



Farmers talk about their experiences with the Minister of Mahaweli Development at a national seminar in 1999. Photo: MASL

Scaling up participatory development in agricultural settlements

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The Promoting Multifunctional Household Environments (PMHE) Project was operational in Mahaweli System C, Sri Lanka, from 1991 to 2000. It was a bi-lateral development cooperation between the governments of the Netherlands and Sri Lanka, with consultancy services provided by ETC. During this period, it developed and scaled up a strategy for sustainable agricultural development based on farmer participation.

Introduction

The Mahaweli Development Programme (MDP) is considered the most ambitious development initiative undertaken in Sri Lanka in the recent past. Five major dams constructed on the largest river “Mahaweli” supplied irrigation water to an area of 144,000 ha, deemed unproductive due to lack of water. Nearly 125,000 families were settled in the downstream areas during the early and mid '80s – many of them poor, landless peasants who left their homelands and journeyed to the “promised land” with the dream of becoming proud owners of a plot of irrigated paddy land. Each settler family was entitled to 1 ha irrigated lowland and 0.2 ha. rainfed highland for a homestead.

The Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka (MASL) was the government agency set up for the sole purpose of making this programme work. It played a central role in the construction of irrigation and other infra-structure, in human settlement and in the development (also agricultural) of these vast settlement areas under its purview. Administratively, the area is divided into Systems (B, C, G, H etc), Blocks and Units. An Unit is more or less comparable to a village with an average of 150 resident farm families. Several units form a Block, and several Blocks form a System. Around 11,000 employees arranged in a strictly hierarchical order managed this vast programme until the agency underwent restructuring in the late '90s and 60% of them were made redundant. Yet, the MASL remains to be one of the biggest

government agencies, which as a river-basin authority, will continue to be involved in management of these areas in partnership with farmers and other stakeholders.

The PMHE Project entered the Mahaweli arena in the early '90's, when the “Mahaweli dream” had begun to blur. Initial euphoria amongst settler farmers had given way to grievances and apathy – they were far from prosperous; in fact many of them were deep in debt and some had even lost the right to their land. Increasing costs to counter falling yields and poor market prices made paddy farming unprofitable. Socially, too, the settlers were severely affected. There was hardly any feeling of community; disconnected families struggled in isolation to make ends meet. And it was in this context that PMHE was given the task of developing a strategy for sustainable agricultural development for the Mahaweli settlements.

Identifying bottlenecks to development

A 9-month action-research undertaken in close cooperation with settler families in 2 units of System C helped PMHE get a deeper understanding of settler life and identify the specific bottlenecks to development. These were classified under the following broad categories: inability to adjust to new surroundings due to background and origin; blue print approach to development adopted by the MASL which did not meet site specific requirements; insufficient income from paddy farming leading to serious indebtedness; poor social cohesion and lack of organisational capacity among farmers; dependency on the MASL due to prolonged assistance given in an attempt to cushion the “settling in” process.

Developing a strategy for participatory development

These problems that hindered settler development and methodologies to overcome them formed the basis for the 3-year implementation phase that followed. PMHE worked in 12 settlement Units in 6 Blocks of System C during this period.

Most of the work was at grassroot level and of an experimental nature. Experiences gained in the field contributed to developing, through continuous adaptation and together with farm families, a strategy for participatory development that was suited to the specific socio-economic and ecological conditions of the area and its inhabitants. It hinged on the principles of LEISA, participatory methodologies including PRA and PTD, organisational development and gender. The strategy consisted of two main interventions at farmer-level - **sustainable resource management and community strengthening** – following a process approach. Farm planning, farmer experimentation, farmer to farmer exchange, community mobilisation through small self help groups and farmer organisation strengthening were the key components of these interventions.

The changes that took place in the 12 Units were evidence to the success of the strategy. Integration of crops and livestock on the farms resulted in improved family nutrition, higher family income and a better microclimate; farmers were gaining more confidence in finding site-specific solutions to their agricultural problems through experimentation. Small groups proved to be an excellent forum for building self-reliance, forging a collective spirit and forming the basis for community strengthening. Small group members were gaining the confidence and the ability to bargain for better prices, demand for services, set up enterprises, build linkages for development purposes etc. In short, a process of sustainable agricultural development based on farmer participation was set in motion.

