

VISION, PLAN AND REALITY : CHALLENGES & EXPERIENCES FROM GUJARAT, INDIA

A paper for the Dakar Forum by Ms. Nafisa Barot and Mr. Ashoke Chetterjee

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This paper traces the effort over the past few years by activists in the western India state of Gujarat to implement Vision 21 and the Iguacu Action Plan. The early involvement of these groups in the drafting of the Vision has inspired a high degree of commitment to its realization in a region affected by drought, salinity, and disasters that have been both natural and man-made. Migration adds to this misery, as well as to an urban crisis. As elsewhere, women and children suffer most. The authorities in Gujarat have been the first in India to establish an institutional framework for greater community involvement in watsan planning and implementation, calling for more effective collaboration between stakeholders to address the scale of Gujarat's watsan challenge. The paper traces some important experiences in innovation, and in facing inevitable resistance to change. Gujarat's experience vindicates the principles of vision 21, with its emphasis on genuine community-led planning and management as well as on pro-poor gender sensitive approaches. The paper also underlines problems and barriers which await resolution, and achievements which offer hope not only in India but wherever stakeholders joint hands in the spirit of the Council's Vision and Plan.

The contents of this paper will be supplemented by the outcome of the Dakar deliberations, and circulated to communities and institutions who form the Pravah network of watsan NGOs in Gujarat. This will assist reflection on the implementation of Vision 21 and the Igaucu Action Plan in the light of latest experience worldwide

Cover page : Water security : A massive rainwater harvesting effort in lined pond through women's action in drought and salinity affected Bhal area.

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Introduction

Water and sanitation activists in Gujarat have played an important role in the global effort toward a watsan agenda that can end 50 years of failed effort in ensuring these basic needs. Stimulated by the WSSCC's efforts, a chapter was established in this western state. In 1998, it set out an action plan which later became the focus of an international consultation in Ahmedabad in November 1999 under Council auspices. Delegates from every continent had an opportunity to understand the Gujarat experience at a time of critical scarcity, following a failed monsoon. This was the first effort anywhere to experiment with the Council's people-centered approach that was soon to evolve into Vision 21. The Gujarat team was invited to make a special presentation at the World Water Forum and Ministerial Conference in The Hague in March 2000, at which Vision 21 was ratified by the international community. This was followed by a workshop organized by the Government of Gujarat with support from The Netherlands. It attempted to take forward the learning from experience and the Vision effort to focus afresh on the water sector. From this gathering a working group was constituted to draft what has now become an official policy document for watsan action in Gujarat: *Jal-Disha 2010*. The report has become an anchor for the network which created it, providing benchmarks for measuring progress toward safe water and sanitation for all in a state of 50 million citizens. This paper attempts to review these experiences in Gujarat toward realising Vision 21 and the 2002 Iguacu Action Plan.

New Approaches

In 1997-98 a pilot project toward involving communities in watsan planning and action began in the Ghogha district of the state. The experiment covered 82 villages in 3 talukas, and Ghogha town. The partnership with government authorities, NGOs and communities groups brought about a concept of de-centralized community-managed water supply and environmental sanitation that was to prove useful in the context of Vision goals. It led to a state institution predicated on the belief that "users of water are the best managers of water". The Water and Sanitation Management Organization (WASMO) was created in 2002 with support from The Netherlands. The formation of WASMO was concurrent with other national efforts for reform in the rural drinking water sector. In order to achieve a greater degree of community participation and management, a pilot Sector Reform experiment was launched in 67 districts, including Gujarat. This was followed in 2002 by the launching of Swajaldhara, a national program of reform toward principles and policies that could lead to decentralized functioning of water supply and management at state, district and panchayat (self-governance institutions) levels. Above all, Swajaldhara seeks meaningful implementation through community action. The Swajaldhara program is regarded as India's paradigm shift from top-down centralized planning and implementation to building local resources, technologies and institutions that responding to local realities and building local capacities for change. In Gujarat, these initiatives were preceded by demonstration of decentralized approaches by several NGOs, including the Pravah network as part of its Vision 21 process. Pravah initiated a movement of self-reliance, Swavalamban Abhiyan, in 1200 villages in 24 out of 25 districts of Gujarat. Forums brought together the principle stakeholders: panchayats, leaders among women and youth, scientists, engineers and other stakeholders. This effort, again assisted by the Dutch government, led to

the formation of the multi-stakeholder Lok Manch (people's forum) in 19 districts by early 2004. Pravah has worked to establish local resource groups that can provide back-up technical services at cost to assist community efforts. Check-dams, soak pits, latrines and roofwater harvesting systems are the major services now provided through 20 resource groups.

