

DYNAMIC GROUP STRATEGY - THE LEAST UNDERSTOOD PHENOMENON IN PARTICIPATORY WATERSHED MANAGEMENT¹

We are already into the 4th year since the 'New Guidelines' have come into force. I have a strong feeling that the spirit and approach of the guidelines has been missed by most who have tried to mechanically interpret them for their own convenience and ease. Everybody claims to have implemented the programme strictly according to the guidelines and some even quote para numbers of the guidelines right from their memory. Before going into the details of the Dynamic Group strategy let us review what the guidelines expected out of this programme.

Like poor people we have poor lands: poor in water resources, poor in soil fertility, poor in vegetation and poor in productivity. These are the arid and semi-arid lands of the country. These lands are drought prone. The DPAP, DDP and IWDP have failed in their objectives and the recommendations of the Hanumantha Rao Committee resulted in prescription of great paradigm shift in the approach of these programmes. The words 'watershed' and 'participation' have become popular but the reversals that were expected in the implementation of these programmes have by and large not taken place. The **reversals envisaged** are:

- ❖ **From Top-Down to Bottom-Up**
- ❖ **From Sectoral to Integrated**
- ❖ **From Annual to Long Term**

The **first reversal** expects people's participation. Which means participation of people right from planning and execution to maintenance, monitoring and evaluation. The paradigm shifts from top-down to bottom-up approach are given in the table on the next page.

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Table: The paradigm shift from top-down to bottom-up approach

S.No	Item	Blue Print (Top-Down)	Process (Bottom-Up)
1.	Point of Departure	Blue Print	Process
2.	Goals	Pre-determined (Closed) Short Term	Adaptive (Open) Long Term
3.	Key Word	Planning	Participatory
4.	Locus of Decision Making	Centralised	De-centralised
5.	Technology	Fixed 'Package'	Varied 'Basket'
6.	Relationship with Local People	Controlling Inducing 'Motivating'	Enabling Supporting Empowering
7.	Local People seen as...	Clients Beneficiaries Recipients	Actors Analysts Partners
8.	Outputs	Uniform Infrastructure	Diverse Capacity Competence

Everyone in the development field is aware of these paradigm shifts. The reason for repeating this here is to re-emphasise them. Every word in the above table carries lot of meaning and a bulky book can be written explaining them. But what is the Bottom in a Bottom-up participatory approach? We will talk more about it later.

The **second reversal** is the watershed approach, treating the selected area to saturation depending upon the situation. However, majority of the areas selected are not watersheds and sectoral allocations are back in while planning for treatment of the area. The approach of watershed development team is also sectoral. The guidelines expect everyone to be a bit of other sectors apart from being expert in his/her own sector. If this is not so, the WDTs cannot function. The community organisation is not separate from the problems faced by the people nor the technological options that are feasible. Hence, a social worker has to know about the problem of erosion, its causes, etc., so as to organise the people who are facing that problem. Similarly a technical person ought to know about the principles of group

dynamics so as to work with people in a participatory process to facilitate solving their production problems. The sectoral approach makes the technical WDTs redundant during the community organisation phase and the social worker redundant during the later phases. The process of community organisation and capacity building is continuous throughout out the project phase and is key to the people taking over the programme after the end of the project phase.

The **third reversal** is in planning. Though we have our five-year plans the actual planning under Top-Down approach was done on annual basis depending on the budget allocated. The Long Term planning under the present programme is for four years as far as the Government allocation of funds is concerned. But for the people it should be a real Long Term plan as they and their generations to come will be residing in that area forever. Even this reversal has not taken place. In most of the cases a perspective plan is prepared for four years on the basis of which the project is approved. Detailed annual action plans are prepared for implementation and mere approval by the 'Watershed Association' is expected to give it the aura of 'participatory' plan. My understanding is that the action plan in the minutest detail (Why, Where, Who, When, How, How Much) should be prepared and prioritised even before the first installment of works to the Watershed Committee is released. Even before a single pie is spent on works the watershed members should know how much money is coming for each field under various works. Only if this long-term action plan is prepared the earlier two reversals of people's plan and integral plan can be achieved. I hasten to add that this is easier said than done.

