



## Watershed Voices – Experiences from the grassroots



# Mhaswandi Watershed Project

**W**hen the fiery furnaces of nearby charcoal kilns were fed with wood from Mhaswandi's verdant forests, its residents were happy, cash-rich and grateful to the rich timber merchants who acted as middlemen in the sale. This new source of easy income flowed into their homes, bringing in its wake a legacy these villagers knew nothing about and were even less prepared to meet. It took a handful of years for the forests, the merchants and the money to vanish. The devastation left behind was unprecedented, catastrophic enough to sweep the future of generations into oblivion. Landscape, barren as far as the eye could see; earning sources shrivelled up into woefully small ruminants and scrub cattle, which further caused land depredation due to free grazing leading to further soil-loss and poorer productivity.

Devoid of its lush forestland, rich in flora and fauna, the once thriving village of Mhaswandi could no longer support its populace in terms of livelihood. Desperate, many resorted to working as wage labourers and some migrated to slums in far-off Mumbai. For nearly forty long years, those who stayed on at Mhaswandi battled hopelessness and despair, unable to see a way out of the cycle of poverty that now had the village in its grip. Little realizing that they had unwittingly sold their future for a few thousand rupees, they accepted what all had happened as their fate. Deep within them too, was now a conviction that accepting any offers from outsiders was not a wise or safe thing to do.

It was into this milieu that Fr. Hermann Bacher (Founder of WOTR & IGWDP) entered when he visited Mhaswandi in 1994.

Fr. Bacher's visit was not mere coincidence. In the 1990s, the Indo-German Watershed Development Programme (IGWDP) was launched in Ahmednagar district which lies in the rain-shadow region of Maharashtra. Dramatic results from a pilot project in Mendhwan (which, like Mhaswandi, also lay in Sangamner taluka of Ahmednagar district) served to erase some of the fears the people in neighbouring villages had, and with some encouragement they also accepted the programme. Having visited Mhaswandi, Fr. Bacher was convinced that launching a watershed programme there too would help restore the land and break the cycle of poverty.

In this endeavour he was ably supported by the Sangamner Sugar Cooperative (hereafter referred to as the Bhag Sahakari Saakhar Karkhana) which joined this restorative venture at his request and accepted the responsibility of being the facilitating NGO through the entire project period. WOTR would provide support throughout, both during the capacity-building phase (CBP) as well as the full implementation phase (FIP) by way of multiple training sessions, experience-sharing workshops, gatherings called melawas and exposure visits. While WOTR would be exclusively responsible for the CBP, NABARD and the IGWDP-Programme Coordinator's team, also based in WOTR, would take responsibility for the FIP. The main responsibility would, however, lie with the Village Watershed Committee (VWC) that would be guided to plan, monitor and execute all watershed development activities and to counter the conflicts that might arise during the process. All that was needed now was to win the villagers' confidence.



## Breaking Barriers

### Addressing Fears

The primary challenge was to address the mindset of the local inhabitants who were understandably suspicious of the intentions of the outsiders and the outcomes of the programme; not quite sure whether they wanted to extend the programme a welcome, let alone their support. They had yet to come to terms with the ruthless use the timber merchants had made of them, and the equally ruthless manner in which they had thereafter been left to fend for themselves.

It took the combined efforts of Fr. Bacher and members of the Bhag Sahakari Saakhar Karkhana to break down this wall. The next impetus actually came from a few inhabitants of Mhaswandi, who had moved on to Mumbai, in search of greener pastures. Having been exposed to prolific progress and development, they envisaged several possibilities for their village as well and encouraged their families to participate in the project. Babubai Shankar Ithape, an active 75-year old woman, also contributed in several ways by taking on the mantle of spreading awareness about the project. Local leaders like Sitaram Damaji Jadhav, Pushpa Bodke, Nanda Kale and Dilip Satkar also participated wholeheartedly and succeeded in motivating the people. After the initial upswings and downswings, it was Subhash Ithape, a poor tailor by profession, who accepted leadership and thereafter put his heart and soul into the efforts that would turn Mhaswandi's barren pastures green again.

After several meetings with the villagers and due to the unstinted support and commitment of the Bhag Sahakari Saakhar Karkhana as well as WOTR, the implementation of the project made a gradual headway which succeeded in changing the attitude of the people. Enabling and convincing the people about the need for the active participation of women in local institutions (VWC, Gram Panchayat etc.) was another daunting task. Both WOTR and IGWDP earmark women's empowerment as a major thrust area, seeing self-help groups (SHGs) as a forum that provides women with an opportunity to access money through savings and credit groups, empowering them economically and thereby enabling them to address their drudgery. Participating in various activities inheres in them a certain level of confidence and thus spurs them to actively participate in village governance as well.