A major element across these efforts has been the promotion of hygiene awareness and sanitation, reflected in the priority given to this neglected sector through Vision 21 and its WASH campaign. In cooperation with WASMO, donor agencies and self-help groups (SHGs) women have led the demand for low-interest loans and technology support. Affordability has been a key element encouraging household initiatives through schemes which provide 1-2 year loan periods. These correspond to the capacity to repay among those most in need.

Challenges of the decentralization

Initially, the State Government envisaged providing water through a pipeline network. Later, in response to continuous pressure from NGOs and communities, it was decided to develop local sources. For this, contractors were hired, but they did not deliver quality work. Thus conflicts arose between contractors, government engineers and the Village Water Committee (VWC) members. Cluster level meetings, repeated deliberations and individual meetings of VWC members resolved to form a federation of VWCs. The federation demanded that the work be assigned to the VWCs. A signed resolution was sent to officials at district and state levels. As a pilot, one VWC was helped to manage construction of their village watsan system. The VWC was trained to open and operate a bank account, to purchase material, make payments and to maintain accounts. Vendor lists for material and technical competency were obtained. Vendors began pouring in. Material rates were analyzed and a comparative rate-sheet was developed. The VWC submitted its plans to the Government, but it never came through. Then the members of the VWC approached the vendors independently and purchased the materials. Attempts were also made to break this consortium by bribing VWC members so that companies could get their market price yet deliver poor quality materials. But the group held firm. Lesson: within the concept of community management, merely giving away the responsibility to VWCs is not enough. They need continuous motivation, problem-solving approaches and exposure to innovations.

Local water committees (Pani Samitis) have been taken over by women leaders when they fail to deliver services. Empowerment in watsan has led to challenging traditions of patriarchy at many levels: family, community and political participation. Perhaps for the first time at such a large scale, women have led interaction with authorities at district and state levels and have even begun to negotiate with donors. Support to this process of capacity-building and implementation has been the major contribution of NGO activism.

The WASH campaign in Gujarat now stands on this foundation of effort at ensuring a genuine 'paradigm shift', one that can go beyond rhetoric into empowerment - - empowerment that can deal with new rights and the new responsibilities which accompany them. District-level watsan / WASH committees are working to facilitate and extend official efforts through the Swajaldhara program. The emphasis is on activating India's constitutional rights to basic services. A strong integration for the first time of hygiene and sanitation is advocated as a precondition for safe water supply. Through the culture of collaboration, it is now possible to see a movement that can translate commitments on paper into policy and implementation realities. The Pravah movement has grown from an initial membership of 65 to 120 partners, while the District level manchs formed have 50 to 60 villages per district, where each village has a population of over 2000. It is one of several NGO efforts at networking for change. The Jal-Disha group, Pravah network and other coalitions of NGOs and government partners have held together as an informal planning and monitoring community, working together to influence state as well as national efforts at reform.