Now let us take a look into the **objectives** of the programme: We are talking about poor and drought prone lands. Our main approach earlier was to tackle the issue of drought after its onset: digging deep bore wells whenever acute water shortage is felt, mandatory transportation of fodder to the drought effected areas, providing wage employment for the afflicted. One might argue that these are the relief measures and not the objectives of the DPAP. There is a saying in Telugu which says: '*Illu Kalutunte baavi tavvataaniki poyinatlu*', which means starting to dig a well when the house is on fire.

However, there were instances where integrated approaches have resulted in mitigating the impact of the drought. Apart from the Three 'E's (Economic Improvement, Ecological Balance and Equity) objectives clearly listed by

the guidelines the entire area treated is expected to become ‘**drought proof**’, that is to withstand the adverse impact of the drought mainly in terms of:

- ❖ **Drinking Water**
- ❖ **Food**
- ❖ **Fodder**
- ❖ **Employment**
- ❖ **Fuel Wood**

The paragraphs in the guidelines, which talk about Grain, Fodder and Fuelwood banks, are conveniently missed by many. Employment is not the employment generated by way of implementation of the programme. That spending the amounts sanctioned by the programme in a concentrated area would generate employment is a foregone conclusion (even this is being scuttled by using heavy machinery in several cases). The employment that we are talking of is the employment generated as a result of the implementation of the programme, in the long term, in the years of drought.

And then we have the **priorities** outlined in the guidelines:

- ❖ **Priority for common lands**
- ❖ **Priority for community works**
- ❖ **Priority for indigenous technical knowledge**
- ❖ **Priority for low-cost**
- ❖ **Priority for the poor and women**

I do not mean that they are priorities in that order.

This is all about the guidelines: the reversals, the objective of drought proofing of the area selected for treatment and the priorities.

If something is to be said even in less words I will take from one Key Point from the MANAGE list: This is not a programme to fulfill the needs of the people but to solve the production problems. Production problems would be the key word.

Now to the people’s participation: ‘Participation’ means different things to different people ranging from passive participation to self-mobilisation which are given in the table given in the following page.

Table: Participation means different things different people.

S.No	Type of participation	Peoples role
1.	Passive Participation	People participate by being told what is going to happen or has already happened. It is an announcement by an administration or project management without listening to peoples response.
2.	Participation in information giving	People participate by answering questions posed by researchers using questionnaires, surveys or similar approaches. People do not have the opportunity to influence the proceedings.
3.	Participation by consultation	People participate by being consulted, and external agents listen to views. This does not concede any share in decision making, and professionals are under no obligation to take on board peoples views.
4.	Participation for material incentives	People participate by providing resources, for example labour, in turn of food, cash or other material incentives. Though this is called participation, people have no stake in prolonging activities when the incentives end.
5.	Functional Participation	People participate by forming groups to meet pre determined objectives related to the project. These institutions tend to be dependant on external initiatives and facilitators, but many become self reliant.
6.	Interactive Participation	People participate in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and the formation of new local institutions or the strengthening of existing ones. These groups take control over local decisions, and so people have a stake in maintaining structures and practices.
7.	Self-Mobilisation	People participate by taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change systems. They develop contact with external institutions for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used.

What the present programme aims to achieve is interactive participation during the years of implementation and self-mobilisation by the end of the programme. However, what has been achieved mostly is participation in information giving, participation by consultation and participation for material incentives. The best of the achievements to date can only be termed as functional participation.

The key to participation is the new village institutions to be formed: The Watershed Association, which is the registered society, is the body to manage natural resources of the selected watershed area. This responsibility was not given to the gram panchayat as the watershed area need not be co-terminus with the panchayat boundary. Moreover the Watershed Association is expected to be a long-term body meant for the management of natural resources. The gram panchayat is an elected body for a term for five years and its duration might not coincide with the project period. Due importance is to be given to the gram panchayat as grass roots elected body. The watershed association should also formulate rules and regulations for democratic functioning. The Watershed Committee is formed to look into the day to day affairs during the years of implementation and even after the project period if desired by the WA. However the Bottom in the participatory process is neither the Watershed Association nor the Watershed Committee. The Bottom is the Self-Help Groups and User Groups.

