

An aerial photograph of a hilly landscape with extensive terraced agriculture. The terraces are arranged in a grid-like pattern across the slopes, with some areas appearing to be planted with crops. The terrain is hilly and the overall color palette is dominated by earthy browns and greens.

# The Wasundhara Approach

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Living on a finite planet, we humans thirst for endless growth – and due to our ingenuity we have always been able to achieve it. But today, as food prices climb and water tables drop, we face a challenge greater than ever before: how to keep feeding everyone with a changing climate and growing population? And how to do so while improving the livelihoods of millions of impoverished Indian farmers?

The situation is especially dire in India, which relies heavily on agricultural production but lacks a widespread, sustainable source of water. Most farmers source their water from wells, relentlessly pumping water that formed in the time of the dinosaurs. As written by environmentalist Maude Barlow, it's “the hydrological equivalent of deficit financing.” India has about 25 million tube wells sucking up water around the clock, and it adds another million every year. The effects of desertification are already being felt – in 2006, for the first time in many years, India had to import mass quantities of wheat, causing global prices to rise. India's water is quickly running out – except for where watershed development is replenishing it.

The elimination of vegetation from the soil by removing forests, overgrazing land or using poor farming methods. These factors determine whether an individual watershed – or an entire country – retains or loses its water, its life fuel. Vegetation keeps water in the local hydrological cycle; destruction or misuse of the same allows it to evaporate or run off into the ocean. Meanwhile, the lack of rural livelihoods through only agriculture is forcing more and more people to run off to cities, further undermining India's agricultural potential.

WOTR's new Wasundhara Approach combines WOTR's proven technology of watershed development with its

policies of socio-economic empowerment; it supplements watershed development by helping women and the poor start businesses and exercise their political voices. WOTR's

Our vision is that communities, especially the poor within, be empowered to live in dignity and secure their livelihoods in sustainable eco-systems. Our mission is to provide committed development support that motivates, energises, and empowers individuals, groups, communities and other organisations to undertake integrated eco-system development for enhancement of well being on a sustainable basis.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “India is not Calcutta and Bombay. India lives in her seven hundred thousand villages.” Likewise we believe that only when the 70 percent of Indians who are villagers are socio-economically and environmentally stable can India reach her full potential. We have the proven tools and methodologies of achieving this, that can be implemented on a broader scale.



## ***The Wasundhara Approach***

Knowing what we know about poverty, climate change and resource scarcity, we have a responsibility to act. What is the most efficient and sustainable way forward?

We began with the simple mission of using watershed development to empower the rural impoverished by uniting and organizing them around sharply felt, common crisis issues – land degradation and water scarcity.

Watershed development is the basis of our approach. It is a straightforward ridge-to-valley approach that changes lives by reshaping landscapes and combating social injustices. We train village communities as well as NGOs across the country to re-form the land so it absorbs more water, leading to healthy ecosystems and higher, more sustainable crop output. Why “ridge-to-valley?” The poorest people hold the land on the ridges, where the land is the worst because it fails to collect water. We believe it is most just to uplift them first, and then move to down toward the people in the valley who need help less urgently. Income grows and livelihoods improve, from the bottom up.

The Wasundhara Approach adopted in 2005 has been implemented in over 200 villages, with far-reaching and self-sustaining impacts. It creates a development partnership between NGO and villagers based on regeneration of the resource base, transparency, equitable distribution of benefits, and gender equality – all components of eradicating poverty. Each village program is tailored to that particular locale’s quality and quantity of natural and human resources. On the ground, this starts with supplementing watershed development by incorporating the poor and the women into decision-making processes by established a Village Watershed Committee (VWC) and Village Development Committee (VDC). We don’t directly support

one class or caste over another, but by stimulating full participation, the rising tide lifts all boats. The VDC, though independent of the Village Panchayat, works along with it. The Village Panchayat thus becomes much more accountable to the villagers, making them more responsive and democratic in their decision-making.