Local water resources : foundation of sustainability

In 1997-98, the Government of Gujarat with Dutch assistance launched a pilot watsan programme in the Bhavnagar region. This “Ghogha” This experiment has challenged many years of top-down, engineering approaches, seeking to replace these community agendas and preferences. Developing local water resources is most often at the top of people’s agendas, with piped-water transfers as a supplement where necessary. Yet past engineering attitudes are hard to change. In some villages, women’s groups and empowered committees have struggled for over three years to shift official plans, from bulk water supplies through long-distance pipelines, toward developing local resources through local effort. Once WASMO agreed to these demands, a new problem arose. Implementation would need to be assigned to contractors, but at rates predetermined by older arrangements. These rates did not match current market realities. Local water committees and women insisted on making payments against actual bills or on volumetric calculations of work done. But this was not acceptable to WASMO. Once management and oversight responsibility move to the community, there was thus the new risk of financial loss for water committees that insisted on quality standards. Issues of cost/price calculations, quality control, delay and corruption now began to sow conflict in the relationship between village groups, contractors and WASMO. NGOs were then invited to take responsibility for book-keeping and certification. This in turn threatened established relationships between NGOs and the communities which they serve. While these challenges are now under review, an important lesson emerges: decentralization require new norms of accountability (including those of finance) along with the articulation of new roles and responsibilities within stakeholder groups.

experiment attempts strategies that actively involve communities in watsan planning and implementation. An independent Water and Sanitation Management Organization (WASMO) was established to innovate and implement genuine community participation and management.

Why Things Don’t Happen

Despite progress towards decentralization, Gujarat has long way to go before communities take real charge of the programmes and schemes that most affect them. A stop-go attitude is a frustrating reminder of top-down, centrally driven approaches. Planning and implementation from below is still the exception, not the rule. There is still little understanding and acceptance of the need to invest in capacity-building, particularly of self-governance institutions (panchayats) and committees which encourage citizens to take charge. Women most of all need opportunities to prepare themselves for new roles. Information-sharing remains inadequate, often to retain power and mystification. During the Abhiyan movement, communities revealed ignorance of the supremacy of the Gram Sabha (village assembly), the administrative structure that empowers village citizens to appoint water committees. Thus this task is still dominated by panchayats that can be heavily skewed in favour of men and traditional power structures. Official Swajaldhara reform programs are entirely structured through panchayats, without NGO/CBO involvement or

Sanitation – Driving whose demand?

Rudiben and Baluben, women leaders from villages in Gujarat’s Bhavnagar district, are advocating systems of sanitation that respond to what women really want and are actually willing to pay for. They demand widening the restricted option of “low-cost toilets” now on offer through government programmes. The women have found that where drinking water access has been assured and awareness created of hygiene and sanitation, a strong demand has emerged for better latrines--latrines that provide the added advantages of privacy and safety, as well as of appeal. These factors are not addressed in the Government’s single low-cost option which is directed primarily at those below the poverty line. Baluben, Rudiben and others point out that many families can afford and need privacy and safety (not just from molestation but also from snake, scorpion and insect bites). They demand alternatives that are longer lasting and more appealing. The problem for them is the absence of micro-finance systems which can enable families to access loans, which they are willing to supplement with family funds. Indeed, they believe that loan schemes (with the requirement to repay) can act as a powerful incentive to savings, diverting resources away from wasteful consumption to meeting more essential health requirements. Utthan is one NGO working with these families, helping organize saving-and loan schemes that can encourage alternate designs suited to a variety of incomes and capacities to pay. Government channels have been approached to expand latrine options beyond the ‘subsidy’ models aimed at the very poor. Even within this constituency, there is a demand for moving on to better alternatives. The lesson: here is a demand for moving on to beyond options that have limited relevance.

adequate provision for their capacity-building. The program also assumes managerial capacities where they do not exist. Representation of women is inadequate, and NGOs are demanding a 50% reservation for women and other marginalized groups. Communities are now expected to provide watsan plans while building their capacity for such responsibilities is ignored. Water and sanitation inputs are fragmented. Clarity is missing on systems that can integrate all the elements that must come together to ensure success. The emphasis remains on linking local distribution systems to centralized pipelines, often neglecting the expressed need for developing local water resources, supplementing these where necessary with piped supplies. Thus the 'how' of Swajaldhara often remains a challenge. WASMO was specifically established to encourage community-led watsan, yet it has no representative of civil society in its top structure of governance. Such participation is limited to advisory functions and to committees. The bias toward centralized engineering solutions is heavy, and the institution struggles with the inadequacy of grassroots teams.