Sustaining and spreading participatory development

Having demonstrated that sustainable agricultural development can be achieved within Mahaweli settlements, it was now important to find ways of sustaining and spreading the process of participatory development. Real success was in ensuring that the many thousands of farm families in Mahaweli settlements would have similar benefits. As such, much of PMHE's energies in its final phase (1996-2000) was focused on creating the conditions in which the strategy would be adopted and adapted by the important development actors in Mahaweli settlements, particularly the farm families and the staff of the MASL. Three large lines of action for scaling up can be distilled from PMHE's experience:

- Strengthening the capacity of settler farmers to sustain and spread elements of the strategy
- Institutionalising the strategy for participatory development within MASL
- Sharing the experiences with a wider circle of development actors beyond MASL

Strengthening the capacity of settler farmers

Providing farmers the knowledge and skills to support other farmers in activities such as farm planning, farmer experimentation, group building etc. was a very effective way of sustaining the process of participatory development. Several methods were used.

a. Farmer to farmer exchange, as an integral part of most interventions, ensured that farmers passed on their experiences and innovations. Farmer to farmer exchange took a variety of forms: group discussions, inter-group events, cross visits, visits to resource farmers, farmer presentations etc.

b. Developing the skills of selected farmers to be village level extensionists/facilitators was another way of ensuring the horizontal spread of the strategy. This also took several forms, depending on the motivation and interests of the farmers. **Praja Sevakas** or community servers were those men and women who had a vision and were interested in being facilitators of the process of community development. As such they were given an all-round training and regular backstopping for an extended period of time, so that they could carry on the process of



Interaction between farmers and trainees at a training session of MASL staff. Photo: PMHE

community development even without external assistance. Community mobilisation, Farm planning and experimentation, participatory development and the use of relevant tools, basic accounting and financial management, village development planning and monitoring, small scale business development were among the many topics covered in their training. These Praja Sevakas took an active role in building their communities. Most importantly they were able to identify and analyse problems with the people, find suitable solutions, plan and implement activities, get the services required, monitor and evaluate activities collectively and share the experiences with others. **Resource farmers** on the other hand were farmers who were interested in sharing their knowledge and experiences in a particular area of activity like experimentation, livestock keeping, crop husbandry. These farmers were given additional support in further developing their skills, not only in agriculture but also in aspects such as communication, group moderation etc. Some among them were trained as facilitators of farm planning and were able to work with groups of farmers in developing sustainable farm plans. Others were able to function as village level livestock extensionists capable of providing basic veterinary services, supporting farmers in building marketing linkages etc. The capacities of the *Praja Sevakas* and Resource Farmers were recognised and acknowledged not only by their fellow villagers, but also by the MASL and many outsiders. Respected as trustworthy and able leaders of the community, they were appointed to office in farmer organisations and looked after the interests of the community. Their technical prowess had earned them a reputation far from home – they were approached not only by farmers, but also by private companies, NGOs etc. who needed farmer-level liaison to support their development ventures in the region.

c. Farmer seminars and workshops were yet another way of getting more farmers involved. *Praja Sevakas* and Resource Farmers often took an active role in such events. Unlike the small-scale farmer to farmer exchanges, these events attracted much larger numbers of farmers from a wider geographical area. Considering that most of the Mahaweli systems are newly settled and sparsely populated areas, these events were excellent for making new contacts and forging new partnerships.

Institutionalising the strategy within MASL

The process of participatory development could not be sustained within the Mahaweli systems, unless the MASL supported it. Having mentioned earlier the strictly hierarchical nature of the organisation, its blue print approach to development and its paternalistic attitude towards the settlers, taking on an approach to development based on farmer participation required fundamental changes. These changes had to be brought about at all levels – enabling field staff to take on the role of development

facilitators through a process of training and backstopping, assisting middle-level staff to manage participation and lobbying at the higher-level to bring about favourable conditions for participatory development.

