

Issues in Restructuring

There is a need to reiterate the interconnectedness of the biophysical, socio-economic, and institutional aspects of watershed development from within a larger conceptual and normative framework for natural resource-based sustainable development.

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Watershed development is increasingly seen as the lynchpin of rural development in dry land areas – one that integrates sectors and provides the foundation for subsequent development. Though some of the notable examples of watershed development appear to offer a way out of stagnation and degradation for all those areas that development had seemingly bypassed, various reviews and studies show that overall the performance has not kept pace with the expectations. The programme needs to be restructured significantly, if the watershed development approach has to deliver what it promises. Such a restructuring must clearly embrace a normative framework that treats livelihoods, productivity, sustainability, equity and decentralised governance as its central concerns, and must be based on strategies that respond to the varying socio-ecological contexts and past experiences with implementation.

After the Hanumantha Rao Committee report of 1994,¹ the recently released report of the Technical Committee on Watershed Development in India (the Parthasarathy Committee report)² is an important landmark in the policy formulation on watershed development. The report is analytical and comprehensive, seeks practical solutions to suit ground realities and builds on the wide-ranging experience of implementing watershed projects across different agro-climatic conditions in India. It derives its rationale from the basic proposition that irrigated agriculture in the country has reached a plateau, and that “increased thrust on rainfed areas through greater emphasis on a reformed watershed programme may hold the key for the challenge” and is reflected in the newly defined objectives of watershed development. Moreover, rather than merely emphasising regeneration of natural resources and/or enhancing farm productivity per se, it lays special emphasis on sustainable livelihood. This recognition of sustainable livelihood upfront is significant, because it then ideally places watershed development at centre stage of not only ecological restoration but also agriculture

and rural development. In this sense too, the report is an important landmark in the contemporary discourse on natural resource-based development that seeks to address varying agro-ecological conditions in different parts of the country. It fully recognises the imperative that in a country like India where the vast majority of the population – farmers, agricultural labourers, adivasis, pastoralists – have been historically dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods, “development” will have to be based primarily on long-term sustainable productivity enhancement of and economic value addition to the natural resource base.

NASDORA

Obviously the policy guidelines for watershed development need to go beyond departmental boundaries as well as the project mode within which implementation may take place. Recognising this is indeed a major leap forward – conceptually, administratively and financially. The real constraint, however, emanates from the fact that the committee’s mandate was restricted to the programmes of the sponsoring ministry, i.e. rural development, focusing mainly on dry land regions in the country. There is thus a clear mismatch between a larger vision of an integrated watershed development authority, and the departmental boundaries/mandate limiting the scope for an ideal paradigm shift in the policy favouring a focus on “natural resource-based sustainable livelihood”. The report clearly recognises that such an ideal situation for an integrated policy formulation and implementation of watershed projects across departments is difficult to realise. Nevertheless, what it attempts to do through its recommendation to form a National Authority for Sustainable Development of Rainfed Areas (NASDORA) therefore is a first “practical” step towards an ideal scenario. The report gives detailed attention to the organisational structure of NASDORA and other institutional arrangements of the programme, right down from the national to the local micro watershed level. In the process it also deals with the tricky issue of provisions for involvement of panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) as they exist in the Hariyali guidelines. It then goes on to describe in detail the important action points under the new Neeranchal guidelines it proposes. While most of the issues involved have been discussed in a fairly detailed manner, some

of the important concerns that naturally emerge from the initial analysis of the rationale for and experiences from watershed projects seem to have been overlooked. Some of these issues are discussed below.³

Given that the central thrust of the programme is identified as the enhancement of sustainable development in rainfed areas, raising the productivity of different farming systems is central to the objectives of the project. But this, in turn, should be reflected in the policies for the agriculture sector in the country. It may be noted that the present policy for agriculture growth in the country continues to lay special emphasis on conventionally enhancing irrigation potential in different parts of the country. Watershed development, thus, needs to be integrated into the mainstream strategy for agriculture growth if a large part of it is going to be realised from the hitherto rainfed areas. This obviously needs that the issue of prioritisation of areas from the viewpoint of sectoral growth, regional equity, and environmental sustainability be adequately addressed.

