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Danida and GOTN Water and Sanitation Demand Project - WASDEP

Rural Water Supply Rehabilitation, Sustainable Maintenance and Sanitation in Cuddalore and
Villupuram Districts of the State of Tamil Nadu, India.

WOMEN VILLAGE PANCHAYAT PRESIDENTS

- EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CAPACITATION

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I. INTRODUCTION :

Within the recent years of development cooperation the policy and concept of Participatory Development/Good Governance (PD/GG) have gained emphasis in Danida's development programmes and projects.

The foci are:

- The democratization process emphasizing the role and responsibility of civil society.
- The decentralization process emphasizing transparency and accountability as essential for sustainable development.

The principle strategy of the policy and programmes are often:

- Promotion and support of institutional capacity building.
- Promotion of active participation of male and female local community members in decision-making.
- Priority setting at the community level.

In the case of the Danida supported water and sanitation project, it is intended that institutional capacity building and consultation with and participation of villagers takes place through the village panchayats as the lowest formal decision-making body.

Gender equality is a cross-cutting principle for Danish development cooperation. This is in line with the Government of India's recognition of gender equality as a strategic objective of development as stated in the Seventh and Eight Five Year Plans with recommendations for 30 % reservation for women at all levels of Government and anti-poverty programmes. Furthermore as a follow-up commitment to the Platform for Action of the United Nations' 4. World Conference on Women 1995. India's Ninth Five Year Plan will have a sub-plan for women, as well as mainstreaming gender equality in the Five Year Plan itself.

Accordingly, empowerment of women through their capacitation institutionally, technically and financially is a high policy priority for both Danida and the Government of India.

The specific aim of this paper is to assess the process of empowerment of women village panchayat presidents (VPPs) as a specific target group for decentralised sustainable demand-driven water supply. That is, their participation in enhancement of the village panchayat as a local organisation responsible for implementing and maintaining future communal water supply facilities.

II. MAIN PRINCIPLES OF THE DANIDA SUPPORTED WATER AND SANITATION PROJECT : "Rural Water Supply Rehabilitation, Sustainable Maintenance and Sanitation in Cuddalore and Villupuram Districts of the State of Tamil Nadu, India."

It is now a common practice in Danida that the formulation and design for sustainable demand-driven water supply in rural drinking water projects and planned sector programmes need to

promote and support institutional, technical and financial capacity building at the lowest formal level i.e. village panchayat (VP). The aim being to ensure decentralisation and local ownership through a participatory approach.

Danida's country strategy for India is to support local democracy with special emphasis on ensuring the involvement of marginalized groups as a cross-cutting issue.

The project is based on a demand-driven approach with implementation through the village panchayat (grama panchayat), the lowest locally elected organisation. However, the VP has a dual function :

- Firstly, as an administrative unit for the state government;
- Secondly, as a political unit acting as an implementing agency which has replaced the block panchayat (taluk panchayat).

The project should be seen as an attempt to strengthen the capacity of the VP by means of:

- Demand-driven approach.
- Participatory strategies with participatory learning and action exercises (PLA).

This includes strengthening the capacity of poor women and men as marginalized groups to improve and maintain their public water and sanitary facilities as well as their household sanitary facilities.

There are three important characteristics of the approach which particularly need to be emphasized.

■ It intends to be demand-driven.

This means that by requesting water supply facilities and household and institutional latrines and by contributing financially, the users themselves should take ownership of the project.

■ It intends to be participatory.

This means that all parties including project staff, NGO facilitators/animators, village panchayat presidents (VPPs) and individual female and male users at village level should have an equal say in the decision-making process. Participation in planning and implementation of the project ensures community based interest, willingness, affordability and capacity to secure appropriate maintenance of the facilities.

■ It intends to empower women and the poor.

The intention is to ensure that those women and men who are seldomly listened to and who do not hold any decision-making position be given the chance to voice their concerns, needs and interests, and be taken seriously in project planning and implementation.

A possible critique of the project should be seen in several perspectives:

- At the Danida programme- and project level handled by the Royal Danish Embassy, the main concern seems to be monitoring of quantified physical target achievement and expenditure within a limited and rigid time frame. Recognition of the participatory process as an equally valuable parameter for achieving sustainable village based water supply and maintenance is merely neglected.

Thus, Danida's emphasis in overall policy documents on the human dimension, where people are seen as means and ends of development, is often disregarded as relevant success-indicators at project level.

