

WOMEN AS PRO-ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL REGENERATION

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INTRODUCTION :

- The experience of Watershed Organisation Trust in the Indo-German Watershed Development Programme and environmental regeneration.
- The vitality of the environment plays a major role in the quality of the life of the human population living therein. This is specially true of the rural society which has a direct symbiotic relationship with its surroundings. Since 70-80% of the rural household needs are met from its environment, communities and villages situated in such degraded conditions barely meet their survival needs. Perennial drought is being aggravated by the exploitation of the natural resources and this in turn worsens the already existing poverty. Thus the vicious cycle continues.
- While the village community is affected, woman is especially at the brunt end. Having no assets to call her own and faced with an impossible situation, she has the responsibility of attending to the well being of the family and keeping the home fires burning. And, if she is unable to make ends meet, she faces the constant threat of insecurity and the displeasure of her husband and family.
- A brief description of the ecological situation of the case under study. The Ahmednagar district. is severely drought prone, having an average rainfall varying between 150 - 500 mm. But a very small portion, the Akole taluka which lies on the Western ghats has a rainfall averaging 800-1000mm. per annum. Due to the massive deforestation, this hilly area is characterized by severe erosion. The free run-off of rain water has created conditions where water for irrigation, live-stock and domestic purposes is lacking for 4-5 months in the year. Agriculture thus provides them with food security for a maximum of 6 months in the year. This results in heavy seasonal or permanent migration to the nearby towns and cities.
- Natural resource regeneration along the lines of Participatory Watershed Development and Management proves to be an effective means to poverty alleviation.

1. THE PROBLEM

In the case under study we do not propose to go into the details of what constitutes a watershed programme. Briefly the approach followed is a ridge to valley one with soil conservation and biomass development taking precedence over water harvesting structures. This is achieved by digging water absorption trenches (WATs) and continuous contour trenches (CCTs) across hills, from the top downwards; farm and contour bunds in the arable and cultivable lands. Along the water courses from the source downwards, gully plugs, nala bunds and checkdams are built sequentially. Plantation of trees and grasses is done on and between the contour trenches, as also along the contour and farm bunds. Horticulture species are generally planted on better lands.

For watershed to succeed, not only should the people be mobilized and organized, but they should understand the WHY, WHAT and the HOW of the effort of regeneration and maintenance of their natural resources. They should not only understand the relationship between their degraded environment and their poverty and hardships, but also what measures have to be taken to reverse the situation. For this they have to be inducted into the technology, methodology and organization of implementing and maintaining the measures undertaken and the structures built.

During the early phase of watershed mobilization and implementation, WOTR realized that the decisions were largely being taken by men, while it was the women who constituted the bulk of the labour force. Men decided what had to be done, the where and how. They designed the structures and did the layout using hydromarkers or dumpy levels, the women dug the ground and did the backbreaking work while the men supervised them. The men took the measurements, maintained the records and disbursed their wages. It quickly became evident that such a situation would not allow for long term sustainability of the project because the women began to view themselves as labourers and not as co-owners. Moreover, despite they being the primary household users of natural resources, their needs and requirements would not be factored into the measures undertaken if they were not proactive in the process.

2. THE CONCEPTUAL LEVEL

Success is usually achieved when a particular element or aspect is integrated because it is a demand of the people. To integrate women into the decision making processes, especially where land is concerned, would not normally occur if one awaits the people's request. Hence the initiative had to be made by the "outsider" i.e. WOTR the implementing NGO.

A two pronged approach is being followed :

1. creating an atmosphere where the participants begin to feel the demand and the possibility of implementation.
2. building an institutional framework in order " to make it happen ".

WOTR then decided that women had to be incorporated more effectively into the decision making processes of the program as well as also into the management and supervision of implementation. As a starting point, at least 33% of women would be included into the Village Watershed Committee (VWC). More importantly, it was decided that if women were to be taken seriously by the menfolk, they would have to acquire the needed technical knowledge of the various measures as well as the skills to organize, supervise and manage their execution. Special efforts would have to be made to equip them with the necessary understanding and skills to participate in discussions pertaining to the project as well as measures to be undertaken. Specifically, they would have to be inducted as designers and supervisors of the various engineering and plantation activities)

2.1. CREATING AN ATMOSPHERE FOR THE ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF WOMEN

Steps taken :

- i. *Informal initial discussions with women's groups as well as men folk.*
Several young girls (8th - SSC) who were already working on the site, expressed their desire and the confidence to handle the technical aspects after the required training. They wanted to be "Mahila Mukadams" or field supervisors.
- ii. *Assuring the male staff that the women would be able to efficiently handle technical work as well as the accurate maintenance of records.*

This was possible only by giving the women the opportunity of an experience and determining their capacity to perform.

iii. *Winning over the "male-dominated" Village Watershed Committee (VWC)..*

This was done through constant dialogue. They had reservations because women would now "encroach" upon the male domain. But more, especially it meant that some of the men of the village would have to accept being supervised and "controlled" by young women. They were finally requested to give the women an opportunity to prove themselves.

iv. *Discussions with women's groups.*

Incidentally, the older women of this group were the least enthusiastic. They felt that the proposed job was not for women but that of men only.