In Mhaswandi too, this was how the process unfolded. With the formation of self-help groups (SHGs), the local women gradually started becoming economically independent as they were engaged in livelihood-generation activities. Their confidence thus boosted, they began to assert themselves at the village level.

Today, the VWC, which is an important body in the village, holds its meeting once in three months where discussions on various

issues are held. They range from maintenance of assets in the watershed such as bunds, check dams etc. as well as plantations in the common lands and forest lands.

The watershed comprises an area of 1145 ha with 287 participating households living in nine hamlets spread across the village. Sixty per cent of these families are Hindu Marathas as well as other sub-castes such as Chambhar, Navhi, and Sutar. The remaining forty percent are Thakkar Adivasis.

A rough patch of untreated land still stands testimony to peoples' fears. The owner of this particular patch had refused to participate in the programme.

## Gaining Compliance

### Shramdaan

In times of continuous crop failure, (as had been happening year after year at Mhaswandi), the villagers were used to receiving grants through government schemes to ease the situation. The concept of 'shramdaan' (or 'donating effort'), was unheard of. Therefore, obtaining shramdaan in the requisite proportion and as per the IGWDP's set parameters was a recurrent concern. In one instance people undertook shramdaan without following the specifically outlined contours. They learnt their lesson when their ill-designed and non-adherent contours failed to give the expected results, and accepted that they would have to do shramdaan again as per the norms and requirements.



### The ban on free grazing

The IGWDP functions under a set of prerogatives, one of which is a ban on free grazing of treated areas. As livestock rearing was the major source of livelihood for all, this precondition was initially met with immense opposition. In general, individual households within a village usually adopt strategies that suit their self-interests, with little or no concern for the impact on neighbouring farms, or on the overall village, or even on the entire landscape. However, as individual and group conflicts began to be regularly addressed, by and large, people began to



follow the rules and procedures that were laid down as a part of the programme.

### Women’s empowerment – creating solutions that work

The ban on tree cutting was another IGWDP prerogative that met with impassioned opposition initially. Women today fondly recall their first meeting with Dr. Marcella D’Souza, the Executive Director of WOTR, when literally they pleaded with her in tears not to impose a ban on cutting trees, since they used wood as a fuel source. The ban would add considerably to the already heavy workload. The smokeless chulha (stove) was then provided as an immediate alternative. However, addressing the issue of fuel shortage in the long run was a priority. Once the 22 SHGs in Mhaswandi were federated into a joint women’s committee called the Sanyukta Mahila Samiti (SMS), the SMS was encouraged to run its own Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) agency. SMS members now convey with pride that the cost of LPG is Rs 25 lower in their village than it is in the cities. The benefits accrue to all the households. This is indeed an example of good economics at work.

Since the SMS is responsible for planning, coordinating and implementing all the SHG activities, Dilip Satkar, a resident of Mhaswandi, has been hired to manage the secretarial work and various other errands at a salary of Rs 750 per month. The same amount is also paid to Tanaji Jadhav for coordinating the activities of the VWC.



Women’s activities in Mhaswandi today include the formation of SHGs, SMSs, micro enterprises such as chilly pounding, vermicelli-

making, running the LPG gas agency, undertaking and providing life insurance, and provision of poshak aahaar (nutritious food) for school children as well as pregnant women. Activities related to seeds and fertilizers have been handed over to the VWC. The VWC compulsorily earmarks and allocates a sum of Rs 10,000/- from the profits thus earned to the SMS at the time of Diwali. This amount is used for distributing gifts to each household thereby giving them an opportunity to feel and share the joys of the festival. As on date, 440 women forming 22 SHGs carry out several activities, infused with a new sense of confidence because they are economically better off and have proven their capabilities. This has caused far greater acceptance of their views and suggestions than existed before.



### Costs and Benefits

Table 1	Overall Project Costs
Component	Amount (Rs)
Watershed treatment measures	51,11,798
Shramdaan (17.04%) [excluding major drainage line structures]	
121 families eligible	7,10,746
Women’s promotion activities	95,698
Administrative costs	10,51,802
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>69,70,044</b>

The cost in DM (German Currency) used at the time of project implementation is DM 2,37,842.

