

Hydraulic Self-Rule?
Establishing Community Water Supply and Sanitation Schemes in
Rural Maharashtra, India

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For more than 25 years, participation has been perceived as **the** key to successful community-based resource management. Defined as the involvement of beneficiaries of any community development project in all aspects of project planning, implementation and operation, the concept has gripped the imagination of scholars and practitioners alike by holding out the twin prospects of the empowerment and welfare of the community in question. And despite the fact that the reality has hardly lived up to this ideal, there is still no challenging alternative to the participatory development model, and very few critiques of it.

The existing handful of critiques of participation—most of which arose only in the last several years—are of three mutually exclusive kinds. The first claims, rather cynically, that participation is merely rhetoric peddled by facilitating agencies that override legitimate community decision-making processes by exercising overall control of a project themselves. The second type highlights the role that local control plays when group dynamics lead to purportedly participatory decisions that reinforce the interests of socially and economically powerful elements within the group. A third, no less relevant critique is a methodological one, namely, that the participatory paradigm has superseded all others so effectively that most case studies, experiences and analyses are couched in terms of participation, despite the potentially greater transformative as well as explanatory strength of some of its alternatives.

Rural Water Supply & Sanitation Schemes

In a trend reminiscent of the Irrigation Management Transfers of the 1970s, the management of drinking water supply schemes is increasingly being transferred to the

small rural communities that use them, due to financial and personnel constraints faced by governments the world over.

Using the case of water supply and sanitation schemes in rural India, we show that participation is not the cure-all it is thought to be and that schemes themselves are not the best examples of voluntarily-constituted resource management regimes. Instead, based on a combination of anthropological fieldwork and economic survey data, we propose that effective and prescient leadership is more likely to account for any successful attempt at resource management and that, therefore, good leadership be considered an alternative paradigm through which to promote and measure the success of locally-implemented projects.

Jal Swarajya: new, yes, but appropriate?

The World Bank, in partnership with several state governments in India, is implementing a series of rural water supply and sanitation schemes under the aegis of a programme called Jal Swarajya, which can be glossed as “Hydraulic Self-Rule”.

The principal objective of Jal Swarajya is to make communities self-reliant in the participatory management of schemes. From a conceptual perspective, this implies a transformation of public goods into communal ones. Since a scheme along with a village’s general environment can be considered a common-pool resource, the process of implementation can be viewed as the purposive creation, by the government, of common property regimes.

In India, the state of Maharashtra is at the forefront of establishing schemes that will ultimately be managed by the communities they are meant to serve. Similar programmes in the past foundered due to less-than-committed government functionaries

and the lack of participation by beneficiaries. Hence, the World Bank's approach has three principal innovations: (1) the establishment of state-level project offices staffed by professional managers rather than career bureaucrats; (2) an insistence on community-wide participation in all phases of the project; and (3) an emphasis on sanitation alongside water supply.

But is Jal Swarajya really promoting self-rule? In other words, can common property regimes be created when there is no local enthusiasm for them?

The Mixed-Methods Approach

In order to answer these questions and study whether Jal Swarajya is being successfully implemented, we—an anthropologist and an economist—adopted a cross-fertilising approach, using techniques from both our disciplines to study project and non-project villages that displayed similar socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. A parallel approach to data collection was adopted with the ethnographic research being conducted concurrent with albeit not in the same locations as the quantitative survey.

This combination of qualitative and quantitative research is a recent trend in the social sciences and has been dubbed mixed-methods analysis. The descriptors “qualitative” and “quantitative” refer not only to the nature of the data but also the methods used in their collection as well as analysis. Mixed-methods analysis is not about the epistemological differences underlying anthropology and economics but about combining the best in evaluative and analytical methods that each subject can bring to a study.

Thus, the economic survey sought detailed information from 242 villages on demographics; socioeconomics; water sources; sanitation facilities and hygiene

behaviour; social relations and village institutions. Meanwhile, participant-observation fieldwork carried out in 12 villages for a span of two weeks per village, investigated the level of awareness regarding existing schemes; the degree of participation of individuals and groups in collective decision-making forums; prevailing sanitary and hygienic practices in the larger community with respect to age, gender, schooling and exposure; the quality of managerial, technical and financial skills within the community; and so on.