*In Madhya Pradesh (MP), 50% of the Wasundhara project villages that were isolated and never had any political representation from their villages saw leaders elected from their villages.*

Along with better government, Wasundhara uses micro-loans to help villagers create better livelihoods for themselves. Over 50 percent of the families in these villages jumped to a higher economic category.

While the rewards of working with WOTR are great, prosperity doesn't come for free. WOTR provides the organizing, efficiency and technical expertise; the villagers must put in equal time and effort to better their communities.

### ***How does Wasundhara Approach work?***

Wasundhara means “caring earth,” and for WOTR it also means **WOTR Attentive to Social Unity for Nature, Development and Humanity in Rural Areas**. Wasundhara represents a paradigm shift, putting the responsibility for development in the hands of not only NGOs and agencies but of the villagers themselves. Only in this way can the projects sustain themselves organically over time. Taking a socio-technical approach, WOTR demystifies technology and puts it into the hands of the farmers so they can use it long after WOTR has left. The results are so great that, in order to achieve them, villagers are willing to make big sacrifices –

laboring in the fields while also paying into a communal fund for long-term security.

The Wasundhara strategy has four main components for leading villagers to create economic prosperity and a greater sense of dignity for themselves. The first is that *each group and hamlet designs their development plan* beginning from what they agree to be their most pressing needs. The second is that *village leadership proportionately represents all classes and both genders*, and decisions are made with social equity in mind. Likewise, there must be a transparent and socially just system of monetary contributions, in which those with higher income pay more to the general fund than those with less. Thirdly, *micro-loans are provided to village women and their self-help groups* so they can lend money to jumpstart economies and livelihoods. Lastly, the *VDC is linked to the Gram Panchayat* and is encouraged to work with the government on development projects.

*The village of Pangan in Dhule district, Maharashtra, was one of the first to embrace Wasundhara. To determine actionable priorities, it divided into five stakeholder groups: big farmers, marginal farmers, landless, women, and youth. After some deliberation, a diverse field of concerns was narrowed down to three: unemployment and lack of work opportunities, shortage of drinking and irrigation water, poor communication facilities in terms of transportation/access to the market. Though the poor had no trouble immediately identifying their top concerns, it was determined that the thread linking the most common problems was lack of water. It would satisfy the women, who wanted drinking water; the farmers, who wanted irrigation water; and, through the latter, the youth, who could then find employment in the fields. Thence, WOTR and the village of Pangan commenced watershed development together.*

Addressing the first component, the Wasundhara Approach can only be carried out with firm and active

commitments from all village groups. Rather than delegate decision-making to the Gram Sabha level, where the few and better off often hijack the process, representatives are selected and decisions are made at the smallest levels, from the bottom up. The Wasundhara approach brings proportionate representation (by household wealth ranking) to the VDC from different social strata. Villagers are divided into four different categories – very poor, poor, medium, and better off. Half of the committee must be women. The committee plans and oversees implementation of important watershed development components, such as *shramdaan* and ban on free grazing and tree felling. It supervises and monitors watershed development work and pays villagers for their labor out of a central village bank account. As it represents all groups of villagers, it helps make a development plan that meets the needs of everyone.

Regarding the second Wasundhara principle, the Village Development Committee (VDC) must comprise of a proportionate representation of the different castes, classes and communities, including 50 percent representation by women, and all decisions must be made with social equity in mind. Differential contribution is one of the strong bases for ensuring equity.

*In the Wankute village of Sangamner taluka in Ahmednagar district, WOTR proposed a cost-sharing scheme for villagers to install home solar panels in which the better off, middle, poor and very poor would pay 80 percent, 60 percent, 30 percent, and 15 percent respectively. The middle and better off objected strongly to this, but WOTR would not accept their argument that all should pay 50 percent. After being reminded of how much benefit WOTR's leadership had already brought them, the two upper classes consented to cost shares of 65, 40, 20, and 10 percent respectively. All accepted this arrangement, and the entire village now lives better – breathing in less toxic fumes, easing through electrical blackouts, and depending less on fossil fuels.*