Now the last two are the least understood in the watershed programme. Understanding that SHGs are for the landless and UGs for the landed is widely prevailing. One high-ranking official of the government has earlier said that this being a programme for the landed some tidbits are thrown to the landless by way of revolving fund for SHGs. Other well meaning people complain that there is very little for landless: each SHG is eligible for only Rs.5,000/- and that too as a loan. But that is not the point.

The entire approach of the watershed programme itself is of Self-Help as it expects the villagers to take forward the task of natural resource management after the project period is over.

The best way to understand the groups would be as follows: User Groups for people who are directly dependant on the watershed area, and Self Help Groups for people who are indirectly dependant on the watershed area. This would seem to be too obvious for those who got the essence of the guidelines. But in implementation SHGs have not been properly

understood. Apart from the agricultural labourers the most commonly formed groups are washermen, carpentry and women for tailoring. Any Self-Help activity has to be encouraged but in the context of natural resource management in a watershed area our focus should be on non-farm based livelihoods that are indirectly dependent on the natural resources. MANAGE in its Operational Manual I has clearly stated these in Format 5 as: Dairying, Sheep Rearing, Goat Rearing, Fisheries, Duckeries, Poultry, Piggeries, Rearing of silk worms, Rope making, Dal Making, Mat/Basket making, others (it has defined Non-farm based livelihood as those livelihoods which are indirectly dependant upon land and water resource or which deals with processing of biomass for value addition at village level). I would gladly add to this list vegetable vendors and toddy tappers.

People's participation is about **capacity building** and **empowerment**. But all people are not equal in the village. This is the reason why the guidelines have indicated that Self-Help Groups be organised first, i.e. within 3 to 5 months of starting the programme. Normally the people to be organised under Self-Help groups would be the poor. If all those who are indirectly dependent are not poor, the objective of Equity and the priority aspect of the poor tells us that we have to focus on the poor under the Self-Help Groups.

Let us look at it in an another way. Imagine that Self-Help Groups for dairying are to be formed. Why are we forming Self-Help Groups for dairying? Apart from increasing their income, our objective under drought proofing is to reduce the adverse impact of fodder shortage. Who should be the primary stakeholders or actors in this? Those who face the problem of fodder shortage. And who faces the problem of fodder shortage? It is not the rich farmer who also has milch animals. It is the poor who do not have land or have only little land. So the poor persons having animals should be organised so that they will plan, implement and monitor the works intended to provide adequate fodder for their animals. They would have to claim their stake on common land for fodder production or capacitated to take up fallow/waste land owned by others for fodder cultivation. When the actual work on land for fodder production would be taken up this group would be User Group. The poor cannot be capacitated to take up this unless they are organised as a group and the small amount of revolving fund given to the Self-Help Groups is to help them to graduate to User Groups. Thus the poor who are dependent indirectly on natural resources for their livelihoods are to be capacitated to take charge of the management of those natural resources on which their livelihoods are dependant.

There can be only few exemptions to Self-Help Groups graduating into User-Groups: the vegetable vendors/ fruit vendors and agricultural labourers. However, there are successful cases of individual fruit vendors leasing out orchards and thus being quasi managers for that resource. Would vegetable vendors graduate as vegetable growers? The issue with agricultural labourers is different. Expecting that Self-Help Groups of agricultural labourers would result in effective land reforms is bit too far. But organising the agricultural labourers is essential for them to receive the entire amounts drawn for the work done from the project funds and not to be siphoned off by the petty contractors and farmer turned contractor. Their organisation should also result in effective implementation of minimum wages.

Coming to the user groups, it is clear that farmers should be organised under this. In practice they are being organised according to a particular activity. Thus a group on bunding, one on check dam, one for horticulture, etc are being formed. Or one group is being formed for every estimate of Rs.25,000/- keeping in view the financial limit of sanctioning the estimates. In some cases one group for bunding in the entire watershed area has been formed. One need not hesitate to say that these are only groups on paper and not functional ones. The basis for formation of the User Group should be the problem faced by a group of people. And for the group to be functional it should be small and homogenous. This homogenous can be a tricky word. For example all farmers facing the problem of erosion can be termed as homogenous group. Within that group there can be a homogenous group of farmers effected by erosion due to a particular stream (this is sometimes called as the sub-watershed). Further within this can be homogenous groups based on class, contiguity of lands, caste, neighborhood, or one more problem that all of them face. The point is that the group should be functional to address the problem faced by them. The group has to plan, execute, implement and evaluate the programme and also maintain and carry forward the work.

