

FROM INDIFFERENCE TO ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Six case studies of natural resource
development through social organisation

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Introduction

1 The aim of these case studies: the importance of understanding social processes

The intent of this publication is two-fold. First, it seeks to share information by recording the experiences of six Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) in India with participatory natural resource based projects. Second, with particular emphasis placed on understanding the social processes which underlie successful experiences, it attempts to draw out lessons for use by those who work at the interface of people and the environment.

The idea of documenting experiences emerged from encounters with a number of natural resource based development programmes which appeared to help poor people realise substantial benefits. These experiences were varied in nature and location, but seemed to have certain commonalities in their principles, priorities and approach. Many could be termed as “participatory”, farmer-first activities advocating localised control of resources and benefits. Most viewed technical change as a natural resources governance issue. The majority clearly established that human resource and organisational development is prerequisite to sustainable technical change.

The effectiveness of “participatory approaches” to natural resources development is now widely demonstrated and accepted. Examples are found of landless people coming together to farm individually owned or common land; of villagers taking control of common property resources for productive purposes; of poor cultivators gaining access to and control over water resources. However, despite the evident benefits of such activities, it appeared that these examples often remain unanalyzed and anecdotal.

Questions of physical, tenurial and institutional sustainability remained unanswered and documentation was either non-existent or rarely available to those wishing to repeat or adapt the experience. While academic literature existed which justified local institutional and human resource development, a gap remained for concrete, easily

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assimilable examples which development workers could link to their own experiences.

In particular, it was felt that experiences needed to be documented to help development workers understand what is "the process by which the rural poor are able to organise themselves and, through their own organisation, are able to identify their needs as well as share in the design and implementation"¹ of a programme.

These case studies of natural resources development programmes in different parts of the India were undertaken to explore these questions - and the additional question of the role played by catalytic external agents - on the basis of practical and relatively successful experience.

Specifically, the aim has been to analyse examples of social organisation in a variety of settings in order to understand:

- * why and how social organisation can be a critical component in natural resources development projects
- * how it can be done in a diversity of settings and in response to different local needs
- * the implications of positive and negative experiences for other similar development initiatives.

It is hoped that the publication will be useful to a wide readership, ranging from students of rural development, through planners and donors, to those implementing agents and agencies who struggle on a daily basis with a number of the issues which emerge from the case studies and analysis.

2 **The NGOs who participated in the case studies**

The six NGOs who have shared and documented their experience in these case studies were:

<u>NGO</u>	<u>State</u>
Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP)	Gujarat
Sadguru Water and Development Foundation (SWDF)	Gujarat
Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti (GVVS)	Rajasthan
Ubeshwar Vikas Mandal (UVM)	Rajasthan
School for Hill Resources Management (SHRMS)	Bihar
Myrada	Karnataka

¹ FAO (1982) definition of 'people's participation'. Quoted in Chambers, Saxena and Shah 'To the Hands of the Poor: Water and Trees' (1989)

A summary profile of the aims of each of these NGOs and the size of their programmes is given below (pages 8-13).

They were initially approached as groups who had positive experiences in enabling local level social organisation which had been supportive of natural resources development action. Other factors considered were the diversity of approaches taken by the organisations; differences in the social and economic contexts of their work; and, agro-ecological variation.

To an extent, attempts to capture diversity in the latter were found to be limited by the close correlation between rural poverty and particular types of physical environments. Most of the groups were working in low rainfall, partially-irrigated, semi-upland locations which enjoyed limited access to markets.

The NGO programmes covered in this publication involve forest, pasture and wasteland development and shared irrigation schemes - mainly lift irrigation. The broad features of the projects - number and social background of households participating, area covered, costs - are summarised in **Table 1**.

3. Issues the case studies attempt to address: some difficulties in process documentation and analysis

Material for the case studies was provided mainly by members of the NGOs concerned. All the case study writers were asked to document and examine

- the details of the process of programme development and social organisation in terms of planning, implementation, maintenance and follow-up
- relevant systems/forms of community cooperation which existed in the project area, both positive and negative
- the strategies which make people's participation and group organisation effective, sustainable and democratic, with particular reference to poorer socio-economic households and women
- the extent of dependency by the group on external support (technical, managerial, financial)
- the impact of the programme and how social organisation has resulted in this impact.

