpose of the study. The list of states would be finalised in the steering committee meeting after consultations.

Though the above is the suggested sampling process, WASSAN would be open to suggestions in this regard.

Organising the Study

WASSAN will take the full responsibility of organising the study and achieving its objectives. It would deploy necessary team for the purpose. Apart from this, the institutional support from WASSAN would also be available to the team from the experienced senior members of WASSAN at different stages of the study. The budgetary estimates are inclusive of the institutional charges of WASSAN. With its wider linkages, WASSAN would ensure that the local resource organisations and resource persons are involved in the study in each state.

The Study would be completed in a period of two years from the date of sanctioning of the proposal.

Steering committee

The study will be guided by a *steering committee* consisting of persons with longstanding contribution to the watershed development in India. The steering committee meets four times during the course of the study to finalise the methodology, to monitor progress, for an interim review and at the completion stage.

Workshops

WASSAN would organise an inception workshop with several key players in the watershed program at national level and state level, where the study is going to be conducted to share the objectives of the study. The methodology will be finalised in the framework of inception workshop by the all the members of study teams from each state.

WASSAN would identify partners in each state who would participate in the study and provide them necessary support in terms of developing methodologies, fieldwork and compiling of the final reports in each state. Apart from the dedicated team from WASSAN for this purpose, other members of WASSAN would also join the study teams at critical stages of the project.

An e-group would also be formed and this group updated on the progress of the study. Towards the end of the study, consultative workshops would be organised in each state to present the results and take feedback. The final report would be compiled and shared with wider audience. Efforts will be made to present the results to the Ministry of Rural Development and the Planning Commission. The study would be published for wider dissemination.

Key Activities Expected Outputs and Follow up Action:

At the watershed level:

- From an analysis of the watershed guidelines (1994, 2001 and 2003) and reports of various committees (like the Technical Committee, Eswaran Committee), the envisaged participatory processes would be distilled
 - The processes identified will be sequenced according to the phases of the program for e.g., Awareness building phase, community organisation, action planning etc.
 - Key questions on the processes at each stage would be formed specific to a particular group i.e. for SHGs, for User Groups, for Watershed Committees, Panchayats, labour etc.,
 - A mix of participant interviews, stakeholder group discussions and other PRA exercises will be used for data generation, appropriately backed up by the process questionnaires.
 - The project management data (action plans, physical and financial achievement statements, monitoring reports etc.,) will also be analysed.
1. Appropriate qualitative assessment tools will be developed for analysing the data

At the district and PIA levels

- The inputs given by the PIAs and the district administration in the sample watersheds would be mapped and analysed. These include the capacity building inputs, budget releases, technical support, monitoring etc.
- The administration processes being in practice at the district would be mapped in detail under a structured questionnaire.
- An analysis of the departmental circulars/ instructions would also be a part

At the State level

- The processes followed at the state level
- Policy statements in terms of guidelines / Government orders etc., would be analysed

Expected Outputs and Follow up Action:

The study would generate many outputs in the form of methodological tools that help in understanding the processes. Reports for each state would be prepared by respective study teams in the uniform structure as per the guidance of the Steering Committee. The state reports would be compiled by WASSAN under the guidance of the Steering Committee and shared with a larger audience at the national level.

- Based on a common structure, the state level reports for each state would be compiled and shared with stakeholders in each state.
- A consolidated report at the national level would be prepared by WASSAN.
- A set of process guidelines in the shape of a manual explaining the most effective processes to be followed would be prepared. These process guidelines would also include indicators for monitoring the processes.

The study and the larger consultation processes would lead to clear actionable points at the end. It is in these sharing meetings that we are expecting a national network would emerge to pursue the agenda further and for advocacy. An action plan would be evolved during the end-consultation process to follow up and on the advocacy strategy. Some of the key outputs in this direction are mentioned here.

- Recommendations for strengthening common guidelines for incorporating effective processes and reorient the training/ capacity building action plans suitably.
- Strengthening of networks comprising of CBOs, NGOs and other organizations involved natural resource managements in each of the states studied.
- Proposals for better advocacy through periodic consultations of a National Network.
- Strategies for funding of watershed development program in people's sector/ CBOs in some states.