Now what does a User Group do, apart from maintenance, after the work has been implemented? Under functional participation we have seen that groups are formed to meet predetermined objectives. These groups tend to become dysfunctional once the project period is over or even during the project period itself if the work has been executed. If this is not to happen the User Group should graduate into a Self-Help Group in order to increase their incomes and better their lives continuously on a long-term basis. The

watershed programme can support only few natural resource management activities with the project funds. The others that would need finances should be carried out on either self-help basis or the groups should be able to access other programmes of the Government and financial institutions for loans. One might facilitate this dovetailing or convergence, but the emphasis should be on the demand side. The role of outsiders is to facilitate the capacity build up of the groups.

Thrift and credit can be an important activity for Users Groups also. This amount might come in handy for the group to pay its contribution for works. Or they might procure inputs jointly with the amounts saved, or access bank loans on the basis of a good track record of credit and repayment. Moreover, group loaning is preferred by banks rather than individuals both in view of the reduced workload and guarantee of repayment. Ultimately the User Groups should be capacitated to carry on the work of natural resource management and economic development on sustainable basis even after the project period is over. Thus the work of Watershed Association after completion of the project period is not mere maintenance of the assets already created but also to further build up the assets of the watershed area.

Thus Self-Help Groups and User-Groups are not static, water-tight compartment groups. The Self Help groups are to graduate as User Groups and User Groups as Self-Help Groups. Each group should have a distinct identity by way of a name and procedures worked out internally by the group. It should also maintain records of meeting, etc. and of accounts as per the need. The names Self-Help and User are given for facilitating our work. What ultimately matters to the people is the increase in their income either by solving production problems or benefiting by group work. Only if such benefit is seen people would organise into groups or else what we have is groups on paper resulting in empowerment of individuals for ulterior motives.

If one reads the success criteria for community organisation in the guidelines it can be concluded that the present watersheds are a big failure in this regard. The success criteria say that at least 50% of those who are directly or indirectly dependent on watershed area should be organised in one or more self-help groups and at least 50 % of the families in the watershed community are represented in at least one user group. This means that the entire community is organised into one or the other group and the total membership of the groups can be more than the total number in the

community. There is no bar for a self-help group member in being a member of another self-help group or a User Group. There is no bar even on the number of Self-Help and User Groups to be formed. Moreover, we have just seen that the Self-Help and User Groups should be in a dynamic state of function and nomenclature per se shouldn't matter as long as the objective is achieved.

But in most of the cases the Self-Help Groups and User Groups are being formed because there should be 4-5 User Group representatives and 3-4 Self-Help Group representatives in the Watershed Committee. Worse still the nominations to the Watershed Committee are made first and they represent the Self-Help and User Groups. The purpose of the revolving fund given to the Self-Help Groups, as already mentioned earlier, is to enhance their income on the basis of group activity from the livelihood that they are already carrying out. This money is not for starting a new livelihood activity. Without noting this several people criticise that the amount allocated as revolving fund for Self-Help Groups is small. Another reason for this criticism is also due to the higher amounts given as revolving fund in the DW CRA programme. That the amount given in watershed is not for new livelihoods is clear as it is expected that the loan be repaid in not more than 6 installments, with the first installment being paid after one month of receiving the loan. For example a Self-Help Group with dairying as its livelihood activity can utilise the amount of revolving fund for bulk purchase of feed, or small feed mixing plant for the group, or purchase of a bicycle and containers for sale of milk in the market nearby, etc. What a group would do depends on the local situation and what constraints are faced in increasing their incomes.

The success criteria for community organisation further state that at the end of the project period the groups should be meeting regularly once a month, and decisions taken on consensus basis. Further the Self Help groups should be transacting business with 50% of the resources generated from amongst the members and have timely recoveries. User Groups have to give their voluntary donations, submit their accounts regularly and actually takeover the operations and maintenance of the completed community works. Not a single group in the entire watersheds would stand up to these success criteria.