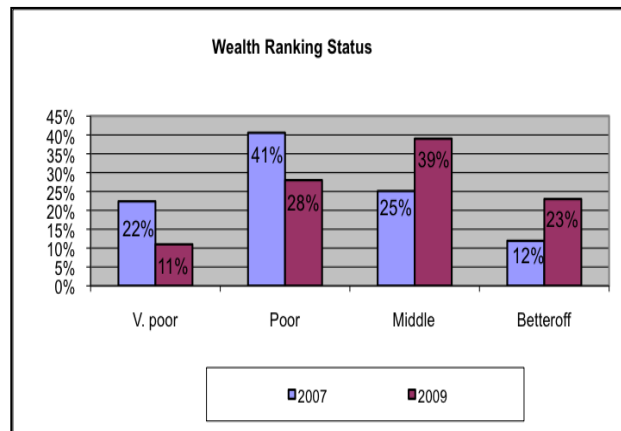
Meanwhile, self-help groups (SHGs) organized into the apex body Samyukt Mahila Samiti (SMS), give village women the opportunity to improve their lives through economic growth. Dropadi of Khamha village, a self-described “ordinary woman,” used an SMS loan to purchase three goats. After one year she had ten goats and had repaid the loan. “*I never dreamed a good future*” she says, “*but the Wasundhara Programme taught me to see a dream and better tomorrow. Now I have hope in life.*” WOTR’s aim is to get 100 percent of women in the project villages participating in SHG’s, and in some villages that has been accomplished.

Improving economic prospects within the locality helps repair the social fabric torn by migration. When men can start businesses at home they are given the priceless experience of raising their children and staying with their families, instead of going off alone in search of work for much of the year. The children, who might otherwise have to migrate as well, can stay home and get a stable education. “*We had to migrate for four to six months to some other village. Due to this reason my son had to discontinue his school,*” says Ramdeen

*Marabi of Paraciya village, Madhya Pradesh. “The Wasundhara project has benefited us with enough employment opportunities – due to which we can now work in our own village. I am happy that now my son can attend school regularly, as we do not have to travel elsewhere.”*

In all of our Madhya Pradesh villages, between 2007 and 2009, the number of medium and better off families went up and the number of very poor went down. For example in Mohpani, the number of medium went from 5 to 39 while the very poor population dropped from 29 to 20. Overall, the number of medium and better off families went from 12 to 23 percent of the villages, and the number of very poor went from 22 to 11 percent. The average family progressed from the third wealthiest category to the second wealthiest.

Lastly, the Wasundhara Approach makes political connections that fulfill the promise of village democracy. In most villages, people don’t organize or know their rights regarding the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat, meaning they forfeit their rights as members of a democracy. Villagers passively watch decisions be made instead of contributing to them. But this changes when WOTR brings the Wasundhara Approach because full participation, especially by the marginalized people, is one of its four pillars. For example, villagers through the VDC, can get their



*Wealth Ranking post-watershed development in MP*

Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha to appoint a NREGS<sup>1</sup> Sevak, who organizes government-funded improvement works with training from WOTR, such as repairs to roads and earthen dams. And by linking with the Gram Panchayat, the villagers claim Wasundhara development as their own while making it a part of their mainstream culture.

The common theme in all Wasundhara projects is development made possible only by a cooperative relationship between WOTR and villages full of devoted people. When done correctly, the combination of watershed development and Wasundhara socio-economic development leads to a blossoming of economic fortune. Savita Uddhe of Mohapani village in Madhya Pradesh is a perfect example of this. *“The day watershed development started in our village our life was changed,”* says she. *“We did farm bunding in our field that resulted in our farm production almost doubling. Work in the village provided us good amount of money,”* she says, referring to a general store she opened thanks to SHG loans. *“Now we do not need to migrate to other places in search of work. We became self sufficient for our food security.... When I compare myself [going from] being a migrant to SHG president, it seems to be a dream.”* In just a couple years Savita went from earning just enough for survival, to owning a shop – from watching her children starve to feeding them nourishing food.