Capacities are also inadequate within civil society to accept and operate the new challenges of decentralization. Management skills are most often very limited. Public accountability is a new concept which often meets resistance. Lateral and vertical learning between teams is frequently ignored. Within a new policy environment driven by liberalization and global agendas, NGOs face the disruption of traditional support systems that affect the marginalized communities which they serve. The external environment is

“We are not here to oppose your endeavors. We are partners in development and we would like to cooperate with each other” – said the Amreli District Collector Sri Gadvi to the representatives of the Amreli District Lok manch. Lok manchs initiated by are independent district level platforms comprising representatives of NGOs, CBOs, Panchayat and SHGs. 28 members of the Lok manch represented problems of the district to the Collector, who is also the chairperson for the watsan mission in the district. The Collector reiterated that to solve local problems in water and sanitation, it is the local initiatives backed by local resources that are necessary, and large dam based water supply projects are only secondary. The engineer from GWSSB, on persuasion by the Collector informed the Lok manch that around 88 applications had been sanctioned under Swajaldhara in the district; worth Rs120 million and only 10 million had been received by the district office. The engineer offered to review the applications received under Swajaldhara. The engineer also offered to participate in meetings organized by the Manch and share information on several Government programs. The positive response from district authorities is a distinct phenomenon of to official response from bureaucracy to the people's collective, and it is definitely a welcome response. To move things, a force is required and the Lok manch is evolving as a multi stakeholder platform at the district level to bring about the paradigm shift.

often hostile--- Gujarat has suffered repeated cycles of drought and civil disorder, as well as the earthquake of 2001. Hygiene and sanitation awareness remains low. While need for scaling-up knowledge and skills in this area is urgent, existing systems do not rapidly respond to people's (especially women's) needs. While collaborative efforts have demonstrated their impact, networking can sometimes be difficult due to persisting sensitivities over turf and credit. Panchayati institutions, now central to official schemes for the devolution of authority, can be heavily political and dominated by traditional power and gender structures. Corruption and mistrust continue to challenge stakeholders at every level of implementation.

The culture of partnership between equals is still new to those in authority. There is a tendency for relationships with civil society to degenerate into client/contractor attitudes. A major lacuna is the absence of M&E systems with clear indicators of both quantitative and qualitative objectives. Equity and sustainability are still to be integrated into the attitude and systems handed down after years of preoccupation with physical and financial targets. Above all, the politics of handing over genuine power continue to be difficult and demanding.

This attitude is reflected in the persistence of centrally - operated supply systems over the development of community-driven local alternatives. Despite national acceptance of the 'paradigm shift', in Gujarat pipeline investments are still preferred by Government over the

revival of local ponds, tanks and traditional rainwater harvesting systems. Sanitation subsidies are restricted to select designs rather than to a wider range of affordable options. Waste management is an acute problem in rural areas. Concepts of eco-sanitation lack adequate demonstration, particularly under the variety of Gujarat's geo-hydrological circumstances. A major communication gap restricts the movement of know-how on viable technologies for water supply, rainwater harvesting and recharging aquifers for both rural and urban requirements. A major issue is that of appropriate financial support for water resource building and to measure quality and quantity. The need for capacity-building in these areas of technology has been revealed through the Abhiyan movement, There is now a demand for windows that can provide potential users with information, training and service. India's massive handpump program of the 1980s now requires the supplement of recharging depleted underground sources. Fluoride contamination persists in several areas of the state. A lack of supportive policies and resources is a barrier to urban waste and water management, despite rapid urban growth.

Pricing of watsan services is challenged by a lack of political will, and the poor continue to pay far more than the rich. Unrealistic pricing of urban water supplies continues to expand inequity. As elsewhere in India, change demands a legislative framework that can transfer power and ownership of water resources more equitably. (In a state dominated by the gigantic Narmada project, the cost of transporting canal water is estimated at Rs.86 per 1000 lt., while the price for this quantity is pegged at Rs.14, a huge subsidy that defies logic).

