

# Social differences in water resource management

*Water security goes hand in hand with food security and is crucial for economic and social well-being. With consumption levels spiralling, water management strategies are necessary to meet national and communal needs. No clear consensus exists and debates on water management are polarised. Two views dominate; both approaches are technocentric and pay insufficient attention to social differences. What alternative approaches could be followed?*

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At country and regional level, the 'Big is Beautiful' view dominates. Large dams are seen as a panacea for water-scarce areas. International dam-builders assert that the social and environmental costs of these schemes are marginal when compared to the benefits of hydropower and irrigation (Biswas and El-Habr, 1993). They advocate top-down, centrally-organised hydroelectric and irrigation systems based on extra-basin transfer of water. The controversial Narmada dam in western India is a good example of such a project.

## Small watershed projects

At community and village level, the 'Small is Beautiful' view plays an important role in highlighting the socio-environmental problems of large dams, including the unequal benefits of canal irrigation (McCully, 1996). It highlights the advantages of small-scale projects based on the principles of water harvesting and watershed management, which are seen as more ecofriendly. However, there is a tendency to gloss over location-specific discrepancies arising from social difference.

## Both technocentric

In some ways both views have flaws. Both tend to be technocentric and, until very recently, supply dominated. Both also maintain an aggregated view of the community involved. Whilst the advocates of large projects focus on superlatives and inflate the actual number of beneficiaries, the advocates of small projects espouse the principles of democracy, equity and participation, forgetting that existing power relations within a community are based on different axioms. There is often a rather naive assumption that just because a project is small, it is bound to be successful and egalitarian.

In reality, both macro and micro projects often fail on social grounds because they

neglect the fact that any kind of water or ecological intervention will build on and feed into existing social and power relations. Social differences, including such variables as class, gender, caste, ethnicity, historical legacies, power, occupation and political rivalries, can hinder the smooth functioning of any water scheme.

## Weaker groups disadvantaged

Clearly, a village is rarely the homogenous and happy place it is often made out to be. There are poor and rich; weak and powerful. In order to gain legitimacy the implementing agency nearly always operates through traditional power-brokers. These are often men and from the higher castes. Only occasionally do the concerns of women, key water users, and those from lower castes come to the fore. Economically weaker groups such as the landless and pastoralists are also largely excluded from benefits.

In many small-scale schemes, targets such as technicality and environmental regeneration seem more important than issues of equity and social justice. They opt for homogenous communities or to focus on just one articulate (powerful) group. Thus, despite often lofty intentions to secure participation and equality, such projects build on skewed power and social relations.

The twenty-first century will possibly see many micro-level watershed projects. Despite the surge of ideas on watershed development, there is a danger that the problems of social differences will be ignored.

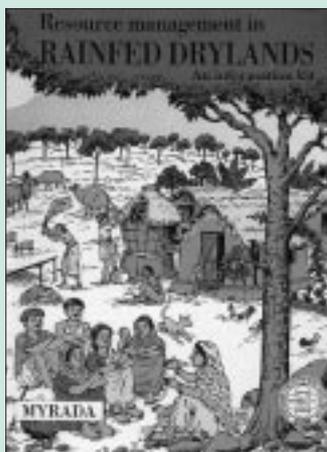
## Alternative approaches

How can this problem be avoided? Clearly, the social feasibility of a project is just as important as its technical feasibility and perhaps socioeconomic appraisals should precede technical ones. One should ensure that marginalised groups participate by according them more power in the context of intervention and by establishing solidarity with them at the very outset. This entails being aggressively partisan. Through aggressive partisanship, groups which would otherwise be excluded could be explicitly targeted (Mehta 1997). An alternative would be to opt for the more subtle but protracted process of negotiating between social actors within and outside communities. Through this negotiating process, points of conflict could be exposed and systematically worked through (Leach, Mearns and Scoones, 1997).

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## References

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## Resource management in rainfed drylands: an information kit.

1997. Bangalore : MYRADA; Silang : IIRR, 1997. 356 p. ISBN 0 942717 71 6. MYRADA, 2 Service Road, Domlur Layout, Bangalore 560071, India; International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR), Y.C. James Yen Center, Silang, Cavite 4118, Philippines.

The International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) conducted in the past decade about 20 workshops on different topics, all resulting very attractive, practical information kits. This last one in this series was produced at a workshop jointly organised by IIRR and MYRADA, a South India based NGO. It describes successful agricultural strategies for drylands, areas with less than 800 mm per year rainfall. In India, the largest part of the country consists of rainfed dry areas, and hence it is not surprising that a lot of research and successful field action in dryland agriculture originates from there. This manual compiles these Indian experiences with farmer-tested, dryland technologies. They involve traditional approaches to natural resource management, gender issues, soil and water conservation, crop management, soil management techniques, alternative land use systems, post-harvest practices and agricultural implements and a concluding chapter on innovative approaches in participation, extension and institutional partnerships. Very accessible, practical information, richly illustrated with excellent drawings. (IHG)