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"WATER OF OUR OWN"

Local Ownership for Sustainability - An Indian Experience

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**From a Struggle
for
Survival**

**To Genuine
Sustainability**



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Local Ownership for Sustainability: An Indian Experience

As we move towards the Third World Water Forum at Kyoto, we can see that the global community has accepted genuine participation of individuals and households in decision-making as the key to achieving water and sanitation goals. There is appreciation that community participation in plans and programs must entail genuine empowerment to find *local* solutions in which equity is the key and access, a human right. This has been the consensus of Vision 21, the World Water Report 2002, the Bonn Recommendations as well as the WEHAB core-sector approach that emerged at Johannesburg.

There have been strong examples from India and the sub-continent towards the goals set out three years ago. Yet there is great difficulty in going to scale with change because existing policies and institutions do not seem capable of responding to a real paradigm shift. While the need for policy and institutional reform was accepted as fundamental to change three years ago, Kyoto must now help us to achieve the breakthrough without which the Millennium Development Goals will continue to elude us. Sustainability as a concept must respect the need for empowerment of and ownership by those most in need, and progress judged by whether a transfer of power is actually taking place.

Decentralization as a Policy

The first major move towards greater decentralization of water resources in India took place through the National Drinking Water Mission in the mid-1980s. The focus of this gigantic effort to bring safe water to millions of citizens was the handpump. Despite major achievement, the goal of adequate access and coverage still remains because of depleting water resources and unresolved issues of ownership. The Mission is still a distance from achieving its objectives, challenged particularly by the inadequacy of any single technology such as the handpump to deal with the accelerating depletion of groundwater sources. India initiated a Sector Reform Programme, in which the emphasis once again is on decentralization, implemented and managed through local institutions, particularly village level water committees and self-government bodies. The Swajaldhara program, its latest extension, stresses direct access to central resources by local institutions. Simultaneously, rainwater harvesting is assuming great importance as water tables fall further and survival in many parts of the country depends on the ability to catch water where it falls.

My experience in Gujarat has been with state level efforts at implementing these government initiatives as well as independent efforts through civil society. At the state level, the experience reflects efforts at establishing viable water and sanitation committees at the village level, tracking the progress of massive pipeline schemes linked to the Narmada River project and participation in a pilot project in Ghogha block of Bhavnagar district, where an experiment is underway to establish a model partnership between government systems, donors and people's institutions. A recent development has been the setting up of a special institution to oversee such partnerships in another five districts. This is the Water and Sanitation Management Organization (WASMO) that receives assistance from The Netherlands. Parallel developments in civil society have been through a major network, Pravah, which brings together over 80 NGOs, technicians, scientists, research organizations and other institutions towards a state-wide drinking water and sanitation drive.

A significant reflection of growing partnerships has been the experience of over four years by a group of 30 non-government and government institutions to work with the global community in developing a vision and action plan to parallel Vision 21. Beginning at the same time as the WSSCC effort, this group has articulated its perspectives and plans in a '*Jal-Disha 2010*' report that has received official as well as global acknowledgement.

Rhetoric & Reality

While this progress is not inconsiderable, experience on the ground indicates the enormous challenges and barriers to more rapid change. One of these is the fact that Watsan is a state subject in India. The central Government can recommend and encourage but not enforce its National Water Policy. The latest National Water Policy raises other concerns of policy and interpretation. For example, it states that water is national property, while the Prime Minister recently stated that water is the communities' property! The Sector Reform effort has been initiated in 65 districts across all states. In Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, there is evidence of a clear political will to promote this initiative. But in Gujarat, our field experience has been disappointing. Communities have no genuine involvement in decision-making processes. Instead of building local ownership over local resources, and responding to local needs and capacities, the tendency is to recruit communities into serving central programs imposed from above.

Institutional reform so essential to change is not taken with seriousness. Attitudes and systems geared to past mentalities are now expected to encourage decentralization and empowerment processes to which they have no genuine commitment. An example has been the decision to appoint elected village leaders to head Watsan committees rather than allowing communities to select their own Watsan leadership. At Ghogha, the state government insists on supplying Narmada water through pipelines up to the village, with community participation limited to the distribution and management of the water received. The communities on the other hand are demanding financial resources and support for planning and building their own local water resources, based on local potential.

