

# INVOLVING COMMUNITY IN WATERSHED MANAGEMENT : CHALLENGES AND APPROACHES <sup>1</sup>

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## SYNOPSIS

Nowadays, almost every development project seeks to involve the community as a strategy to ensure success. Experiences all over the world show that most sustainable and successful projects have a strong involvement of the local community. It is observed that success of a project often determined by the quality of participation of the community during and after the project period. Community participation and involvement are generally believed – both by NGOs and planners – to be difficult to achieve, and therefore, not adequately addressed.

Experience shows that organisation and involvement of community, although complex in nature, are not difficult to achieve if approached systematically. Experiences of Marathwada Sheti Sahayya Mandal (MSSM) indicate that the communities have not only ably shouldered the responsibilities of maintaining and managing the resources created, but have gone beyond to undertake further development initiatives on their own.

The approach adopted in these watersheds focuses on involving the community from the planning stage using participatory planning tools. During implementation, the community was entrusted continuously with small tasks of gradually increasing complexity. Towards the end of the implementation period, the community was encouraged to explore options for post-project maintenance and management, and also for building further upon the resources developed. Appropriate groups were formed as committees and adequate financial resources were generated from within the community meet the further demands of maintenance and further development.

In essence, the capacity of the local people was gradually and positively enhanced to meet the challenges of resource management. These capacity-enhancement measures comprised of simple steps and methods that are widely replicable in other natural resources management.

This paper describes the capacity enhancement approach and the corresponding result from four watershed projects in Aurangabad and Jalna districts. Based on the experience, the paper suggests guidelines for application of approach to Community-based Natural Resources Management projects.

## 1. PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION

Involvement in planning, implementation, and monitoring of any activity is a broad definition of participation<sup>3</sup>. It always results in increased stake holding and feeling of ownership, which invariably results in improved quality of the process (way in which the project was managed) and the output (project works or activities). In rural development projects, the involvement of local community is a little complicated because of heterogeneity of the population and a

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<sup>3</sup> The term “participation” is used here in holistic sense and as distinct from numerical contribution. Of late, tendency to measure participation in terms of *shramadan* or local contribution is on the rise among some programme administrators. It often leads to setting numerical targets on ritualistic *shramadan*, which invariably results in manipulation of schedule of rates or records.

variety of interest groups in the village. It is particularly important in the context of integrated development projects like watershed, where one has to consider the entire area or village. Thus, the objective of people's participation in such projects would be to involve the entire village population in project management.

It is also observed that involving community in project management is a slow process, mainly because of the lack of clarity on the project concept and its management practices. In the watershed development projects, MSSM<sup>4</sup> adopted a simple four-stage methodology to involve the community into the project. These four stages are : awareness building and participatory planning; community organisation; involving community in routine work; and conflict management.

The experience of working with the people for watershed development, especially over the last decade, is presented here together with the prominent lessons drawn. The approach was refined, and learnings consolidated, with experience over time. During this period, MSSM worked for watershed development mainly in two talukas, viz., Aurangabad (villages Jadgaon, Hivra, Ladgaon, Mangrul, Tongaon, Satana and Karmad) and Jalna (villages Asarkheda, Kadwanchi and Butkheda)<sup>5</sup>.

## **2. AWARENESS BUILDING**

In the initial stage of the project, involvement of the people depends on their understanding of the project and their assessment of the expected benefits. Three main aspects of collective learning were focused in this stage, viz., understanding the situation, analysing the problem, and identifying the options. These were done through formal and informal discussions and training events, as described below. In a typical project cycle, these steps broadly correspond to the pre-planning preparation stage.

**2.1 Understanding the situation :** We attempted to build a common understanding among the men and women in the villages on the situation of natural resources in their village through a dialogical process, which could be typically described as follows. Three to four meetings on the drought situation – a perpetual phenomenon – were held with the people. It was followed by screening of films and slide shows on natural resources degradation before men and women of the villages. A few days after the screening, a meeting was held with as many men and women (adults in the village) to discuss the message from the films and to decide the next step, which was named as “collectively understanding our village”.

The villagers developed the understanding of village situation collectively using some tools of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). It may be noted here that we did not insist on carrying out all the typical PRA exercises, but did the mapping and seasonality analysis of aspects related to land and water resources. The fieldwork culminated in sharing of the maps and

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<sup>4</sup> MSSM is a voluntary organisation working in drought-prone areas of Marathwada for over three decades for watershed development, natural resources management, agricultural extension and training. The efforts have resulted in significant improvement in livelihood situation and socio-economic well being of watershed dwellers in the villages where watershed development activities were undertaken.

<sup>5</sup> Although the experiences cited here are from Marathwada – the operational area of MSSM, similar efforts were made in other parts by other voluntary organisations, esp. under programmes by AFARM, AFPRO, WOTR, and IGWDP.

charts with almost all villagers at a village meeting. This was the basis for taking the next step of collective problem analysis.