Expenditure on women’s development activities includes a grant of Rs 3,06,000, of which Rs 2,76,090 has been received. Of this Rs 95,698 has been utilized. The balance with the bank at the time of project completion was thus pegged at Rs 1,80,392.

Farm bunds (FB), contour bunds (CB), nala bunds, gabion structures, check dams, afforestation, horticulture, development of grasslands etc. are some of the various watershed treatments carried out during this project. Table 2 displays expenditure incurred on various area treatments.

## Programme Benefits Perceived by Villagers

As an increasing amount of land was brought under treatment, it led to:

- More land becoming available for farming.
- More fodder for livestock
- This translated into healthier and more productive livestock.
- All this led to a cumulative rise in income levels.

In 2001, the people of Mhaswandi extended their livestock.

Loans from banks enabled them to purchase cross-bred cows. Availability of adequate fodder also further boosted their efforts at livestock extension. Milk production thereby increased and the daily output of milk in the village went up to 790 liters daily. Thus inspired, the people purchased several hybrid cows but without adequate knowledge as to how to take care of them. They were thus unable to manage the livestock in an appropriate and desirable manner. As a result, several cows died and the farmers incurred huge losses. This affected the total milk production sending it down to 464 liters per day. This was indeed a turning point in their experience of livestock rearing. It, however, acted as a learning exercise for them and spurred them to plan and manage better thereafter.

The villagers can list out several benefits that have resulted from the watershed development project. A few are mentioned below:

- Income opportunities are now available within the village itself and there are no distress migrations anymore.
- There is increased moisture in the soil and water is available in the wells throughout the year.
- Not only has the area of cultivable land increased, but the existing land productivity has also multiplied manifold.
- One Ashram Shala (village boarding school) has been set up by the government for the Thakkar Adivasi community where the children are provided with basic needs like food, clothing and shelter.
- This has definitely contributed effectively to the observation that there are now no children who weigh less than normal in Mhaswandi.

Perennially irrigated areas have more than doubled during the post-watershed period in 2001 and trebled during 2006. Use of electric motors has also increased, whereas the use of those that run on fuel such as diesel has gone down. The number of bullocks has also gone down while that of cross-bred cows has increased. There is an improvement in the livestock ownership pattern. Employment in agriculture has also risen with increased availability of water and increased land value. Figures pertaining to latrines and soak pits also show that sanitation facilities and their usage have also surged.

Villagers feel that the watershed development project has brought about a sense of social discipline among the individuals and within the community as a whole. It has also enhanced the capacity of the women in the community and improved

Table 2 Costs of Various Treatments		
Treatment Undertaken	Area Covered (Ha./Nos.)	Total Cost Rs.
<b>(A) Area Treatments</b>		
FB/CB	367.00 ha	14,40,134
Horti-pasture	02.00 ha	7,813
Grassland with trees	100.04 ha	2,76,120
Afforestation	171.45 ha	20,11,845
<b>Total</b>	<b>640.49 ha</b>	<b>37,35,912</b>
<b>(B) Drainage Line Treatments</b>		
Nala bund	07.00	2,68,978
Gabion Structure	48.00	4,50,196
Check dam	02.00	6,56,712
<b>Total</b>	<b>57.00</b>	<b>13,75,886</b>
<b>(C) Project Management Overheads</b>		<b>10,51,802</b>
<b>Grand Total= A+B+C</b>		<b>61,63,600</b>



Table 3		Number of Trees Planted
Forest Department (plantation)		2,73,168
IGWDP (private land)		3,44,212
<b>Total</b>		<b>6,17,380</b>
Survived Plants		5,53,358

The survival rate is 89.63 per cent as can be seen from the total number of plants that have survived.

gender equity. A commitment to development has resulted in increased unity in the village and has resulted in free and fair elections. Thus political conflicts are also resolved amicably. The villagers now understand the potential and the significance of a unanimous contribution towards empowerment and their own well-being. They have understood the significance of a united effort and slowly the picture has morphed into one that holds more meaning, brightness and promise!

Today, the various exposure visits outside and the continuous inflow of a stream of visitors to Mhaswandi from several places keeps the community motivated and resurges their spirits. Thirty-

three organizations visited the village between 2000–2002. Since then, 227 NGOs have visited the village. Government officials such as the Agriculture Officer of Maharashtra, the Commissioner and several others have also visited the village.

