

## **Community Based Organizations and Panchayats as Instruments of Governance in the Sphere of Watershed Development**

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The Government of India has long considered watershed development as the catalyst for development activities in rain-fed areas. Accordingly during the last twenty five years most programs of the Ministries of Rural Development, Agriculture and Environment have followed the watershed development approach. During this period a number of NGOs and Panchayat bodies/ District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) as well as State Governments and grassroots researchers gained considerable experience in the implementation of watershed projects. Based on their feedback and the report of the Hanumantha Rao committee on Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP) and Desert Development Programme (DDP), the Government of India had, in 1994, developed Guidelines for Implementation of Watershed Programs. These guidelines were subsequently (following the publication by the Rainfed Farming Division of the Ministry of Agriculture in 2000 of Common Principles for Watershed Development prepared jointly with the Ministry of Rural Development) revised in 2001 by the Department of Land Resources of the Ministry of Rural Development and circulated as the Guidelines for Watershed Development (Revised 2001) or GWD (popularly referred to as Common Guidelines).

The GWD aimed to bring people to the center stage and push the administration towards a facilitating and assisting role. The focus was on the enhancement of the viability and quality of rural livelihood support systems as indicated by the objectives of Watershed Development mentioned in the Guidelines which referred to developing wastelands/degraded lands/drought prone and desert areas on watershed basis; and also called for attention to improving the socio-economic condition of the resource-poor sections inhabiting the programme areas; employment generation; poverty alleviation; community empowerment; as well as encouraging the village community to make use of simple and affordable technological solutions and institutional arrangements.

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), which are India's Constitutionally recognized local government bodies, had an important role in Watershed Development Programmes as per the Common Guidelines; having the right to monitor and review the implementation of the programmes and provide guidance. At the village level, the Gram Panchayat (GP) was to be involved in the implementation of the programme. The Zila Parishad (ZP), Panchayat Samitis(PS) and the GP could also take on the responsibility of implementing a cluster of watershed projects in the capacity of a Project Implementation Agency (PIA). However for this they had to compete with other NGOs, GOs, Community Based Organizations or other support organizations to get selected as a PIA. .

The Common Guidelines (GWD) proposed a user friendly organizational structure with Watershed Associations (WAs) and elected/nominated Watershed Committees (WCs) undertaking the field/village level implementation of each watershed under the

supervision of the PIA (which was to manage 10-12 watersheds), and with technical inputs from experts who comprised the Watershed Development Team (WDTs).

A District Watershed Committee with multi-source membership helped ensure coordination as well as the selection of PIAs and members of WDTs and in the approval of detailed action plans for watershed projects in the district.

To recapitulate, the main institutional and administrative arrangements as per Common Guidelines of 2001 can be summarized as follows:

1. A State Watershed Development Committee (SWDC) constituted to ensure coordination among various Government Departments/Institutions and Voluntary Agencies. This committee was to meet twice a year to monitor, review and evaluate the progress of implementation of Watershed Development Programmes.
2. The Watershed Development Programmes to be implemented through the Zila Parishads/ District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs)
3. To ensure coordination at the district level, a District Watershed Development Committee (DWDC) constituted under the Chairman Zila Parishad or DRDA with a multi- source membership of officials and non-officials. The role of DWDC was to advise and assist the ZP/DRDA on matters regarding selection of Project Implementation Agencies (PIAs), and of members of Watershed Development Teams, as well as training, community organization etc. The committee was also to approve the detailed action plan for watershed development projects in the district
4. The PRIs had the right to monitor and review the implementation of the Watershed Development Programmes and provide guidance for improvements in the administrative arrangements and procedures with a view to ensuring convergence with other programmes of the Ministry of Rural Development. At the village level, the Gram Panchayat was to be involved especially in community organization activities and in training. The Zila Parishads, Panchayat Samitis and the Gram Panchayati could also take on the responsibility of implementing a cluster of watershed projects as a Project Implementation Agency (PIA), however for this they had to follow norms prescribed for PIAs under the Guidelines, and had to compete with other NGOs, GOs, or Community Based Organizations or other support organizations to get selected as a PIA.
5. The projects were implemented at the field level by the Watershed Committees (WC) under the over all supervision and guidance of Project Implementation Agencies. PIAs to normally be assigned 10—12 watershed projects covering an area ranging between 5000-6000 hectares and to be responsible for appointment of the four member Watershed Development Teams (WDT) for planning, implementing and reviewing of watershed programmes through village level