Mobilization for Vision 21 in Bhavnagar

Women-led WATSAN committees in several villages of this drought-prone district of coastal Gujarat have demonstrated rainwater harvesting and recharging on a scale that has ensured self-sufficiency as well as provided neighboring villages with tanker supplies during periods of drought. The technology utilized has combined roof water collection and bore well recharging through a series of check dams built and managed by the WATSAN committees. In contrast, many surrounding communities are still awaiting water supplies through the pipeline schemes.

Source: **Utthan, Ahmedabad**

At WASMO, the organizational structure is marked by bureaucratic control. At the village level, NGOs have been advocating that women should represent at least 50 % of the membership that marginalized groups should be adequately included and those willing and able to take on Watsan responsibilities should be identified by the community. Instead, the state has passed a resolution for the mandatory inclusion of elected officials, with the village sarpanch (head) in charge. The *Swajaldhara* scheme that was launched in December 2002 by the Prime Minister leaves glaring questions about the space and scope for women's participation, key institutional arrangements, and investment in capacity-building at the grassroots and not only in capital costs.

Civil Society in Kutchh Demonstrates Institutional Alternatives

Drought-proofing efforts in this desert region have taken additional importance after the devastation of the 2001 earthquake. Kutchh Abhiyan, a network of local NGOs, have mobilized communities to access central funding toward action plans that reflect Vision 21 principles. Institutional mechanisms have been innovated to process applications for financial assistance and to monitor implementation. Capacity building is the pre-requisite in this empowerment process, which has now reached over 300 villages.

Source: **Kutchh Abhiyan**

From a field perspective, this situation is particularly frustrating because the need for genuine decentralization and local ownership, as well as the strategy for how to achieve it, has been spelled out through the '*Jal-Disha 2010*' exercise and strongly ratified by experience both in India and all over the world. At this time of preparation for the Kyoto Forum, we therefore need to acknowledge that the consensus on decentralization that emerged at The Hague and which was subsequently

endorsed at Bonn and Johannesburg is still very far from being translated into a reality on the ground. What then is now needed if rhetoric is to become the reality?

What Needs To Change?

Speaking from my perspective as a field worker in Gujarat, the priority is for the paradigm shift to take place first within the minds and attitudes of the political and administrative leadership. There is no way that established institutions working through their established systems can achieve this change. We need new policies and new ways of doing things. Dramatic evidence of this dichotomy in Gujarat is that state policies and programs continue to be based on the gigantic Narmada pipeline programme, which in turn is wholly government-owned and government-operated. The only apparent space for local ownership is in the distribution and management of water received from the central system. So long as this preoccupation with massive capital-intensive schemes continues, there can be no genuine decentralization or local ownership. Most resources will be swallowed by the pipelines and only marginal resources will be left to implement the people-centered approaches advocated at the global level by the Vision 21 and at the local level by the PRAVAH network and the 'Jal-Disha 2010' coalition.

Lessons from the Field

Encourage local communities toward local solutions. What is possible through a genuine paradigm shift has been strongly demonstrated over three years of drought by women and men in several districts of Gujarat. For example, in fluoride-affected Balisana village of Patan district, women have led a gigantic rainwater harvesting effort that is capable of recharging and storing water up to a capacity of 320 million liters per year. So successful has this effort been that irrespective of what happens in the monsoon this year, there is adequate provision of community-managed fluoride-free water for essential domestic needs over the next two years. Community-led resource mobilization covered 40 per cent of the total cost of Rs 7.50 million. In addition, the community has innovated arrangements to regulate the proper use of this resource. This has been achieved in the face of considerable pressure from vested interests to gain control for commercial uses.

Give priority to hygiene awareness and sanitation. This overwhelming need can never be achieved unless it is linked to local water-resource conservation, development and management, and to the development of a local, gender-sensitive and women-led movement.