The people of Mhaswandi convey with pride that management institutions should take lessons from their village. Voluntary leader, Subash Ithape, was invited to present his views and opinions about the transformation of Mhaswandi at a seminar organized by the Sadhana Center for Management and Leadership Development, Pune.

## Future Plans — 2006 Village Envisioning Workshop

A 'Village Envisioning' workshop for Mhaswandi was arranged by WOTR at Darewadi in May 2006. All the VDC members and key persons from the village took part in this workshop. During this workshop, the people were encouraged to share their future plans.

**Table 4:** Future Plans for Mhaswandi

Targets	Action	Medium	Person/Institution Responsible	Involvement/Contribution	Time
Toilet in each house	Start the toilet construction work	Gram Panchayat to provide toilet pots and NABARD to provide loans to the tune of Rs. 1,000 for each household	Gram Panchayat, VWC, CBOs, and the beneficiaries (households)	Gram Panchayat, VWC, CBOs, and beneficiaries	5 months
Start telephone service in the village	Follow-up with Telephone Department, Pressurize Govt. by organizing Morchas		All committees and individuals		1 year
Utilization of natural resources such as Pawanchakki (wind energy), improve health services in the village	Hire the services of private practitioners	All institutions, Funding agencies, private donors, contribution from all the families	A separate action Committee	90% Contribution from the Government and the remaining 10% from households	4 years
Increase in the numbers of small scale industries such as candle-making, soap-making etc.	Trainings, collection of requisite raw materials	SHGs and SMSs	SMSs, WOTR	Banks	1 year



To date, 90 per cent of the households have achieved the target of one toilet per house. However, there are many other objectives which are yet to be met.

Table 5 below examines pre and post-watershed indicators to highlight the impact of the watershed programme over three progressive periods.

**Table 5 : Pre and Post Watershed Indicators**

Indicators	Pre-Watershed (Pre 1994)	Post-Watershed	
		2001	2006
Irrigated Area			
Perennial	61 ha	70 ha	175 ha
Seasonal	35 ha	135 ha	423 ha
Total	61 ha	205 ha	598 ha
Electric Motor	05	31	80
Oil Engine	07	08	1
Livestock			
Bullock	316	139	160
Cow (scrub)	312	30	60
Cow (cross- bred)	08	10	130
Sheep and Goats	271	93	100
Buffaloes	03	14	15
Dairy Milk	Daily 190 liters (from 70 litres daily in 1992)	Daily 790 liters	Daily 464 liters
Employment in Agriculture	3 months	8 months	12 months
Land Value (Rs./ha)			
Agriculture	Rs 15,000	Rs 80,000	Rs 7.5 lakhs
Wasteland (Rainfed)	Rs 5,000	Rs 45,000	Rs 1.25 lakhs
Fodder production	9,50 tons	1,920 tons	2,500 tons
Bio-gas	1	11	11
Gas cylinders	0	9	150
Smokeless chullas	0	87	20
Kitchen garden	0	30	60
Individual latrines	0	03	130
Soak pits	0	21	25
Number of wells	33	56	70
Television	01	29	125
Cycle	13	69	30
Motorcycle	01	07	85
Tractors	01	01	1
Tempo (Goods Carrier)	0	0	2

## Village Level Organizations and Their Contribution to Development

Leadership in Mhaswandi is thriving with ample space and opportunity for all. Though there were very few organizations when the project started today there are many community-based organizations (CBOs) functioning at various levels. Funds have been allocated for specific CBOs depending on the activities involved. Some of them are as follows:

- VWC: Rs. 20,000
- SMS: Rs. 10,000
- Milk Society: Rs. 10,000
- Credit Society: Rs. 10,000.





Another novel practice over the last four years in Mhaswandi is the distribution of a ration of all household necessities to all the SMS SHG members as a part of the Diwali celebrations. Diwali, the festival of lights and firecrackers, is one of the biggest annual celebrations in India. Friends and families meet and revel in abundant joy and sharing. This ration affords a week of indulgent cooking at home. The concern is that every household however poor they may be, should be able to celebrate Diwali and not feel left out. It also induces a feeling of inclusiveness amongst the households and enables them to participate in the festivities with gay abandon. The amount earmarked depends on the profits made from the various activities of the SHGs. The contents are decided depending on needs and through consensus, specifically of the womenfolk. This year, the members received rations worth Rs 950. The gift hamper contained a shopping bag, sugar, cooking oil, chana dal, maida (fine wheat flour), semolina, dry coconut, bath soap, detergent, and other useful products like coconut oil and a nail cutter.



