

Voluntary Organisations in Watershed Management in India¹

Yugandhar Mandavkar²

Abstract

Land, water and people are the basic resources of a nation. Productive land is the source of human sustenance and security. Economic stability and wise use of these basic resources are inseparable. Watershed management has now been accepted as the approach for regeneration and use of basic resources for ensuring sustainable livelihood for rural population. Sustainability in watershed management or natural resources management (NRM) context could be viewed as continuing productivity of land and water for sustenance and growth of people dependent on these resources.

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. Many NGOs and Government projects have evolved and adopted various approaches towards community involvement, and towards sustainable watershed management of watersheds.

Particularly interesting are the experiences of the Voluntary Organisations (VOs), or Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), who have long been working towards sustainable rural development. While many of them have pioneered and evolved pragmatic methodologies, the transfer of this knowledge and learning to other practitioners and planners had been limited. As a result, we see a plethora of VOs working for watershed development, but unable to achieve the effectiveness and sustainability.

The sustainability of watersheds largely depends on the effectiveness of capacity building of local communities to manage their resources. It depends on the effectiveness of approach to technology, community organisation approach and management systems evolved in the process. This calls for an empowerment approach, which many VOs have demonstrated in their successful watershed programmes. This paper describes the effective approaches and experiences of some VO initiatives in various parts of the country and takes a critical look at the current scenario in development sector. The paper is meant to initiate discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of the VOs individually or collectively, within the changing development environment and opportunities it provides.

Introduction : Sustainable development has evolved out of long process of public concern with respect both to natural resources and to the environment. During the first

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² Secretary, Grass Roots Action for Social Participation (GRASP), 20, Shreya Nagar, Aurangabad – 431 005, India (grasp.ho@gmail.com and yugman10@yahoo.com)

half of this century, such concerns emphasised technically efficient means directed at productivity and efficiency of natural resources. During the latter half of the century, the emphasis shifted to long-term and continuing productivity, and particularly after World War II, to the aesthetic and amenity use of natural resources. Concepts like bio-dynamic agriculture, natural and organic farming, farming systems, appropriate technology, and more recently, regenerative and low-input agriculture had sustainability as the core value. Watershed management approach has shown its significance in regeneration and utilisation of basic resources for ensuring sustainable livelihood for rural population.

The contribution of Voluntary Organisations (VOs), or Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) as they are commonly called, has been of great importance in evolving and developing suitable approaches to watershed management. Many³ of them have pioneered the cause of community based natural resources management (CBNRM) and evolved pragmatic methodologies, and demonstrated them through successful projects.

Successful Projects

Most watershed management projects aimed at regeneration and utilisation of the basic resources, viz., land and water, with the people or watershed-dwellers. The focus was on various measures of soil and water conservation and awareness and motivation of the people on appropriate use of these resources. The results were in the form of increased crop-productivity, employment-generation, allied activities like livestock and horticulture and growth in service sector economy, along with improvement in health, education and the living conditions. The community also developed the ability and mechanism to seek and obtain new inputs on information and technology. The projects that were recognized as successful showed these results.

Based on the above, three main impacts of successful watershed projects could be identified. These, viz., economic viability, management of technology and equity could be considered as three main indicators of success.

Chart 1 : Impacts of successful projects

Physical and Economic Improvement	Technology Management and Transfer	Equity
Increased productivity	Repair and maintenance	Access to skills and tools
Land use upgrading	Water use systems	Access to resources
Capital formation		Employment opportunities

³ The observations are largely based on the projects from Maharashtra – the operational area of MSSM, GRASP, AFARM, AFPRO, WOTR, and IGWDP; Gujarat - AKRSP(I), KMVS and Sahjeevan, BSC and Mahiti-Utthan; Karnataka - MYRADA; and Rajasthan - Seva Mandir and Tarun Bharat Sangh. Similar efforts were made in other parts by other voluntary organisations, as well as various government programmes.

Most successful projects in the earlier years had not aimed at all these impacts. Yet they achieved significant levels of growth, equity and technology transfer. Some recent projects aimed at these impacts from the very beginning. Their efforts included appropriate strategies for effective implementation on all the above counts.

Although many projects visited showed achievements on almost all the above aspects, a large number of projects run by VOs and the Governments could impact on only a few aspects. An analysis of the successful projects pointed at the management and methodological aspects as the main factors towards success.

Factors contributing to success

It was observed that the factors, which were contributing to the success of the projects, were methodological in nature. These could be broadly categorised into three main areas of interventions as common elements in the approach or methodology. It is important to note that these were participatory, democratic and transparent in nature.

Chart 2 : Methods contributing to the success of the projects

Appropriate technology and its management	Community involvement and leadership training	Management systems
Problem analysis	Identify opinion leaders and potential leadership	Institutional mechanisms
Option assessment	Involving them in tasks	Norms, values, beliefs – how to make and practise them
		Communication for transparency
People who do these tasks and their capacity		

Approach to technology : It was observed that in the initial stage of the successful projects, involvement of the people depended on their understanding of the project and their assessment of the expected benefits. Three main aspects of collective learning are noticed at this stage, *viz.*, understanding the situation, analysing the problem, and identifying the options. The emphasis was on providing cues on scientific principles and technological considerations during the dialogue, so as to help people understand the technological choices and their implications for informed decisions. These were done through formal and informal discussions and training events.

Community involvement : The sustainability of watersheds largely depends on the effectiveness of capacity building of local communities to manage their resources. This calls for an empowerment approach, which many VOs have demonstrated in their successful watershed projects.

It was normally observed that 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 fulfil responsibly, for example, watershed management committee, village development committee, *shramadan* (voluntary labour) committee, water users' committee, forest protection committee, etc.⁴

Community organisation efforts in these projects were about identifying present and potential responsible leaders, helping them identify their roles and capacitating them to fulfil the same. The approach adopted in the above projects broadly comprised of three major components, *viz.*, identification of leaders, involving them in operational aspects, and formalising such involvement.

Management Systems : This refers to the social and managerial response of the community to the information and technology and its use in the project. Since most projects were based on scientific knowledge, the approach helped in cultivating a logical and scientific outlook among farmers. The institutional mechanisms pertain to the roles and responsibilities of various people. The norms and procedures are the underlying fabric that governs the functioning of people's groups and committees. Communication ensures that the community knows the progress or happenings in the project. In most projects these were achieved using a step-wise process, wherein the community was given responsibilities of increasing complexity – beginning with simple tasks like listing the families to conflict resolution later on.

Human Resources and Organisations

The most important factor that contributed to the success was the capacities of the VOs to respond to the ever-changing village dynamics appropriately. The capacities were in terms of the capabilities of the human resources in these VOs and the efforts of the leadership in promoting suitable systems for the people to work effectively.

These VOs also had strong environment scanning and sensing systems, information systems with up-to-date records and well-defined administrative procedures. The information was used in decision-making, and was backed by regular documentation.

Plenary

An organisation's cutting edge, its reason for being, is its identity and the strategies it employs to give effect to that identity. What the organisation offers to its constituency and environment and what the organisation's users need provide it with reason to develop and grow. Organisational strategies and identity arise largely out of what the organisation learns as it pursues its goals, improving through reflection on experience.

In the context of VOs engaged in watershed management in Central India, a reflective exercise on systematic Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Treats (SWOT) analysis would be useful to increase their effectiveness and impact.

⁴ There is a strong possibility and desirability to involve the Gram Panchayat, which is a "statutory committee" of representatives 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 experimenting with 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 Jalna in collaboration with the Zilla Panchayat.