Having said this let me tell that all this is easier said than done. First there should be a great shift from the authoritarian/paternalistic attitude of the

GO/NGO personnel and second a shift from dependant mode by the community. This dependant mode by the community is the making of the Government.

Even if the guidelines were accepted in its truest spirit the process and dynamics of community organisation is a difficult task to understand and achieve. Added to this difficulty are the personal preferences and pressures of agencies involved in implementation of the programme. All this has made mess of community organisation. Without organising, capacitating and empowering the Self-Help Groups and User Groups talking about accountability, quality and proper utilisation of funds is mere waste of time. Whereas the participatory approach empowers groups, the top-down authoritarian/ technically loaded programme will benefit the individuals. Even the Watershed Association and the Watershed Committee and all the office bearers are to facilitate the Self Help Groups and User Groups.

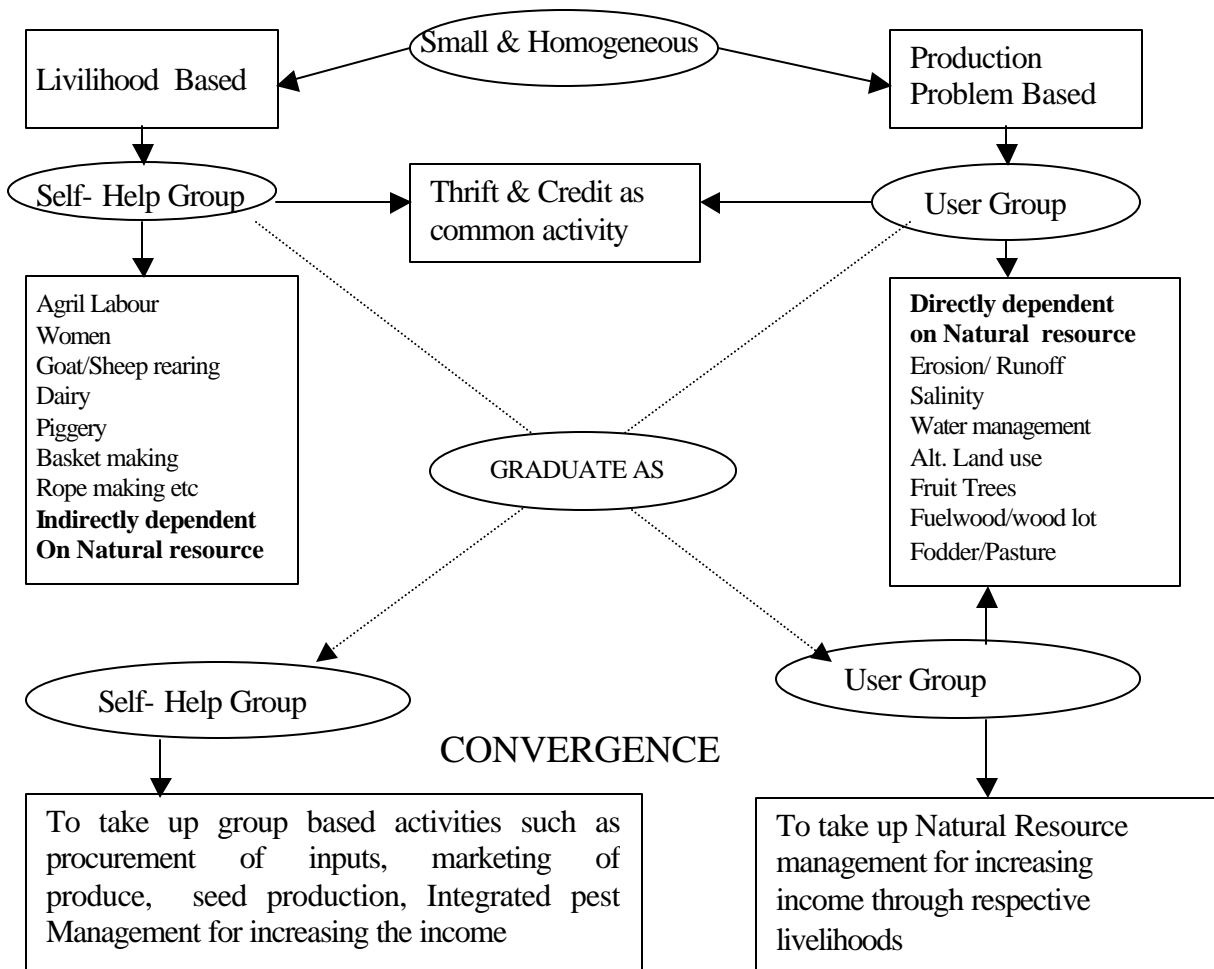


Fig: Dynamic relationship between Groups in Watershed Management

The fate of PRA in watersheds:

PRA is an approach that facilitates participation. From its inception as RRA many changes have taken place in this approach. The major changes from RRA to PRA are given in the following table:

Table: RRA and PRA compared

	RRA	PRA
Period of Major Development	Late 1970s, 1980s	Late 1980s, 1990s
Major innovators	Universities	NGOs
Main Users	Aid agencies, Universities	NGOs, Government, Field Organisations
Key resources earlier overlooked	Local people's knowledge	Local people's capabilities
Main innovation	Methods	Behaviour
Predominant Mode	Elicitive Extractive	Facilitating Participatory
Ideal objective	Learning by outsiders	Empowerment of local people
Long-term outcomes	Plans, projects, publications	Sustainable local action and institutions

For me the simplest definition of PRA is empowering and giving voice to the marginalised. The marginalised are not same in every case: at a Global level between the North and South the South is marginalised, within a country between Urban and Rural the Rural are marginalised, in a rural situation between the Rich and Poor the Poor are marginalised and in poor between Men and Women it is the women who are marginalised. However the participation has got stuck in our country mostly at information gathering level of the RRA mode. The PRA approach while talking about empowering the marginalised also lays emphasis on 'giving away power at all levels'. This has been popularised as 'handing over the stick'. Much emphasis is being given world over to attitude and behaviour in the participatory approach, but its impact is not yet seen in a significant way at the grass root level.