## Festivals as a Binding Factor

Festivals hold immense significance in Indian Hindu households and also act as a binding factor, since they provide an opportunity for all to come together. It is seen that CBOs are strongly involved in festival-related activities. Below are highlighted the various village level organizations under different festivities and amounts that have been earmarked accordingly. These organizations take on various responsibilities to enhance the overall well-being of the village.

1. Navarathra Utsava Mandali: approximately Rs 3 lakhs
2. Purnima Fund Mandali: about Rs 6 lakhs
3. Ganesh Utsav Mandali: Rs 1.5 lakhs
4. Shiva Jayanthi Utsava Mandali: Rs 75,000
5. Gudipadva (Marathi New Year) Fund Mandali: Rs 1.5 lakhs
6. Natya Mandali: Rs 35,000
7. Bhajni Mandal: Rs 20,000
8. Migrated Farmers Fund (more than 100 persons), comprising those who migrated to other places since the past 15 years contribute Rs 20 per month and has a pool of Rs 3 lakhs
9. Alandi Fund Mandali: Rs 1 lakh

## Recognition and Honours

On November 16, 2004, the College of Agriculture, Pune, invited WOTR to participate in an Agro Industry Exhibition held under the aegis of the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences. WOTR put up a stall during this exhibition reflecting its success stories, of which the story of Mhaswandi formed a significant component. Nanda Kale, Pushpa Bodke, and Dilip Satkar from Mhaswandi actively participated in sharing the joys of the successful transformation of their village and the gallant strides they had made with respect to watershed development and women empowerment.

### Sakal Award

In 2004, leading Marathi daily Sakal honored Mhaswandi with a cash prize of Rs 25,000 for having implemented the watershed development program successfully. This was in the year 2004.

The year 2006 was also year of recognition and honours galore for Mhaswandi.

### NABARD Award

Mhaswandi received a cash prize of Rs 20,000 from the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) for the exemplary work done in the village, particularly on women's issues and for the headway SHGs had made in the village. It was given to the watershed implementing agency, the Bhag Sahakari Sakhar Karkhana on March 8, 2006.

### LIC Award for 100 per cent Insurance of Women

Mhaswandi is the first village in Sangamner Taluka, where all the women availed of life insurance policies from the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC), Sangamner branch, for which the branch awarded them Rs 25,000 in cash. Besides this, they received another Rs 25,000 from the Indian Overseas Bank, Bota, for pioneering achievements under the Mahila Vima Gram in the insurance sector for women in the village.

### 'Aakar Jal Puraskar' Award, 2006

Yet another glorious moment was when the Aakar Charitable Trust, Mumbai, honoured Mhaswandi village with the 'Aakar

Jal Puraskar' Award, 2006. It is indeed a matter of pride for the implementing agency as such laurels are not easy to come by. Likewise, it was a momentous occasion for WOTR, which is the Capacity Building and Support Agency and has been associated with the transformation of this village.

This award is given every year to three best project villages in Maharashtra that have done commendable work in soil and water conservation and water use. Mhaswandi village bagged the First Prize. The award included a cheque of Rs 10,00,00 as well as a trophy and a certificate. The award was presented on March 21, 2006, by the Hon. R.R. Patil, Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra at a function in Pune. He lauded the united efforts of the villagers, their sheer grit and determination to make a difference in their own lives and situation in the village by taking up various developmental initiatives (watershed development and other soil and water conservation measures), and moving towards sustainability. Mhaswandi is a living example for other villages to learn and emulate in several ways.

These were moments of monumental pride for the people of Mhaswandi. Mhaswandi has indeed come a long way. Though the dream of self-sustenance has not yet been realized fully, efforts are on in earnest on all fronts. This has certainly paved the way towards better livelihood opportunities, increased cohesiveness, and greater harmony for the villagers. Hopefully the people of Mhaswandi will continue to tread this path with more confidence and poise, enabling them to cross the watermark that so evidently divides urban and rural India.



WOTR is a support/resource organisation working with 120 NGOs in the field of watershed development and related areas. Work is currently on in 308 micro-watersheds in partnerships with other NGOs, spanning over an area of 3,60,557 ha. and benefitting a population of over 4,85,000. The experiences mentioned in *Watershed Voices* are those of WOTR and its partners implementing watershed development programs in the state of Maharashtra, India. This publication is financially supported by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ).

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