The term "rainfed" seems to have been used in order to cover a larger area, where dry land regions are included. However, it needs to be emphasised that watershed approaches are relevant for all regions and it may be more important to evolve and focus on prioritisation criteria rather than on restricting coverage. For example, it may be noted in this context that some of the rainfed areas, especially in the sub-humid agro-climatic regions, have significantly large untapped potential for groundwater irrigation. It is quite likely that the next round of agricultural growth comes from this high potential rainfed area rather than highly drought-prone areas in dry land regions in the country and may need special attention for watershed programmes. The report does address the issue of differential approaches to watershed development across different agro-climatic conditions, but it does not do enough to integrate watershed development as the key approach for agricultural growth in general, rather than rainfed areas alone. Making this vital link may go a long way in changing the departmental mindset, which continues to view watershed as one among several separate interventions for agricultural productivity, with livelihood enhancement and natural resource management as by-products rather than as a core strategy.

Issue of Dependability

Another important area that is not given sufficient attention is that of the issue of dependability as a factor in watershed planning.⁴ It is becoming increasingly apparent that while watershed development measures per se are of great help in better years, they cannot per se utilise the full potential of drought proofing ability in bad years. Measures for risk proofing and dependability have to be actively and consciously planned so that incremental strategies and redistribution of benefits across bad and good years can minimise and pool risks. In the absence of such planning, watershed benefits are prone to fluctuate greatly with variation in rainfall and endanger the perception of possibility of stable benefits from the programme.

While the proposed guidelines recognise the importance of developing pastures (hence livestock) and forest or land for plantation, the link (and possible conflict) between an integrated natural resource management and promotion of income/employment through individual components such as crop cultivation, farm forestry, pasture development, inland fishery and forestry is not clearly recognised. In the absence of such linkage, ecological balance is likely to remain as an add-on objective rather than becoming the key feature guiding development and use of natural resources for these different components.

The strong emphasis that the report places on equity is to be welcomed. However, there is one type of inequality associated with the biophysical factors within a watershed that also needs to be given more attention. This issue arises because of the asymmetry of relations between upstream/downstream and ridge/valley portions.⁵ (Work done in upstream/ridge results in benefit for the downstream/valley portions but not vice versa.) This asymmetry within and between watersheds needs to be given proper attention, especially since it also maps on to the social and economic inequities that may exist within and between watersheds.

While the report recognises the tricky issue of interaction between groundwater catchments and micro watersheds and recognises "milli watershed" as an important unit, it does not adequately recognise the interaction between larger and micro units of watershed for planning purposes. The issue of upstream-downstream conflicts thus remains peripheral.

Since poverty is highly concentrated in forest areas (or regions with larger

proportion of forest areas),⁶ linking watershed programmes with forest management also needs special attention. The report goes a long way with the specific recommendations that it makes in respect of treatment of forest areas within watersheds; however, the requirement that the treatment plan be "in conformity with the Forest Conservation Act and the approved working plan" does not provide for an active and interactive common plan to be evolved.

The report recognises the importance of livestock development not only from the viewpoint of livelihood promotion, but also from the viewpoint of ensuring diversity and sustainable livelihood. However, the practical problems like encroachment of common property land resources (CPLRs) and the community's inability to resolve the conflicts over common property resources (CPRs) need to be recognised upfront as a deeper institutional issue rather than merely an organisational one.

While demand management for water is critical, a paradigm shift from a crop centred to a farming system centred approach may also need simultaneous changes in the macro policies for input-output prices, reforms in the energy sector, infrastructure development, and public distribution of food, etc.⁷ Such linkages with the broader policies also need to be placed on the table so that it helps initiate thinking within the framework of the long-term vision that underlies the report.

Beyond Organisation

The report seems to have taken a view that the central problem (and cause for poor performance in the past) is the absence of organisational arrangement and the right kind of agencies to implement the project. For instance, the report (pp 8-9) notes that failure of the Hariyali guidelines to clearly identify how gram sabhas will form self-help groups (SHGs) or other groups and large number of functions devolved upon it, has led to a major setback as the high expectations raised by the watershed programme have not been fulfilled. In our assessment the issue of institutional efficacy and sustainability goes much beyond the specific provision in the guidelines. The experiences even, before the Hariyali guidelines came into practice, do suggest that high expectations especially among poor remained unfulfilled mainly due to faulty planning, execution, and benefit sharing mechanisms. Watershed institutions, notwithstanding the

norms laid out in guidelines as well as the commitment of implementing agencies have fallen short of expectations in a large number of cases. This, in our view, is a more deep-rooted problem than merely an issue of organisational arrangement or guidelines pertaining to the programme. This is not to deny that the organisational problems capture a large part of the reality; it is however, not the complete reality.