- organizations, and for maintenance of accounts. The PIAs to preferably be selected from amongst PRIs, Government departments or a reputed NGO, which had been active in the field of watershed development or similar area of development.
6. The WDT had a minimum of four members, one each from the disciplines of forestry/plant science, animal sciences, civil/agricultural engineering and social sciences.
  7. The Common Guidelines envisaged the following village level institutions to enable the communities to take up participatory watershed management:
    - a. Self-Help Groups (SHGs)- Constituted in the watershed area with the help of the WDT, these were to be homogenous groups having common identity who are dependent on the watershed but not owning land in the watershed areas, such as agricultural labourers, shepherds etc.
    - b. User Group (UGs)- These groups to consist of persons most likely to derive direct benefits from particular watershed work and holding land within the watershed areas. The UGs were to eventually take over the operation and maintenance of completed community works.
    - c. Watershed Associations (WAs)- Members of the community directly or indirectly dependent on a watershed area organized into a WA, which should be a registered society as per Registration of Societies Act 1860. The WA to meet at least twice a year to improve, monitor and review the watershed development plan, nominate members of the Watershed Committee etc. Wherever a watershed was coterminous with a Village Panchayat, the Gram Sabha of the Panchayat concerned could be designated as the Watershed Association.
    - d. Watershed Committee (WC)- the WC to consist of members nominated by WA from amongst the user groups, self-help groups, Gram Panchayat and a member of the Watershed Development Team for carrying out the day to day activities of the Watershed Development Project. Each WC to have a secretary to be a paid on an honorarium basis by the Watershed Association

Just as the initial projects under the Common Guidelines were beginning to bear fruit, with growing awareness about the procedures, schemes, benefits etc among the beneficiaries and the potential PIAs, as well as Community Based Organisations (CBOs), NGOs, local government staff etc, the Government (Ministry of Rural Development) decided to launch a new Haryali scheme in January 2003 under which it replaced the common GWD by the 'Haryali' guidelines. The Haryali guidelines stipulated that CBOs comprising of user groups, self- help groups, watershed committees and even the watershed associations, as well as NGOs, which have often proved to be efficient PIAs, would cease to have any role in watershed development and that, henceforth, the Panchayat bodies (Gram Sabhas, GP, Block Panchayats/PSs and ZPs) are to manage and implement watershed development activities.

Some changes brought about by the Haryali guidelines are:

- The Haryali guidelines have done away with WAs and WCs; their functions being transferred to the GP. The GP is now expected to perform both executive functions (even being responsible for day to day activities) as also governance functions. The user groups and SHGs are now to be constituted by the PRIs and the role of the user group has been reduced to mere maintenance of the created assets while its earlier role in planning and executing development works has been ended.

- Under the 2001 guidelines a large variety of organizations were allowed to function as PIAs -but preference was to be given to PRIs, a line department of government, or a reputed NGO/other body corporate- in that order. The Haryali Guidelines, however, indicate that an intermediate Panchayat (block Panchayat/PS/Mandal Panchayat/ Taluka Panchayat) may be the PIA for all the projects sanctioned in a block/taluka/tehsil. In case the intermediate Panchayat is not adequately empowered, then the ZP either may itself act as PIA or appoint a suitable line Department (agriculture, social forestry/soil conservation etc) or an agency of State Government/University or Institute as PIA, failing which a reputed NGO with experience of having worked as a PIA could be considered. Thus eventually it is only the intermediate Panchayat bodies, which so far were not associated with watershed development, who are to be the PIAs.
- The District Watershed Committee has been dispensed with- though one wonders why the Haryali guidelines have chosen to deprive the Zila Parishad of the advice/guidance of a district level body of social and technical experts and representatives of various stakeholders (GO, NGO, CBO and other support organizations) intimately connected with watershed activities.
- The 2001 guidelines had provided for a watershed secretary for each watershed to be locally engaged on honorariums basis by the WA to work under the supervision of the chairman of the WC. As per the Haryali guidelines the GP Secretary (a government employee) is to assist the GP Chairman.
- Haryali has left State Governments wondering whether their Watershed Directorates should continue to be attached to the Agriculture Departments and to provide technical/techno-economic inputs, or whether the Watershed Directorates should be transferred to the State Panchayats Department where it would emphasize on participatory and socio-political aspects of watersheds.
- While there is considerable commonality about the objectives of watershed development, the two guidelines differ somewhat wherein the 2001 guidelines stress developing wasteland /degraded lands, drought prone and desert areas keeping in view capability of the land and local needs and conditions, while the Haryali Guidelines talk of harnessing every drop of rainwater for irrigation,

horticulture, floriculture, pasture development/fisheries etc. to create sustainable sources of income for the village community, and provide drinking water supplies. However, where the two guidelines totally part company is that the Haryali Guidelines talk about ensuring overall development of rural areas through GPs and creating regular sources of income for the panchayats as a major objective. The earlier guidelines were silent regarding any such objective.