a. Training and backstopping of staff: Training was a key element of the capacity building process. Nearly 100 training workshops were conducted in the period January 1995 to June 2000. The main subject areas covered by the training were Participatory Rural Appraisal, Farm Planning, Participatory Technology Development, Community Mobilisation, and Organisational Development. The curricula for these training programmes were tailor-made to the requirements of MASL staff, with aspects of Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation and Gender built in. Training was initially undertaken with those officers who worked in direct contact with farmers at Unit and Block level and then worked up and across the many layers of the hierarchical structure to the top. Contents of the training programmes varied according to staff category - field level training was usually much longer with a large component of field-work, whilst shorter workshops or seminars were used for managerial levels. However, most training events included an opportunity for trainees to interact directly with farmers. Training of trainers was done simultaneously in order to build up the capacity for training in participatory methodologies within the organisation. Another important activity in this regard was the preparation of systematic training manuals, which could be used by the MASL trainers. *Backstopping* followed training as another key element of the capacity building process. It facilitated the application of newly gained knowledge and skills. It took many forms and evolved over the period to consist of sharing sessions for trained staff, post-training refreshers, joint monitoring of post-training assignments, on-the-job guidance to trained staff in routine activities and training impact assessment. *Support to the Human Resources Development Unit* of MASL was a crucial activity that tied up, in a sense, all the input into capacity building of staff. As the unit responsible for all training activities within the organisation, it was important to provide them with the knowledge and skills required not only to continue training and backstopping, but also to adapt training to meet the changing requirements of the organisation and its staff.

b. Support to manage participation: Field Officers who adopted a participatory working style needed to be understood and supported by their superiors. Within the MASL hierarchy, this was primarily in the hands of Block Managers, who supervised all field staff in a given Block. Institutional Development and Organisational Strengthening (ID/OS) was considered a very useful tool for Blocks Managers in stimulating the changes required towards managing participation. Being trained in ID/OS, Block Managers were provided backstopping in a variety of applications, i.e. analysing the activities of the Block office in relation to all actors in the community and finding areas for networking, analysing the tasks and skills of Block staff to determine a more efficient use of human resources, incorporating participatory action planning for preparation of annual and seasonal Block plans etc. This intervention brought about noteworthy changes - farmers' priorities were being incorporated into plans, collaboration was sought with other actors (NGOs, government line ministries and farmer organisations) in development activities, Block staff were working more effectively and barriers among them were being broken down as collective goals were pursued.

c. Creating conditions to sustain the process: The full potential of all changes at field and middle level could only be realised if the strategy for participatory development was fully integrated

within the MASL. It was only then that the benefits could reach settlers in all Mahaweli Systems. Here again PMHE worked on many fronts and with many key persons, mainly at the higher levels of the organisation. *Seminars and workshops* were specially prepared to provide decision-makers with a clear picture of field developments and raise issues that needed attention. These were also occasions in which farmers were given an opportunity to discuss matters directly with higher officials of MASL. *Close collaboration with sectional heads* was very important in keeping a continuous and open dialogue about the process of participatory development and its implications. Such dialogue helped to incorporate their views and led to strong support for the strategy. Many openings for integrating elements into routine MASL programmes were found. For instance farmer to farmer extension as a means of sharing experiences and farm planning as a tool for sustainable resource management were integrated into many field level agricultural programmes. *Policy advocacy* was another step in creating the legal framework for further expansion of the strategy into other Mahaweli Systems. It built on the foundations laid through awareness raising and dialogue and resulted in key elements of the strategy being included into MASL policy for rural development. The new agricultural extension policy of the MASL, for instance, incorporated participatory analysis and farm planning for identifying crops and extents to be cultivated in a given season, farmer experimentation as a means of finding site-specific solutions, farmer-to-farmer extension as a means of sharing experiences, participatory monitoring and evaluation methods for end-season evaluations etc. Similarly, the small group approach to community mobilisation and the participatory analysis and planning approach to strengthening farmer organisations were integrated into MASL's guidelines for Farmer Organisation strengthening.

Sharing experiences with a wider audience

Although MASL was the main focus of PMHE's efforts to institutionalise participatory development, it certainly did not exclude others who could benefit from shared experiences.



A Praja Sevaka conducting training for a small group of farmers.
Photo: PMHE

Networking, workshops and seminars, visits of interested persons and documentation were some of the main activities undertaken for this purpose.

a. Networking: Two networking experiences deserve special mention as being very fruitful. The first is the *PID/PRA* (participatory interactions in development/ participatory rural appraisal) *Network* in which PMHE played a very active role for many years as a member of the working committee. The Network consisted of organisations and individuals, practitioners and

trainers in participatory methodologies involved in a variety of sectors – health, agriculture, rural development, relief and rehabilitation. This meant that a wide range of experiences was made available for sharing. This Network made a considerable contribution to promoting participatory development in Sri Lanka by sharing and publishing experiences, grooming national trainers and providing access to resources. MASL was introduced to the Network by PMHE and together were able to share some of the unique experiences in using participatory methodologies for development in the Mahaweli settlements. The PTD (participatory technology development) Working Group is the second successful networking experience. PMHE and two other projects working in the field of sustainable agriculture founded the Working Group, which grew to accommodate other projects, government as well as non-governmental organisations. Apart from sharing experiences and learning from each other in a very systematic manner, the Working Group was instrumental in creating a pool of national trainers in PTD. PMHE made a significant contribution to this training effort, which was also used to train MASL staff. These efforts of the PTD Working Group was commended in a study undertaken by a leading university in Sri Lanka to ascertain the effectiveness of training in participatory extension methodologies on the working styles of government field extension officers.