With greater resources at its disposal, WOTR could bring this proven development program to the huge number of villages that need it. After having our watershed development techniques celebrated and backed by media publications and international agencies, we have developed its successful socio-economic counterpart. With enough additional funding, there’s no limit to how many villages we could help lift to their

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<sup>1</sup> NREGS is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

feet.

Dr. Dhanmanjari Sathe of Pune University and Sunil Agrawal of the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) carried out an early study on the Wasundhara Approach. The study found that earlier WOTR's watershed development succeeded in awakening and unifying village politics, but benefits for the poor often did not sustain. It found that the Wasundhara programmes fixed this shortcoming, though in some villages more than others of course, as techniques were still in their formative stages. Women had new independence thanks to SHGs; water quality and sanitation improved; and poor people were taking advantage of WOTR and government schemes. "Here the Wasundhara approach can also be called an **Empowerment approach**," the report says.

### ***Future action plan***

In the future we plan to continue perfecting Wasundhara while expanding it to include Climate Change Adaptation. In the summer of 2007, as unusually heavy rains caused flooding across northern India, a top United Nations official warned that climate change, if it continues unchecked, will seriously damage crop production in India. Of course, population is expected to continue rising, demanding that crop output rise instead of fall.

Monsoons are already following the expected pattern of climate change destabilization – coming earlier or later than expected many times over the last decade, it has ruined crops and devastated livelihoods. No one is quite prepared for these changes, but with our Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) program we are helping already vulnerable villagers adapt to the instability ahead.

Knowledge is power, so our CCA program begins with Agro-meteorology systems, which inform farmers of temperature, humidity, precipitation, wind, evaporation and other weather factors. This data, juxtaposed with data from the Meteorological Department and local indigenous knowledge, get fed to an Agromet Advisory Generator. This way the farmers have a much better idea of what their available resources are, and when might be the best time to plant and harvest. We also work out a water budgeting mechanism that helps establish better crop planning and management systems so villages don't exhaust their water or soil resources.

In addition, we are introducing the People's Biodiversity Register (PBR), a way for local communities to deeper understand and keep track of the health of their ecosystems. Biodiversity is crucial not only for the health and

sustainability of the environment, but also as a direct food and medicinal resource base for the people.

Lastly we are exploring new methods of introducing renewable energy to villagers in simple ways they can use. Our most common tool so far is the parabolic solar cooker, which simply reflects the sun's heat to a pot, allowing school chefs to cook everyday without relying on polluting and expensive fossil fuels. We are also developing ways for villagers to turn organic waste products into biofuels, which will save them money and reduce their market dependency.

The key in addressing CCA is to reduce economic and environmental vulnerability by improving livelihood options and enhancing the resource base. Our Climate Change Adaptation programme is a new and innovative experiment that, if and when it works, could revolutionize how India and rural people around the world respond to the pressures of climate change and resource scarcity.

## ***WOTR impacts***

WOTR works with rural Indian villages that come voluntarily with a desire to take part in development programs. This is the only way that program sustainability can be ensured. If it is imposed upon a village then it will be unlikely to have social or political support, making it an unsustainable proposition no matter how helpful it could potentially be. But when a village decides to work with WOTR, both sides know that they will be equal partners in development.

In all, WOTR has worked in 1,450 villages in 31 districts of the four states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. In its 18 years it has organized 1,029 watershed development projects, covering over 600,000 hectares and impacting 821,000 people. Its women's SHG promotion, micro-finance, trainings and other initiatives extend to even more villages. This is either by direct implementation or by handholding NGOs and village committees in implementation. WOTR has 184 NGOs and government Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs), which are vital partners in WOTR's extensive development network.

It has promoted almost 5,000 self-help groups, which use micro-financing to empower villagers with a desire to work but no resources to get started. Over 1,00,300 women have improved their lives through these ground-level organizations.

WOTR aims to promote watershed development not only in India but anywhere it can be implemented. It has conducted trainings and exposure programs for 250,000 people from 27 states of India and 29 countries.