Some Case Studies in Brief

Qualitative data regarding water supply, sanitation and hygiene can be ranged along a number of scales, each of which measures a different variable. These variables may include, for example, the level of awareness or knowledge regarding prevailing WSH schemes in a village; the degree of participation of an individual or group in collective forums that convene to decide what interventions will most benefit the community; the gender of those who deal most with WSH related activities in a household; extant sanitary and hygienic practices in the larger community with respect to age, gender, schooling, exposure, etc.; legal and social controls governing the behaviour of a community as well as adherence to such rules; the nature of authority in a community, whether focussed or diffuse; the quality of managerial, technical and financial capabilities that exist among a community's members; the level of political and economic participation in community life; the size of a community, which may affect the ability to make effective and enforceable decisions; the degree of social, economic, religious and political heterogeneity in a community, which also contribute to communal cohesion; and so on. The twelve communities studied rank differently along these different scales.

Looking at the qualitative data alone, there appears to be no correlation between a village being chosen under the Jal Swarajya project and its potential for success. In fact, if success is defined in terms of universal water supply—even if this means public standposts—and universal use of toilets among the village populace, the most successful village received no support whatsoever from the government. Apart from this model village, open defecation and related unsanitary practices were widespread in 10 of the remaining 11 villages while all 11 suffered from an inadequate supply of potable water. Granted that Jal Swarajya was in the early stages of implementation but even so, no clear link can be established between community participatory efforts and the progress in service delivery observed in the six project villages studied. Instead, there seems to be a clearer relation between the quality of local leadership and the level of service delivery in all the villages, whether covered by the project or not.

It is instructive to look more closely at Sangule, the one definite success in our sample. There, a young and dynamic headman had a firm hold on a small and relatively caste-homogeneous community. About two years ago, he propagated his vision of a clean and healthy community at village meetings where all village households had to attend on pain of incurring a fine. Soon after, a system of fines was agreed for anyone caught defecating in public. However, defaulters in the early days were first given an opportunity to explain their infringement of the rules in the village assembly. Toilets were built by rich households who then subsidised the toilets of poorer households until coverage was a hundred percent. Consistent efforts at educating the community about good health and hygiene seem to have wrought a dramatic change as open defecation is now a thing of the past in Sangule. Community water points are maintained. Near the

main entrance to the village, communal toilets meant for visitors are kept locked at all times to prevent their misuse. A platform for laundry has been built downstream from water-fetching points in the nearby stream.

In contrast, there seems to be no impact of the success achieved in this village on its neighbour, which is also a non-project village. People there admire and perhaps secretly envy Sangule's achievements but have managed to do nothing about it themselves despite living barely a kilometre away. Not only does this seriously cast in doubt the much-vaunted case for exposure visits and learning-by-imitation but, in this village, the lack of any institutional framework of rules of behaviour and sanctions for contravening such rules seems to be a factor contributing to its backwardness. Most significant of all, however, political factionalism is rife and there is no clear leader.

In yet another village which is showing signs of some progress, there are nascent rules and sanctions for both water supply and sanitation which preceded the arrival of Jal Swarajya in the village but which the implementing agency chose to ignore. Again, a small coterie of leaders seems to have had a say in circumscribing the village temple compound with a brush fence in order to dissuade people from using the area as an open toilet and thereby defiling its sanctity. During fieldwork, there was also an incident of the household connection of a village resident being cut off for non-payment of dues to the water supply committee, which still oversees a reticulated supply network predating Jal Swarajya.

Discussion and Recommendations

In the two relatively successful villages, the leadership appears strong or at least somewhat cohesive. In the others, there are no dedicated leaders or no leaders at all and

even where they do exist, these men and women do not display any remarkable qualities of leadership. Hence, the lack of a determined, knowledgeable and discerning leader or leaders can not always be put down to political instability or deep-rooted social and economic differences in the community. Simultaneously though, there appears to be no correlation between efforts at promoting participatory behaviour and improving the chances of success in terms of service delivery.