b. Workshops and seminars: The workshops and seminars that fell into this category were mostly at national or regional level. Some were joint initiatives of the above-mentioned networks, and the others were organised by PMHE alone. But all of them had the purpose of bringing the message of farmer participation in sustainable development to those who had a stake in policy formulation and decision making, among them politicians, directors of government agencies, representatives of the donor agencies, heads of research institutes, academics etc. A notable feature in all these events were the presentations of farmers, which gave much more credibility to the message that was being promoted.

c. Visits of interested persons: Although it appears an insignificant aspect, visits were actually a very tangible way of promoting participatory development. Unlike in any of the other options for sharing, visitors could go right down to where things were happening – to the field and talk to the farm families. Despite certain logistical constraints, visits were by far fact the best exposure to the facts. Even the hardest of sceptics were unable to leave without having food for thought.

d. Documentation: Apart from documentation that was prepared with a specific focus on the MASL, resource material of a general nature was created for the purpose of scaling up. The lack of relevant material in the national language *Sinhala* prompted PMHE to take on the *translation* of a number of key books that covered the basics of participatory development and were simple enough for use by field workers and farmers. *Case studies* of farmers' experiences published in several periodicals reached a wide audience within and outside the country. More comprehensive information on the strategy as a whole, or important elements thereof, were written up in *reports, books etc.* that were widely distributed. Special mention in this regard should be given to the video produced by PMHE that provided a concise account of how the strategy was developed and efforts in scaling up within the MASL. The original made in English was versioned into *Sinhala* for use in Sri Lanka, and in German and French to fulfil the requests of many who wanted to use it in other parts of the world. The video has been screened at many events, national and international, and been distributed to many development organisations worldwide.

Some reflections on scaling up

In reading an article of this nature, there is a tendency to imagine that scaling up was indeed a logically-arranged package of activities which were implemented quite straight forwardly. This, however, was not the case at all. Much of what is written in this article evolved over a couple of years and through a process of action and reflection. Yet, PMHE gained a good measure of success in scaling up - starting with a few farm families in 2 Units of System C the strategy was adapted by the MASL for implementation in all Mahaweli areas, counting direct or indirect benefits to thousands of settler farm families.

In evaluating the success of such a programme, attention would usually be given to the more obvious aspects such as the training of field staff, systematic documentation, capacity building of farmers etc. But there are certainly other, less significant aspects, which deserve mention.

Flexibility - PMHE, like any other bi-lateral project, had its objectives, interventions, activities etc. set out in neat planning matrices. But in implementation, PMHE was able to adopt a flexible approach that allowed for responding to changing conditions, capitalising on new opportunities and finding the right entry points.

Perseverance - What PMHE undertook was primarily a task of transforming people - changing their attitudes and perceptions through an intensive process of capacity building, the results of which are hard to show and quantify in the short term. This was at times a dilemma for PMHE as a time-bound, donor-funded project. It was only sheer perseverance and commitment that enabled PMHE to get the time it needed to complete, satisfactorily, the task it had begun.

Meeting felt need - The strategy developed through PMHE interventions filled a vacuum in the Mahaweli settlements - it found solutions to the most pressing economic, social and environmental problems of the settlers. As such it found favour, not only in the eyes of settler farmers, but also the MASL.

Shared ownership - Although PMHE invested substantial energy in developing the strategy, it avoided falling into the trap of claiming total ownership to it. In a true sense of participation, it created an environment in which farmers and MASL staff could say, "we did this ourselves". This is not to say that PMHE was not proud of its achievements, but rather to emphasise the importance of not holding on to findings in a way that hinders the spread.

Conclusion

What better way to conclude this article than with the words of a farmer who wrote this poem in farewell to PMHE:

*"All the efforts that PMHE took
to support and guide us, to make us aware
To motivate us towards sustainable development
We will value as precious gems*

*The farmers who were fallen
Got strength to stand up
We respect immensely
PMHE's input in this*

*Even though you leave us now
What you gave us will live on
And be given to the next generation
As a heritage that lives on"*

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