

Capitalization of Experiences «Water, Land and People»

Introduction into the context

India, 2007



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Watershed Development in India

In India, rainfed areas constitute about 65 percent of arable land and are characterized by low productivity. About 70 percent of the population in this region depends on agriculture. An analysis of the government investments in India showed that rainfed areas offer greater growth for an additional unit of investment apart from having a much larger impact on poverty alleviation compared to irrigated areas. The need to improve the productivity of less favoured regions has become even more compelling in regard of equity, efficiency and sustainability. Additionally growing scarcity and competition for water stands as a major threat to future advances in poverty alleviation.

Watershed development offers a unique approach to address these problems. Watershed development aims to ensure availability of drinking water, fuel wood and fodder and raise income and employment for farmers, landless labourers, women and other vulnerable groups through improved agricultural production and productivity in areas with marginal lands.

In India today, watershed development is one of the largest single development initiatives undertaken in terms of resources, geographical spread and agencies (governmental and non-governmental) involved. The Ministry of Agriculture's budget alone for the years 2002-2006 worked out to US\$ 1.1 billion or approx \$ 274 million a year. The Ministry of rural Development's budget for the year 2005-2006 alone was 279 million.

The watershed development focus evolved from technically oriented soil conservation to soil and water conservation and finally to participatory watershed development. It is now projected by different agencies as a comprehensive program for rural development that promotes rural livelihoods, especially of the poor and disadvantaged.

In 1994, watershed development guidelines were formulated by the Indian government to adopt a common approach for planning and implementing all the various programs. The power of decision-making was devolved to district and village levels and financial allocations were made to local-level organizations. Provisions were made for partnerships between government, NGOs and people's organizations. In the revised, *Hariyali* guidelines of 2003, there was a shift in focus from NGOs to Panchayat Raj Institutions for implementing watershed activities. The existing institutional structures were overhauled by replacing Watershed Associations and Committees with Gram Sabhas (at the village level) and the Gram Panchayat (at the Panchayat level) respectively.

The recent Parthasarathy Committee report of 2006 (Neeranchal guidelines) made recommendations for future watershed projects. The major recommendations of the committee regarding institutional aspects are the restoration of the role of the village watershed committee (VWC) and the acceptance of Gram Sabha for watershed association. The village watershed council is expected to function as a committee of the Gram Panchayat. Strengthening of the panchayat system through capacity building and leadership development was identified as a critical element for sustainability of watershed programs, although the primacy of VWCs should be maintained, with the panchayats having more of a governance than implementation function.

Central and State governments, donors and NGOs have all been involved in the implementation of watershed programs with varying degrees of success. The majority of the more successful projects share one or more of the following characteristics:

- They often occur under specific preconditions, which are not easily replicable
- Approaches to development are resource intensive and cannot easily be 'scaled up' to new areas



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- There is uncertainty over the long-term institutional and ecological sustainability of rehabilitated watersheds.

The experiences and lessons learnt during the processes provide tacit and implicit knowledge valuable to future policy formulations and programs. The major recommendations pertaining to institutional design aspects are:

- Providing institutional arrangements for equitable distribution of benefits
- Strengthening the capacities of local bodies in terms of implementing tasks and managing resources
- Guaranteeing proper legal status of the local bodies
- Formal allocation of user rights in order to achieve sustainability of common property resources



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