However, an exhaustive analysis of the reason for the latter requires that conditions and obligations of development cooperation financing procedures are taken into the analysis, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

Implications of disregarding the human dimension is distortion of human project resources and activities with impetus on technical engineering aspects neglecting the participatory learning and action (PLA) aspects. Furthermore, it limits the room for manoeuvre of the project staff from field team level to Chief Adviser and Project Director.

- At the project level there are numerous constraints. A participatory approach and a PLA strategy with time- and human resource consuming activities demands both sufficient time and trained and experienced staff. Both are in short supply and emphasis on staff training has been limited.

- At the village level, a lack of experience in working in a participatory manner as well as caste and class conflicts, religion and social norms and practices which hinder participation by women and the poor in general are severe constraints.

As a political unit representing the villager's formal power group, the VP's capability and willingness to act as an unbiased implementing agency in securing equal distribution of water and sanitary facilities is a challenge.

It is experienced through project interventions that the elders, the traditional leaders and better-off male villagers in reality are the primary de facto decision-makers within the VP. They, as informal leaders, should therefore be targetted specifically in project orientation meetings and other consultations together with formal village leaders. Project experience, although limited at present, also show that such a strategy is worthwhile pursuing.

- At the GoTN level it is important to distinguish between decentralisation and the political willingness to create a genuine forum for democratic VP planning and community based governance. It is envisaged that the VP should function simultaneously as an administrative unit and as promotor of civil society development.

However, a highly political organisation as the VP is often without political experienced leadership and is as such not yet prepared or fully-equipped for this task - since the GoTN is still

in the initial process of transferring funds and providing the VP with administrative procedures and support personell.

III . THE CRITICAL MASS OF WOMEN VILLAGE PANCHAYAT PRESIDENTS (WPPs) :

With the amendment of the Panchayat Raj Act in 1993 which reserves one-third of seats for women and its adoption by the State of Tamil Nadu in 1994, women were legally empowered to exercise their political right of participating in decision-making at the village panchayat level. The Tamil Nadu Panchayat Raj Act of 1994 is both a women specific and poverty specific decentralised structure with reservation of one-third of seats for women and another one-third of seats for scheduled caste. It is a powerful mechanism for political empowerment of women as well as the realignment of political power in favour of both women in general and marginalised poor women and men in particular.

However, given the political and socio-economic base for implementation of the Act, the main issues to address are:

- The feasibility of including women in the political mainstream.
- Mainstreaming women specific issues.

One could therefore pose two questions, namely :

1. Have the VP's way of functioning changed ?
2. Has there been a priority change in topics handled by the VP's ?

Answers to these questions are premature. However, it could be argued that:

- VP's are an important entry point for village women. Women have obtained the right to the political space of the village.

The reservation of seats for women in the VP's allow women into the political space. They have the right of access to information about essential issues affecting their daily lives, such as development of water and sanitary facilities. Access to information is a first step in the empowerment process and may eventually lead to informed decision-making by the women VPP. The project is actively mobilizing women VPPs and other women leaders to participate in planning and implementation of the water and sanitary facilities in their respective villages. There are various positive experiences from villages in Cuddalore and Villupuram districts, where several project interventions are being implemented in VP's with women presidents. In March 1998 the Project is implementing physical construction work for water schemes in ten VP's, three of them have women VPP's. Initially, in February 1997, all VPP's in the Project area (8 blocks) were invited to participate in an orientation meeting. Of the 378 VPP's who participated, 129 were women. Thus, more than 1/3 of the participants were women.

If the project is successfully implemented the leadership capacity of both male and female VPP's will be enhanced in respect of management of public water supply. They will be given technical skills training in accountancy for handling of the VP fourth account (i.e. the VP water plan). Women will also as members of the water and sanitation committees and as members of user groups be trained in organizational aspects including operation of bank accounts enabling them to manage their task of future maintenance. Likewise, it should be mentioned that village women in theory are target groups for masonry, power-pump and hand-pump mechanic training.

- The internalisation of new values and norms as well as attitudinal change and practice is a long term process.

By attending women specific training sessions as well as meetings with male colleagues women VPP's have the possibility of seeing themselves as capable of project planning and implementation while at the same time combatting oppressive patriarchal norms and practices.