2.2 INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND INPUT REQUIREMENTS

- * Each watershed is owned by its respective ***Gram Sabha (GS)***. It is valid if one member of the household attends. It is the forum where the progress of the work, difficulties and achievements as well as other issues of interest are discussed.

To date it was understood that only the male representatives of the households participate. Women are now called to participate in these GS. They are asked their opinions in public.

- * ***VWC***: Is the executive representative body of the GS. Following the government mandate at least a 33% representation of women is required. While a 50% representation is desired, the women are not yet prepared for their role.

- * ***Mukadams or Site Supervisors***: These are local persons who supervise the work of 40 labourers. They maintain the muster, check the quality and quantity of work output of each labourer. Until this experience there were usually only "men" mukadams.

- * ***Women's Organizations***: The ***Mahila Mandal*** and ***Self-Help Groups (SHGs)*** for savings and Credit and the ***SMS***.

These fora give the women an opportunity to come together, be informed, discuss and take decisions. These also help them to handle money (of their SHG groups and other activities worked as a group) and maintain their accounts. Experiences and strengths gained within their own organization helps to build self-confidence.

- * **Inputs : Trainings** : Separate training inputs are given to the mahila mukadams.

Trainings are also given to women on SHGs and other topics of their interest. Exposure visits and trainings give the women an opportunity to go out of their village and at times even spend a night out. Besides receiving information, special emphasis is given to Record and Account keeping and managerial skills.

- * **GS and VWC meetings** : The male staff of the NGO consciously seeks the opinions of the women. This sends out signals to the village men that the voice of the women is also valued. Besides it encourages the women to be more active.

3. Observations :

This experiment began in early December 1997. Almost an year has been elapsed since passed since Mahila Mukadams (women supervisors) have been appointed. Some observations of this experience are noted below.

1. Initially a lot of problems were faced by the young women "mukadams" from both the male mukadams as well as the labourers. It should be remembered that each working group of labourers consisted of both men and women. The men and quite a few elderly women resented the fact that young women were now "lording" it over them. This expressed itself in quarrels over how things had to be done as well as over measurements of work done. Jealousy compounded the issue and at times vicious rumors of these women were spread.
2. These few months experience proved that the women mukadams were not only knowledgeable but very regular and meticulous in their work. It reflected in a noticeable improvement in the quality of the work. Records have been properly maintained on a regular basis.
3. Women have now begun taking an active interest in the village and particularly of the program. They are involved in discussions and interestingly, they are now more listened to by the men folk. The women mukadams have become beacons of change and spokespersons for the majority of the other women who generally remain silent. This silent majority is now also becoming more confident and vocal at village level meetings, even for issues not directly related to the project.

4. Women are now being seen by the men folk in a new light. Their status has improved and they are listened to. It is interesting to note that prior to this experiment, the "participation" of women at project meetings was associated with nodding their heads and sitting at the periphery of the group and a normal representation in the Village Watershed Committee (VWC). Now, however, though they sit separately, they are up-front in the meetings. Even women other than VWC members participate in the these meetings.
5. Women make their preferences known and their presence felt. A case in point is the selection of the plantation species. While the men folk wanted monoculture cash crops (timber and fruit), the women opted for multi-species which would cater to household needs (fodder, fuel, fruit, biomass, fibre etc.) A healthy mix of these two approaches was arrived at.
6. Women have developed greater confidence, solidarity and a sense of their significance and importance as a group. In one village, a women's SHG was undertaking an income generating activity of making canvas water-bags. Once this mahila mukadam experiment was started, this group decided to give up the activity and go onto the work site, despite the fact that the water-bag activity was much lighter, and generating comparable income. Two of them became mukadams. When asked why this had happened, one of the women replied that working at the water-bags one only looked at the machine and the bags the whole day long; while on the watershed site, they were working, relating to people and discussing issues relevant to them . This gave her a sense of dignity and worth.
7. The acceptance of the Mahila Mukadams have increased the participation of the women in their own women's organization and SHGs. The men now encourage their women folk to join the SHGs . In the 6 project villages there are now 40 SHG's involving 542 women.
8. From an initial 7 mahila mukadams in 2 projects, their number has increased to 23 mahila mukadams in 6 projects at present and this number is on the rise.
9. This experience has given confidence both to the watershed community as well as the NGO staff that cultural biases can be changed and that women when given the know-how are dependable even in so called complex technical activities.

4. CONCLUSION :

A process has been initiated. It has opened the door to further integration and involvement of women for other activities related to village life and development. Even though this experiment is only a few months old, the relative ease with which it has been accepted by the watershed community is the fact that it has spread over several projects in the area. Women's activities participation and Mahila Mukadam and is now being taken granted in forthcoming projects. This seems to indicate that the manner in which it was presented to the people and the degree of their involvement had a crucial role to play in its success.

Both the men and the women were involved. Women were not seen as a group apart that had to be given privileged treatment. The VWC was taken into confidence in all Implementation. Men were made to feel that the progress and development of their women folk would positively affect their family life and ultimately their status in society. They were made to feel that they could be pioneers in defining new forms of organizations and relationships. This resulted in their viewing this initiative not as an imposition but as one that grew from within the dynamics of their own community and the aspirations of their women folk. They could not but respond in a supportive and enabling manner.