Evidently the purpose behind introducing the Haryali Guidelines was to strengthen the PRIs. There exists a group of activists and scholars who feel that such “parallel” bodies like WAs should either not be permitted to exist or should function as subordinate entities of the Panchayati Raj Institutions who they see as the third tier of Indian federalism. They often advocate that to strengthen PRIs it is necessary to abolish the special watershed related bodies.

The present authors tend to disagree with the view that it is necessary that only Panchayat bodies represent the local community or act on its behalf. Not every member of the Gram Sabha is a user or beneficiary, while in the case of a watershed user group every member is user and beneficiary as well as an implementer-cum-manager. In fact, because of their nature, traditions, functions, size and frequency of meetings etc., GPs function in a manner very different from watershed user groups and have different sorts of relationships with their members. The Gram Panchayat leadership may also have a wide band of concerns and interests of which watersheds may form a miniscule or peripheral part, while for the watershed user group the watershed is a major part of their existence. It is thus necessary for Panchayat bodies and local user groups to not only co-exist but also to supplement, complement and strengthen each other. Perhaps a small amount of creative tension between PRIs and user groups, or other CBOs, may even prove to be good for the community and for the watershed development efforts.

It needs to be questioned whether using of Haryali as a tool for empowering PRIs, to the extent of displacing the WCs, WAs, and other user groups and SHGs, is the appropriate or best way to empower PRIs. Without the devolution or decentralization of appropriate powers and authority from the State Governments to the various levels of PRIs, as is called for in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, it is difficult to expect real empowerment of PRIs. It is such devolution of powers (which has still to be effected properly in most States), rather than trying to take over functions from the primary community-based stakeholder groups (user groups/SHGs), which would really empower Panchayat bodies.

It may also be pointed out that experience in the field has shown that Gram Sabha have not been able to perform the required functions effectively due to their large size, unorganized membership and high degree of heterogeneity.

A Gram Panchayat may comprise 1,2, or 3 villages. Each village and its attendant hamlets may normally have a population of between 1500 and 3000 persons (though the

population of a particular village may go up to even 15000. The Gram Sabha/Gram Panchayat's average population in most States would be between 2000 and 6000 (though in one State the average is about 21000). Thus the Gram Panchayat cannot be considered to be the grassroots in today's India-instead it would be a hamlet, or a ward, or a single watershed/group of 2-3 contiguous watersheds, which would be the real grassroots.

Also the Gram Panchayts are territorial units and not ecological units. Thus a watershed may cut across boundaries of Gram Panchayats or a Gram Panchayat may cut across watershed boundaries. Where the watershed area is coterminous with the GP, the Gram Sabha could function as the WA. However if there are several watersheds within the area of a GP, then each such watershed area, and the people depending upon the resources of the watershed, should have their own WA.

There is need for an executive body elected from the users groups and self-help groups to manage the watershed programme on a day –to-day basis. The GP cannot entirely replace the WC in its roles and responsibilities as it takes away decision making from the direct stakeholders. This is particularly so if the watershed area is only a part of the entire village. Of course if the Sarpanch of the GP is a member of a user group/self help group, then he/she could also be elected as chairperson of the WC. One option could be that the WC could also be considered as a standing committee of the GP for purposes of managing the watershed programme.

It is unfortunate that the Haryali guidelines have reduced the percentage of budgets available for community organization and for training and capacity building.

We, as informed observers, are clear in our mind that the prime objective of all watershed efforts has to be improved land-water management and rural livelihoods including the generation of incomes and optimal use of natural resources, and not the strengthening of any governmental institution like the panchayats- for which other steps could be undertaken.

Similarly it doesn't make sense to let the capabilities for watershed work that CBOs, NGOs, GOs, and other agencies working as PIAs have built up over time go waste by divorcing them from watershed activities. Since both PRIs and CBOs lack in technical expertise, the role of district and lower level staff of State Government Departments and of experienced NGOs having professional staff in providing technical inputs either as PIAs or through other coordinating mechanisms, should not be under-emphasized.

Thus, all things considered, it appears that the Haryali guidelines would have done well to have retained provisions for WCs, WAs, and effective watershed users groups as well as NGOs etc. working in coordination with Panchayat bodies. This would not only enable the achievement of natural resource related land-water management goals, but also result in the greater importance of Panchayat bodies. Accordingly appropriate mechanisms and procedures for promoting harmonious relations between participatory

watershed groups (which are community based organizations) and Gram Panchayats need to be innovated with and put into practice

PRIs constitute the third tier of Indian federalism. Watershed bodies working in parallel to, or at levels lower than, Panchayat bodies comprise (in a manner similar to the case of water users associations in the irrigation sector) part of a fourth tier whose importance is gradually being understood. Neither needs to replace the other- both can co-exist and reinforce each other, as also coordinate and interact with functionaries of the State Government (second tier of Indian federalism) for performing the complex tasks of watershed development and management.

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