Often, the reality of caste in village India creates a system of apartheid not only in water supply—with water collection points segregated by caste—but also in sanitation, as questions about the use and maintenance of communal toilets arise. In the case of Sangule, however, a strong leader who instituted a cast-iron system of rules and sanctions managed to “foster” or, more likely, enforce the rapid adoption of new behaviour.

The scope for participation is further reduced by the absolute scarcity of water in villages. Consequently, there is scant interest in collective-choice arrangements, monitoring is lax, customary sanctions are non-existent, and conflict-resolution mechanisms ineffective. Participation falls prey to the lack of material resources and technical skills of villagers. The absence of a strong local economy means that the financial ability of villagers to support their own water supply schemes is at risk. (The exception again is Sangule where an upper caste of comparatively well-educated jewellers was able and willing, under the headman’s guidance, to fund communal handpumps and toilets for their poorer, lower-caste neighbours.) Moreover, partly because of the need to constantly look for paying jobs, and partly because of the thankless nature of a post on the water committee, the spirit of voluntarism in project villages is weak.

Decades of centralised management have led to a deeply entrenched dependency on the state or on external donor agencies for the provision and management of all resources, including water for domestic purposes. This lack of a sense of ownership is often manifested in the lack of enthusiasm for participatory management. Again, despite the legal statutes providing for the creation of village water committees, these committees have not been endowed with the authority required for them to do their job effectively. They have no mandate to sanction rule breakers or resolve disputes effectively. Nor is there a clear division of managerial tasks or the authority to see them performed, among water committees, village elders and elected municipal councillors. On the flip side, water committees still lack not only the skills—financial and technical—and the creativity required to solve problems but are also not accountable for their actions to the users of schemes. The poor communication among various stakeholders only compounds this managerial and institutional mess.

As a first step, therefore, more institutional support is needed to strengthen village water committees while keeping them accountable to the people they serve. Under the aegis of Jal Swarajya, the state government should examine whether the power of local prosecuting authorities—the village moot or water committee—can be strengthened through legislation. Conversely, legislation should also ensure their accountability to ordinary community members.

Those villages that have made a success of water supply and sanitation—whether or not they are part of the Jal Swarajya programme—have not only made successful attempts to find and exploit local water sources but also spread awareness about the benefits of judicious water use and proper sanitation. They have local rules & sanctions

in place to govern the management of this sector, which must be taken into account by any implementing agency in this sector.

However, most importantly, in the case of Jal Swarajya, the World Bank has the wrong end of the stick. Rather than encouraging participation it is better off supporting effective and accountable local control.

At the village level, as opposed to the project level, an implementing agency should (1) study the ethnographic reality and look for existing frameworks of rules and sanctions in a community so that these can be made applicable in the management of a water supply & sanitation scheme; (2) use methods of accounting, monitoring, reporting and feedback that can be easily understood and used even by illiterate or semi-literate people; (3) strengthen the powers of community leadership councils— by bolstering them where they exist or empowering leaders if these powers are altogether new; and (4) simultaneously ensure that the local leadership understands it can be held accountable for its actions.

The long term vision must, of course, include participation. But service delivery entrusted to a community where there is a scant or no pre-existing foundation of information, awareness and education is a self-defeating exercise. Successive rounds of attempts to deliver water supply and sanitation to villages have already proven this.

Conclusion

Our study found that there are significant problems in the implementation of Jal Swarajya despite the fact that implementation is only in its initial stages. Participation is made difficult by the weak latent capacity of rural communities to operate and manage their own schemes and further exacerbated by widespread ignorance of good sanitary and

hygienic practices. In such circumstances, present levels of investment in educating the community about water supply and sanitation seem woefully inadequate and, in the long run, pointless. In many villages, participation, too, is more nominal than real, due to varied constraints against empowering socially, economically or educationally disadvantaged groups. In communities making a success of implementing water supply and sanitation schemes—whether self-sponsored or sponsored by the government and other agencies—the one common feature appears to be a strong and prescient leadership, which is not always elected. The attempt of researchers, therefore, should be to build up a rigorous model of leadership that will be a good predictor of success and will thus mark an improvement over the participatory model.