The fact that women VPP's and other village women are direct target groups for the project is an enormous boost to their self-esteem, confidence and acknowledgement of other male and female villagers.

An example illustrating this is the household latrine subsidy distribution ceremony, which takes place in the VP. Both husband and wife are encouraged to participate and the project staff members make an effort of ensuring that it is the wife who receives the subsidy of up to Rs. 2635 as well as co-signing for it together with the husband. Many of those women have never before in public held so much money in their hands. The project could also be instrumental in supporting women, either as individuals or as members of women sangram groups with advise on investment of their latrine subsidy in economic activities.

- Women VPP's who are organized in women groups and other women group leaders seem to capture the project concepts and messages easily and play an important role in sensitizing the villagers on appropriate water use and maintenance as well as personal and environmental hygiene and sanitation.

Project activities such as the PLA exercises and in particular the social mapping and problem analysis are great opportunities for women villagers to voice their knowledge, needs and interests of water supply facilities, being the main water drawers, -carriers and -household managers, they feel comfortable and directly involved with the issue.

The government employed village workers such as nurses, nutritionists and NGO staff at village level play an essential role as a supporting network in respect of mobilizing women for participation in development activities in general and the project activities in particular. Thus, the project benefits through their support in relation to village fund collection for the village water plan and for individual household latrines and user maintenance groups and for making it possible for the project to address and interact with women as a stakeholder group rather than as individuals at general village meetings.

After one year of sporadic interaction with some of the women VPP's and other active women

VP leaders and women group members in some of the villages of project intervention it is observed that the self-esteem of women VPP's newly elected (October 1996) has grown. They interact more freely at both informal and formal meetings with project staff and have started to participate actively in the discussion of project planning and implementation.

Women as a group of stakeholders within the political space of a VP can eventually take a collective action to overcome resistance from patriarchal norms and practices at both household and village level by taking their right to information and participation.

Conversely it can be argued that :

- In general, the social context of newly elected women VPP's is still unchanged.
- Apart from a few exceptions, women lack political education and experience and, due to the prevailing patriarchal attitudes and practices, women are inhibited when participating in mixed meetings.
- While a few women VPP's are elected in their own capacity, this is the exception. The prevailing reality is that due to the reservation rule the elected women VPP's hold the position as substitutes for their husbands whose views, rather than their own personal views, they voice.
- While women VPP's have the right to participate, many perform in a passive way leaving both initiative and decision-making to their husbands.

The right they have may be de-jure, but not de-facto, since in many communities women are often banned from participating in public meetings and, if attending, never speak up.

However, the process of change is facilitated by ensuring a critical mass of women villagers access to information and decision-making within the VP as a decentralized political structure. In addition, women are, through project activities such as PLA exercises and participation in user maintenance groups, slowly beginning to take room for manoeuvre within the political space they have obtained through the reservation bill. Given a continuous growth of self-reliance, autonomy and public authority women, as a specific stakeholder group, may eventually influence policy priorities at the VP level.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS :

The empowerment framework used in this paper includes macro-, meso- and micro levels and entails elements of welfare, access, conscientization and training, participation and control.

- At macro level, national laws are in place with the Panchayat Raj Act and 1/3 of reservation of seats for women.

- At meso level, the institutional level, women panchayat presidents are formally participating in the decentralised decision-making village structure.
- At micro level, within the individual households, the husband has to accept that it is the wife rather than himself who in legal terms is the village panchayat president.

With respect to welfare and access, the project:

- Provides safe and nearby water and sanitary facilities as basic needs.
- Promotes opportunities for conscientization and training.
- Take various actions towards combatting gender barriers.
- Facilitates information and knowledge about appropriate planning, implementation and maintenance of water- and sanitary facilities.

With respect to participation and control, the project through its gender equality principle and objective of equal distribution of water supply facilities within the VP is planned to involve women leaders and poor women and men in the process of decision-making.

Capacitation entails elements of confidence building from the status of passive observer to active participant.

Efficiency requires optimal use of all human development resources. Therefore, the poor and marginalized women and men in project areas should be targeted for confidence-building and for technical-, organizational- and financial capacity building.

Furthermore, the project should both give space and opportunity for the women panchayat presidents to challenge oppressive social structures inhibiting them in performing their duties with respect to project planning and implementation.

As a fundamental principle in project implementation it should be acknowledged that the project is based on a participatory methodology, which is value-based and the value is empowerment.