Making Things Happens

Coalitions such as those that have come together through NGO networks, (such as Pravah, Jal-Disha group, Vision 21 and the WASH campaign) are working for change through the demonstration of people-centered technologies. Rainwater harvesting is the most important of these, linked to demands for systems that reflect local realities, both social and physical. The Gujarat experience is that the spark for change comes most often from within communities, and most particularly from women. Intervention from outside then becomes essential to help translate needs into deliveries. An example from the coastal region of Bhal is that of the lined water tanks, knowledge which women gained through the brutal pattern of seasonal migration from their drought and salinity-prone habitats. NGOs like Utthan and Mahiti have served as catalysts for change, using demonstrations that build on existing knowledge, and assisting the process of technology transfer. Shallow-well recharging in north Gujarat, large community-managed water harvesting systems, resource raising and management at local levels, as well as the formation of democratic water committees are positives experiences driven by community-activist cooperation. These suggest a future built on solid experience.

The major initiative now under the way is an experiment in citizen's monitoring, through a system operated through the Abhiyan to oversee the distribution of Narmada water supply in 1300 villages involving 44 NGOs and volunteers from each village through Lok Manch. The effort, led by Pravah and the ITP partnership, will assist government in monitoring. It also supplements official indicators with those that can address issues of equity. Multi-stakeholder groups have been established at the district level. These Lok Manch bodies will assist the sharing the information and qualitative improvements in the distribution system. The Pravah initiatives in Gujarat like campaign have generated a demand to study and monitor pollution and water resources consumption by industries in several regions of Gujarat.

A major source of energy has emerged through the active interest of research and academic institutions, as well as of school and college students. Some universities have suggested regular opportunities of student involvement, while in north Gujarat and southern coastal areas a large number of colleges and schools have helping extend the Abhiyan to larger audiences. Another major proposal is for setting up a People's Learning Center that can respond to the information and service requirements now streaming in from communities and coalition partners.

Accountability/sustainability : finding checks and balance

Devolution of planning and implementation power to structures of village self-governance has been a major development in Indian democracy. These village institutions now have constitutional sanction and can access funds direct from federal authorities. Under the innovative "Ghogha" watsan programme (see above) a strong women's group has emerged in Nesvad village in the coastal district of Bhavnagar. A water committee has been formed, its member selected by the village general body (or Gram Sabha), and including elected members of the Panchayat (the basic unit of village self-governance). In Nesvad, women have played a major role in supporting the local water committee and Panchayat. These bodies have reflected women's insistence on building local resources over pipeline supplies. As part of its watsan programme, the entire village agreed to contribute 100% of O&M costs, including maintenance of bathing spaces for women, cattle troughs and wastewater disposal systems. Everything ran smoothly until some families defaulted. Pressure on them threatened politically sensitive relationships. The water committee soon came under pressure from other households. When technical problems led to a systems breakdown, the water committee took a back seat. Water stoppages affected the entire community. The women now called a meeting of the Panchayat, the water committee as well as of the Gram Sabha. They announced that they will support water committee efforts at maintaining supplies to all who are willing to pay. If the committee was unwilling to take this responsibility, the women themselves would take charge! The water committee acted promptly to save face, while the Panchayat set out ground rules that were approved by the Gram Sabha. The lesson: put women in charge! And establish institutional checks and balances that can help ensure accountability.

What Authorities Can Do

The Jal-Disha exercise revealed a critical need for better coordination between governmental sectors and departments. The watsan challenge demands an integrated approach from authorities concerned not only with water supply and sanitation but equally from health, agriculture, education, forestry, industry, power generation and other management of natural resources. New institution, such as WASMO can be used to reflect such integration in their governance and activities.

Programs such as Swajaldhara need clearly articulated missions, principles and goals. At present, the emphasis remains on physical targets rather than on the processes of change that are equally, if not more, important.

Sanitation and hygiene promotion, backed with adequate resources, is still not a widespread priority. The WASH approach of the integration of hygiene awareness and sanitation as a pre-condition for water supply programs can no longer wait. Gujarat's massive pipeline proposals are yet to be accompanied by programs for the management of wastewater.