Demand-driven Sanitation Action

In the districts of Amreli and Bhavnagar, Utthan has demonstrated that sanitation is a real demand that can be actioned by responding to women's needs. In an environment, which most often neglects hygiene awareness and sanitation on the excuse that communities do not demand this, households willing to install latrines and contribute toward costs have been identified through Watsan committees. Field visits have been arranged to Tamil Nadu to demonstrate the range of options from which communities and households can choose. Demand creation has been so effective that the issue is no longer reliance on government subsidies but rather on community-led credit schemes.

Source: **Utthan, Ahmedabad**

Emerging Patterns of Urban Cooperation

The southern city of Chennai has been a pioneer in systems of urban rainwater harvesting and waste water management in which role of civil society is acknowledged and made crucial. A massive public education campaign preceded legislation that makes water conservation compulsory. Institutional mechanisms have been put in place to assist communities in implementing the new regulations. Fiscal incentives are now under review. Other states, including Delhi and Gujarat, have introduced similar legislation without the same emphasis on prior education and community involvement. In Ahmedabad, civil society has taken the initiative to propose a major urban facility which can act for awareness building and follow this up with technical services and resource mobilization. This effort brings together Watsan activists with city planners, research and financial institutions and local authorities in what could be an important model.

Source: **Pravah, Ahmedabad**

The urban crisis demands new capacities and approaches. Experience during the years since The Hague has also underlined the need for many of us with predominantly rural experience to pay increasing attention to the urban challenge. The global concern with the impact of population growth and urbanization on poor communities in towns and cities is reflected in the efforts of India's urban authorities and many NGOs to innovate community-based strategies which can apply to the management, financial and technological demands of urban Watsan. A key example is the introduction of new legislation in several Indian cities that makes rainwater harvesting compulsory for new construction. Some authorities realize that this cannot be implemented without strong community understanding and involvement in decisions and resource management.

Where do we go from here?

For stakeholders in India, the major need now is for national policies that clearly establish the ownership of people over water resources that they can manage effectively. This emphasis on ownership then needs to be more uniformly applied by state and local authorities, to remove the uncertainties which now surround issues of ownership, and thus to encourage genuinely people-centered programmes on the ground. Genuine ownership of local resources will also require an extremely close monitoring systems that can help ensure that key decisions are those of local communities, and not of dominating power structures. In this connection, it is worth remembering that only a few months ago, a senior state official in India declared that every drop of rain that falls from the sky belongs to the state. This, while underground resources are merrily exploited by those rich enough to dig deeper! We also need a clear directive that financial resources will be channeled to local, community-led water resource building and management. In all of this, the state must acknowledge and support the role of women in decision-making not just through rhetoric, but through investment in capacity-building and building institutions, in which women and other marginalized groups have the leading voice on a pre-requisite.

Local Ownership for Sustainability:

The Raisangarh Example

Raisangarh village in Ahmedabad district faced chronic water shortages compounded by salinity. Suffering was further intensified by chronic indebtedness that left the local community as well as their natural resources at the mercy of a money-lending cartel. The Mahiti NGO organized a women's self help group to explore the options available for building local water resources which they could own and manage. Eventually, a lined pond for harvesting rainwater was constructed and self-sufficiency was achieved. However, an immediate threat came from vested-interests to take control of this precious resource in connivance with the authorities. The women devised a strategy to confront the authorities by demonstrating at official headquarters to assert their right of control. This right has been successfully exercised over several years and the demonstration has been communicated across many communities.

Source: **Mahiti, Dholera.**

Global stakeholders have a responsibility to ensure implementation of the principles of *Vision 21* as well as the Bonn Recommendations. Preparations for Kyoto reveal the progress made by communities and authorities toward those goals, as well as the inadequacy of these achievements.

There is clearly no hope of achieving the Millennium Development Goals for safe water and sanitation if things continue at the current pace. Policy and institutional reform needs to be jointly monitored by all partners if the pace of change is to be accelerated. Donors may now need to examine ways in which their support can be accessed by those whose actions on the ground are in keeping with the principles of *Vision 21* and what has followed. This might require major changes in policy, to adequately reflect that now governments must be facilitators, not suppliers, and that other partners in civil society must be acknowledged as equals in the processes of decision-making and implementation. The focus of future partnerships must therefore reflect a genuine shift toward local ownership for sustainability, the only paradigm that can work.

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