What emerges quite clearly from the case studies is that these questions are not easy ones to answer. It is relatively straightforward to

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record decisions and agreements, describe organisational forms, list training programmes and report on physical achievements.

However, it is far more difficult to probe further in order to understand

- * how these achievements came about
- * how different people participated
- * what were the conflicts and how were they resolved
- * what has been effective, what has not and why?

Often, such details have not been recorded as they happened. They are lost, effectively forgotten, in the hard work and process of change and development, a process which is gradual and long-term. Another aspect of the case studies has been the tendency to underplay conflicts or problems - which could help to understand the process and which illustrate the challenges - whilst concentrating on the obvious achievements.

Equity issues also have a general tendency to be subsumed in generality rather than being squarely confronted as a thorny problem which implied confronting power relations between different social and economic groups in a society. One clear example of this is the relative lack of analysis of, and apparent paucity of attention in practice paid to, the gender aspects of differentiation.

4 Achievements of participatory natural resource development

The achievements of the programmes documented in the case studies are significant. In areas where the natural resource base - water, trees, soil - has been severely eroded and people struggle against extreme poverty, the impact of these programmes has been tangible in terms of

- reclamation of wasteland, watershed development and an increase in agricultural productivity
- galvanising a response and action from otherwise ineffective government departments
- income increases for poor families, a reduction in migration for employment, asset creation and an improvement in the quality of life.

Each of the programmes has focused on the poorest socio-economic households - scheduled and backward castes, scheduled tribes, the

landless, marginal and small farmers; promoted their sustainable access to and control over resources, and worked through village institutional forums or groups at nearly every stage.

The case studies do not attempt a comparative analysis of costs.² Available data is provided in order to provide a rough order of magnitude and to show the extent to which local communities themselves have contributed or been able to mobilise funds available from the government.

What is significant is that in a development area (major and medium irrigation projects; 'social' forestry programmes) where the expenditure of huge sums of public money have seldom achieved a sustainable improvement in the lives of the rural poor, these case studies show how technology and resources can be harnessed to the needs and skills of small and marginal farmers, scheduled castes and tribes in order to revitalise difficult and degraded environments.

5 Some emerging principles

The experiences are diverse and the process of development continues with no obvious blue-print which can anticipate with certainty what is most likely to 'work' in different contexts. Each NGO's case study tells a unique story, and to capture that diversity was one of the objectives of this publication. However, out of the range of experiences and approaches did emerge a number of common issues. Repeated occurrence of certain themes leads us to conclude that

- * individual benefit, rather than the common good, is often the motivating force for people to work together
- * activities which seek to achieve social equity involve changing both individual and collective attitudes and behaviour
- * practical action based on principles of equity has also to take into account the strategic needs of disempowered men and women. That is, action focusing on everyday needs of people who are socially and economically disadvantaged is only sustainable and effective when companion action is also taken to address issues of power, authority and prestige
- * practical action provides a "learning" situation which can be used to

¹ This would require detailed calculation and allocation of indirect (NGO overheads, training, other support) costs as well as the direct costs usually provided. Analysis would also need to take into account the varying typographical features affecting fixed and operational costs and, in the case of shared irrigation, the patterns of cropping and watering.

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strengthen peoples' understanding of what they are involved in and what is needed to sustain and develop the process

- * using experience as a tool for learning suggests the need for "monitoring" as a mechanism of reflection for change. This "learning for change" approach applies at the individual, household, village/community, NGO, donor and government level. Each collective or individual learning unit needs a different way of collecting, assimilating and responding to information and the approaches and methodologies can be formal or informal
- * human resource development is rarely successful in the context of natural resources development if the critical role of organisational capacity building is not recognised
- * some of the most effective groups are those which have a clearly defined, often narrow, focus
- * organisations need mechanisms for reflection and reaction. These include fora and procedures for conflict resolution and response to other emerging issues
- * higher level regulatory bodies are useful for de-fusing and depersonalising contentious issues
- * linkages between local developments and the broader context, e.g. government policies, programmes, norms, personnel etc. are important. Local initiatives, however decentralised, are not isolated. Networking and lobbying may be a starting point for wider political representation and change.

While the above represents a general statement of the most common lessons, there are many more which will become apparent through reading the various case studies. Each case describes a different experience, approach and context and as such offers individual insights into the options and possibilities for ensuring that improved natural resources management is supported by equitable forms of social organisation.