Addressing some of these issues may have been useful, especially while making a case for a major jump in budgetary allocation for watershed programmes of the tune of Rs 10,000 crore per year. The issue of internal articulation of the programme is all the more important if half of the financial allocation comes from the Employment Guarantee Scheme; it then may have a potential danger of slipping off into a purely wage employment/relief works programme, even though they may be individual components of watershed programmes. It may therefore be useful to make separate provisions for developing pilot-cum-model watershed projects – one in each district, which could demonstrate this articulation in a particular agro-climatic context and also generate data for assessment of cost norms.

The organisational structure that the report details starting with a single co-ordinating agency, i.e., NASDORA through the milli watershed organisations down to the village watershed committee elected by the gram sabha is indeed a major leap forward. Nevertheless, having identified a desirable organisational structure, and in fact because of it, the watershed guidelines needed to go the distance, taking the programme beyond the mode of a departmental “project”. In our judgment, the report, despite the fairly realistic assessment of the past experience, does not make a significant headway in terms of addressing the critical issues raised above. The analysis of the past experience would have been much more meaningful if it were placed against the backdrop of a conceptual framework that would have linked the three important aspects – biophysical (resource management and ecological balance), socio-economic (productivity, agricultural growth and livelihood support); and institutional (sustainable resource use, equity and benefit-cost sharing) – and their complex interactions. Indeed, the efficacy of any one aspect depends crucially on how it interacts with the others. This feature, though widely recognised, is often overlooked by policy-makers as well as

practitioners. Similarly, enabling watershed development to become the principal means of development in the rainfed areas, by implication, brings in a host of inter-relations (for example, how does one see policies aimed at contract farming, tourism, export-oriented floriculture, greenhouses interacting with watershed development directions) that, at a minimum, need a wider perspective and conceptual and normative framework. There is a need to reiterate the interconnectedness of the biophysical, socio-economic, and institutional aspects of watershed development from within a larger conceptual and normative framework for natural resource based sustainable development. We would urge the government to take the initiative to organise extensive debates and discussions on the report amongst various stakeholders – elected representatives, concerned government departments and officials, non-governmental organisations, practitioners, academics and media – to both further develop on the report as well as build up a societal consensus about the critical issues confronting the watershed development programme and its future direction. **FW**

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Notes

- 1 ‘Drought-Prone Areas Programme and Desert Development Programme’, C H Hanumantha Rao Committee report, ministry of rural development, GoI, Delhi, 1994.
- 2 *From Hariyali to Neeranchal: Report of the Technical Committee on Watershed Programmes in India*, department of land resources, ministry of rural development, GOI, Delhi, 2006.
- 3 A comprehensive proposal on watershed development was presented and discussed in detail in a consultative meeting with the Parthasarathy Committee and organised by the Forum for Watershed Research and Policy Dialogue (ForWaRD) at Pune on July 25, 2005. See K J Joy et al, ‘Reorienting the Watershed Programme in India’ (ForWaRD, February 2006).
- 4 K J Joy and Suhas Paranjape, 2004, ‘Watershed Development Review: Issues and Prospects’, Technical Report, Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Environment and Development (CISED), Bangalore and Joy et al ‘Reorienting the Watershed Programme in India’, *ibid*.
- 5 K J Joy and Suhas Paranjape, 2004, *ibid* and Joy et al, *ibid*.
- 6 Amita Shah and Baidyanath Guru, 2003, ‘Poverty in Remote Rural Areas in India: A Review of Evidence and Issues’, CPRC-IIPA Working Paper Series No 21.
- 7 Amita Shah, 2006, ‘Mainstreaming Sustainable Agriculture in India: Some Reflections’ (draft), paper presented at National Workshop on ‘Moving towards Sustainable Agriculture: Issues for Mainstreaming Organic Farming in India’, organised at Gujarat Institute of Development Research, Ahmedabad, January 18-19.