**2.2 Analysing the problem :** This was done in a series of informal meetings with large number of villagers. It was followed by a one-day workshop to consolidate the problem analysis. During the workshop, the villagers tried to identify their most pressing problems related to livelihood and their causes or reasons. These causes were grouped into two, viz., those linked to land and water, and those linked to individual or collective behaviour of the villagers. The exercise was mostly done using a base map – either a revenue map or the one prepared during the PRA exercises. Informal conversation on possible solutions was encouraged, but no ready-made solutions were offered. It invariably raised the level of curiosity among the villagers, setting the right condition to attempt the next step of exposure visit.

**2.3 Identifying options :** Once the villagers became familiar with the problems of their village and possible reasons thereof, they attempted to identify options. Some villagers often have knowledge of related work done in other villages or in neighbouring areas. At this stage, exposure visit was planned for the men and women to see the possible ways in which their problems could be addressed. MSSM organised the exposure visits to areas where watershed work has been done and community organisation is functional and effective. During the field visit, interaction with the local villagers was encouraged. Immediately thereafter, the experience and observations were shared in a village meeting and a broad development plan as to what could be adopted was prepared.

### 3. COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

While the awareness building efforts aimed at a large proportion of the village population in the pre-planning stage, not all of them could take active part in the planning and implementation of the project. It was, therefore, necessary to identify small group or groups of people who could take more responsibilities than the rest. Such groups could be in form of committees set up with specific roles that they could fulfill responsibly, for example, watershed management committee, village development committee, shramadan committee, water users' committee, forest protection committee, etc.<sup>6</sup> Community organisation is about identifying responsible leaders, helping them identify their roles and capacitating them to fulfill the same. The approach adopted in the above projects had three major components, viz., identification of opinion leaders, involving them in operational aspects, and formalising institutional arrangements, as described below.

**3.1 Identification of opinion leaders :** The pre-planning stage in all projects lasted for about 6 months to a year, which was sufficient to understand the strengths and potential of most opinion leaders in the villages. However, such identification was impressionistic, and therefore, required further testing, which was done by giving small tasks to these individuals and

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<sup>6</sup> There is a strong possibility and desirability to involve the *Gram Panchayat* (Village Council), which is a “statutory” entity representing of the entire village, in administration and management of such development programmes. Some claim that the overall political climate is not favourable for such interventions. MSSM is presently working on the idea of promoting watershed development through *Gram Panchayats*. Capacity building of *Gram Panchayat* members and functionaries from three selected villages has been initiated in district Jalna of Maharashtra State in collaboration with Jalna *Zilla Parishad* (District Council).

observing their performance<sup>7</sup>. This provided considerable information on their leadership style and potential to shoulder various responsibilities.

**3.2 Involving in action :** Most people were involved in the planning of the soil and water conservation works. The exercise, which lasted over a couple of months, involved visiting each farm to study its degradation status and to plan corrective measures in consultation with the owner of the farm<sup>8</sup>. This task needed some technical skills of measurement of length, slope, depth, as well as using tape measure and calculator. Some youth and opinion leaders were trained in these skills. Similarly, technical skill training was done in tree-plantation methods, well-water measurement, assessing flood quantities, etc.

It was noted that the opinion leaders did not require much training in process or behavioural skills like communication, dialogue, conflict resolution, etc. Depending upon the interest and aptitude, the men and women were involved in various activities and tasks like supervision and quality control, measurement and payment, handling material, mobilising community, conflict resolution, etc. At individual level, they were given tasks with progressively increasing complexity, for example, from measurement of pits, to recording the measurement to computing volume, to preparing muster, etc. At collective level, the responsibility was increased by asking the villagers to take some decisions, while the project staff gradually reducing their own role in operational decisions. Such involvement helped not only in achieving the physical outputs, but also in developing their capacities.

**3.3 Formalising institutional arrangements :** It was found that the above groups of men and women worked effectively in informal way. But, for continuity of systems and for further development, a formal institution is desirable. Registration is one type of formalisation, but in order to ensure the long-term effective functioning, some other measures were tried. These included formation of small groups or task force federating into the committee, involving other groups like *mahila mandals* and self-help groups, linking with other institutions like *panchayats*, etc. Some measures that were found effective in most villages are explained below.

#### 4. INSTITUTIONALISING PARTICIPATION

Participation or involvement of people in any development initiative may be easier to achieve in some events or stages, but it is relatively more difficult to sustain throughout the programme, unless institutionalised. Some practical methods of institutionalising participation, as developed during the implementation of the above watershed development projects are broad-basing the responsibility, conflict resolution mechanism, and maintenance fund, were found effective in most villages.