Institutional reform and support can be slow, yet change cannot be expected through structures developed decades ago in an era of central planning. For example, WASMO's influence cannot compare with that of the powerful Gujarat Water Supply Board. Now there is also Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd. that would sell water to the Narmada Board or give them some work for implementation. Swajaldhara objectives cannot be met unless district level watsan committees acquire clout and the capacity for people-centered roles and responsibilities. These must include new requirements of monitoring and facilitating the planning process and the twin ability to partner and confront authorities. In turn, authorities will need to not merely tolerate but to encourage shifts of power, even when empowerment is untidy and noisy. The democratic

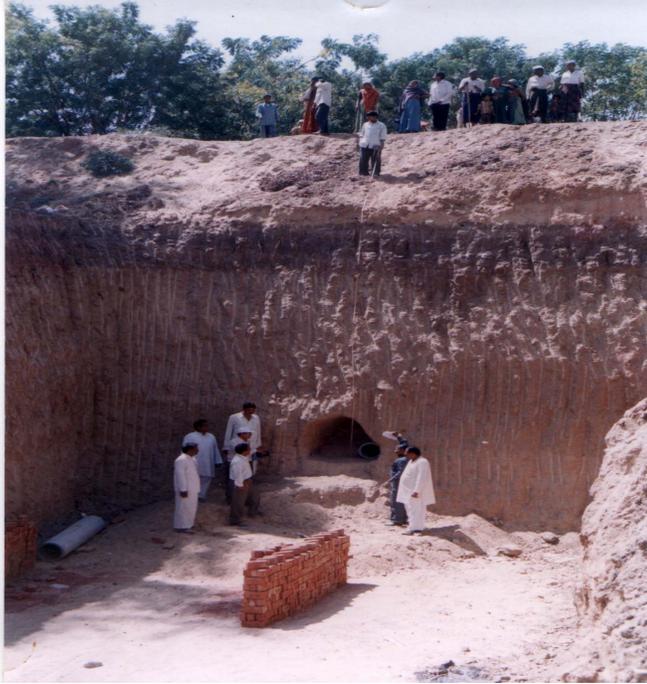
motivation for change needs to be reflected in the governance of new institutions, including WASMO.

A major change is needed in the allocation of financial resources which are now largely confined to limited project periods. The paradigm shift to which India is committed demand resources for social and political change that can seldom be achieved within project schedules dominated by infrastructure supply. A deeper understanding is needed of what it takes to achieve decentralization that is truly demand-driven, and that can achieve genuine shifts in power.

Capacity building requires training. Government commands a strong training apparatus, into which learning in people-centered approaches needs to be integrated. Engineers, most particularly the younger generation, require exposure to social skills that are becoming so important in the sector. Entrepreneurial skills are essential for sustainable watsan services, of which India's Sulabh example is paramount. Gujarat has a major tradition in this capacity, and it must now be focused on watsan priorities. Investment in awareness and in capacity building need acceptance as a non-negotiable pre-requisite for attaining watsan goals in which empowerment is embedded. NGOs have major responsibilities to assist this process, which demands a new sense of professionalism. Movements such as the right to information will need to be strengthened not only to improve the very poor database upon which watsan decisions are now made, but also to ensure feedback to communities on schemes and programs they are encouraged to control. Building sound coalitions between authorities, communities and NGOs is the most important priority toward Millennium Development Goals in Gujarat.



A plastic-lined surface water storage system, built by community effort in the water-scarce and saline region of Bhavnagar(Gujarat). Women's groups have led this effort, which also includes massive earthwork. Their demonstration have helped ensure that never again can anyone in Gujarat doubt community capacities, even in regions so severely affected and deprived.



Community demonstration of fluoride-free water through massive recharging of rainwater in the fluoride affected Patan district of Gujarat





A young citizen of Limkheda village proudly displays the latrine and washing facility built with support from its community saving and loan scheme. Official latrine construction supports are limited to a so-called low-cost option that cannot include privacy and safety factors now demanded by man. Members of the local Pani Smiti (water committee) clean up around new sanitation blocks for the village school. There are separate latrines for boys and girls, each with its own water tank to help ensure cleanliness.



In tribal villages of the Panchmahal region, roof rainwater harvesting systems provide year round water security. This technology is now a social movement that demands urgent attention and priority.