In the watershed programme PRA has become a three-day drama with rangoli, which results in treatment map of the entire watershed area and

formation of Watershed Association, and Committee. At one place the guidelines says 'on return from training, the WDT members will conduct three-day participatory rural appraisal exercises in each of the ten selected villages'. And this has been taken literally. Even the NGOs known for their pioneering work in PRA have trained the personnel involved in watersheds in mainly using social map, resource map and transect which would immediately lead into a treatment map, as was the case in the earlier days of RRA. Other tools such as seasonality, matrix, venn diagram, etc are done and kept in files. The action plan is in no way connected to the PRA exercises in majority of the cases. What the guidelines says about three-day PRA is for the initial entry phase for understanding of the watershed area, the people, their livelihoods, the linkages between the resources and the people and to get an idea about the production problems. This is to help the WDT in organising the community, arranging exposure visits and plan for training's as per the local situation.

The guidelines further point that 'Gathering information is only one of the objectives of the PRA exercises. The more important objective is to interact with the village community in small groups to understand their perspectives, perceptions and priorities. The PRA exercises should lead to diagnosis of the important problems and a common understanding of the village community's priorities.' However, this aspect is completely being missed out in practice.

PRA is not about tools or methods (tools are not the solution), it is an approach. The process of community organisation and evolving of people's action plan is to be facilitated by the participatory approach. The end objectives of the watershed programme and PRA are the same: empowerment of local people and sustainable local action and institutions. Each and every group is to be facilitated by tools of seasonality, matrix, time line to understand the changes over a period and within the year, for joint analysis of their problems, options and priorities. Mapping is to facilitate the treatment of each group separately. Key informants, semi-structured interviews and focussed group discussions are the methods that are to be used continuously. PRA when understood from the aspect of attitude and behaviour is a way of life, which concerns the personal angle of the practitioner. This approach is reflected not only in work area but also in personal life. The objective of empowerment of the community cannot take place without giving away of power by those in positions of authority.