**4.1 Broad-basing responsibility :** Different interdependent roles were assigned to different people to enhance teamwork and synergy. For example, the tasks of quality check

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<sup>7</sup> It must be acknowledged that opinion leaders exist in each village. Subjective assessment of their qualities by external interventionists only helps in determining as to how much stakes they could put on such leaders. But they cannot (and should not attempt to) change the leadership or the leadership behaviour in a short span.

<sup>8</sup> This methodology, originally evolved by MSSM for pragmatic operational planning, has been refined further. It is now being used by Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR) and NABARD as the official (and mandatory) planning tool called "Net Planning" in the Indo-German Watershed Programme (IGWDP).

(supervision), measurement, and payment were allotted to different committee members, who shared their observations in the committee meetings (on larger platform). This also helped in mutual checks. Here, the underlying principle is that if the management of affairs is rested in the hands of larger number of people, as compared to a few individuals, there is a mutual check due to increased transparency. It also helped in allowing more space for more men and women to participate in the work, and thereby, increase their ownership in the project.

**4.2 Conflict resolution mechanism :** Minor conflicts kept surfacing in course of the implementation, such as provision of space for stacking material, exact demarcation of boundary between two farms, provision of land for alternative road around a dam site, etc., which were resolved by the villagers themselves in an amicable manner. The conflict resolution mechanism, with minor variation across the villages, constituted three main and progressive stages. The first stage would comprise of an attempt by the site supervisor to resolve the conflict through dialogue between the two conflicting farmers or groups. If they failed to arrive at a consensus, the issue would be discussed with the committee. If it could not be resolved there, a few elderly and respected persons would be brought in to mediate. An important aspect of this mechanism was that no compensation or special benefits were bestowed upon the conflicting parties from the project funds.

**4.3 Maintenance Fund :** As an element of ensuring continuation of the activity beyond project period, especially to address the maintenance and repair needs, maintenance fund is created in the watershed projects, mostly out of the cost saved on account of *shramadan*. In the above projects, maintenance fund was collected from the farmers on the basis of their land holding, besides their *shramadan* contribution. This helped create an increased sense of ownership. The fund (to the tune of a few lakhs of Rupees already collected in each village) would be managed by the people (committee) and could also be used for any development purpose, especially for development of women and children.

## 5. INFERENCES

Participation or involvement of people in any development initiative may be easier to achieve in some events or stages, but it is difficult to sustain throughout the programme. This is sometimes because of the limited availability of villagers, who are willing and capable of taking up the project responsibilities. This could be overcome by systematic awareness, motivation, training and capacity building<sup>9</sup>. A framework for capacity building, based on the past experience as described above, is presented in Exhibit 1. The preliminary inferences, the conclusiveness of which needs to be established over a variety of socio-economic and socio-political milieu, are as follows:

- Capacity building of local people is essential to increase their participation in any development programme. The capacity building measures should be used gradually based on the response and rate of progress of the people.

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<sup>9</sup> Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR), Ahmednagar has developed a 24-step capacity building methodology (it is called “pedagogy” in their official literature) for use in the Indo-German Watershed Programme (IGWDP). It has proved quite useful in the past in increasing the technical skills and knowledge of the rural people. However, it has limited applicability in building capacities in institutional and behavioural fields, owing to the rigid structure of the former.

- *Shramadan*, especially when expressed in numerical terms or percentages, is, at best, an accounting indicator of people's participation. It does not represent the quality of involvement of people.
- Institutionalising participation and involvement of the community is essential for sustainability.
- Participation depends on agreeing to and practising some core values by all the concerned. It is, therefore, necessary that the attitude and behaviour of the project staff are in consonance with these values.

In essence, the framework and the aforementioned inferences are drawn from the experience in watershed development projects, but they are applicable, with appropriate modifications or adaptations, to most rural development projects.

**Exhibit – 1**  
**Framework for capacity building**

<b>Stage of the Project</b>	<b>Field</b>	<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Methods and Tools</b>
<b>Pre-planning</b>	Technical	Awareness building	Audio-visuals, PRA
	Techno-economic	Problem Analysis	LFA
<b>Planning</b>	Technical	Identifying options	Exposure visit
	Socio-economic	Evaluating the desirability of options	Group work, village meeting
<b>Physical Implementation</b>	Techno-economic	Preparing (individual) implementation plan	Net planning
	Managerial	Operational plan	Group work
		Quality control	Supervision by team
		Measurement and payment	By interdependent teams
<b>Project Implementation</b>	Institutional	Sharing work-related responsibilities	Forming Task-teams and committees
		Conflict resolution	Institutional mechanism
		Creating development fund	Management system

To be cited as:

Mandavkar, Yugandhar and J M Gandhi (2001); Involving Community in Watershed Management : Challenges And Approaches; Technical Paper; International Seminar on “An Integrated Approach for Strengthening and Protecting Drinking Water Sources” held at Pune, India, on September 27-28, 2001