



IMPACT OF WATERSHED DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN WARDHA DISTRICT OF MAHARASHTRA

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Abstract

Watershed development has been conceived as a strategy for protecting the livelihoods of the people living in the fragile ecosystems experiencing soil degradation and moisture stress. Watershed development has a potential to improve the land, water, fragile natural resources and can result in better yields in agriculture thereby increasing the food production. Formation of self-help groups, Watershed Associations, Watershed Committees and Credit Management Groups in village helps in effective planning and implementation of the program and to achieve the objectives. The participation of the community in watershed projects is desirable to make them objective oriented and sustainable. Watershed development can be looked upon as a means to increase the agricultural production and addressing to the issues of ecological degradation in rainfed and resource poor areas. Wardha district of Maharashtra was purposively selected for the study. The Watershed Development programs appears to be weak with regard to community organization for maintaining the assets created as well as continuing the program through user groups and people's involvement. Grounding of different physical activities seems to be underway before proper groundwork in the watershed villages, in terms of creating homogeneity among the community towards holistic approach for developing the area is needed. The analysis of women's empowerment shows that the women participation was not adequate.

Watershed development is a series of biophysical and social interventions aimed at restoring a degraded ecosystem to ensure livelihoods for the community depending upon it. However, the issue of impacts on livelihood entered watershed discourse and practice very recently. Bringing the livelihood issue into focus, to a large extent as well as to ensure the streamlining of the poverty reduction, sustainable ecosystem resources a precondition. Watershed development has been conceived as a strategy for protecting the livelihoods of the people living in the fragile ecosystems experiencing soil degradation and moisture stress. The aim has been to ensure the availability of drinking water, fuel-wood and fodder, also to raise the income level and employment opportunities for marginal farmers and the landless people (Rao 2000, Paranjape, 1988). Moreover, through literature reviewed, it can be summarized that, watershed development has a potential to improve the land, water, fragile natural resources and can result in better yields in agriculture thereby increasing the food production. But, the landless and the marginal farmers have a minimal share in such success. Hence, it becomes imperative that due attention should be given for their progress and involvement in the watershed activities while framing the program objectives and also should be strictly followed. From the reviews it is also clear that peoples' participation in the watershed program is a key factor for its success. Formation of self-help groups, Watershed Associations, Watershed Committees and Credit Management Groups in village helps in effective planning and implementation of the program and to achieve the objectives. Equity is also another important aspect to be focused while looking at the framework of the objectives of the program to be achieved. In most of the studies done earlier in this regard, it is more or less evident that women are less involve in the actual decision making and other leading roles. There is a need for greater awareness of equity issues related to the landless, the women and the marginal farmers (resource poor) to be ensured a share of the increased resources that watershed generates.

Many impact assessments of watershed programs have been undertaken covering both biophysical and socio-economic program aspects. Increase in crop area, cropping intensity, increase in crop yields, changes in the cropping pattern, increase in irrigated area, increase in the productivity of common/ waste lands due to increase in green cover and therefore increase in fodder and fuel from them, change in livestock composition, change in water levels leading to changes in withdrawal rate, increase in number of wells, improvement in water quality, improvement in soil quality and reduction in soil erosion, improvement in environment, improvement in employment opportunities, changes in labour requirements, changes in income levels and livelihoods and finally changes in the socio-economic structure of the community are some of the changes that could be expected to emerge from watershed programs. All these indicators of impact have a direct relation to the livelihood issues of the community inhabiting the specific watershed. Augmented natural resources from watershed development are expected to contribute towards improved livelihood opportunities for all strata and stakeholders.

Implication of Watershed

Environment and development are interlinked issues. The degradation of environment increases poverty and reduces the standard of living. About eighty percent of the rural community meets their food, fodder and fuel demands from their local environment and this contribute to an increasing pressure on the fragile biotic eco-system in the absence of adequate and



appropriate management to conserve the land and water resources. Hence, watershed can facilitate all planners, managers to consider all inputs, processes and outputs systematically, something essential for a holistic development approach. Such an approach is also logical from the economic point of view. Not only does the watershed have a definite determining role in shaping the basic economic potential, it also determines which activities will be internally compatible (**Paranjape 1988**). In 1994, the Ministry of Rural Development of the govt. of India came out with a set of guidelines for watershed development programs, which is basically a people centred policy. The participation of the community in such projects is desirable to make them objective oriented and sustainable. In the 1970's, watershed management was dependent on the bio-physical framework which is mostly based on top-down approach (**Rhoades and Elliot, 2000**).

Research Methodology

The study was conducted in Wardha district of Maharashtra. This watershed was started during the year 2007 under the NABARD Holistic Watershed Development Program (NHWD) in a phased manner. The respondents were chosen by method of stratified random sampling taking into account the total number of households, population, and different sections of the village community. Wardha district was purposively selected because the program was already implemented in this district. Arvitaluka was selected based on maximum population of resource poor among the six clusters.

Result and Discussion

Impact of the Watershed Development Projects on Women's Participation and Empowerment

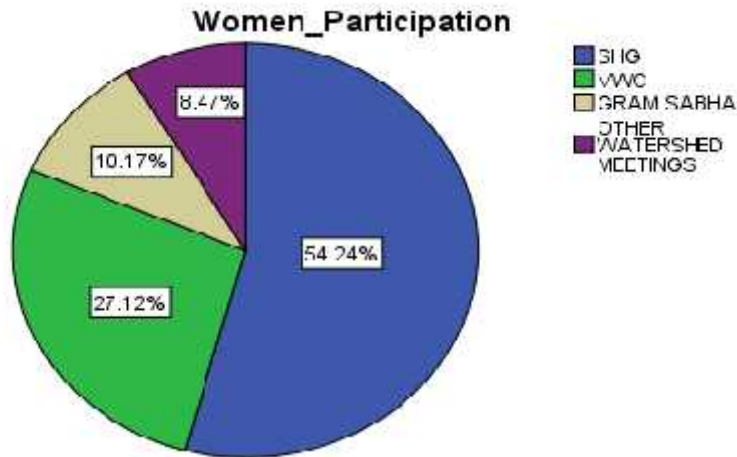
Self-help groups (SHG's) have emerged as one of the major strategies for women's empowerment. Many successful watershed development projects have highlighted the benefits of formation of women's groups for building confidence and focusing on developmental issues. It becomes imperative for taking steps on part of the government and other agencies involved in such projects to focus on skill development and awareness generation, promoting economic development through income generating activities, inculcating saving and credit management activities among the resource poor.

Table 1: Distribution of the Respondents according to Women's Participation in Various Institutions

Institutions	Frequency	Percentage
Self Help Group	32	54.2
Village Watershed Committee	16	27.1
Gram Sabha	6	10.2
Other watershed meetings	5	8.5
Total	59	100

Women cannot be ignored while devising various policies for rural and socio-economic development therefore, treating the women with equality of opportunities is very much required. In this section, results of the findings related to the extent of participation of rural women through income generating activities (IGA) carried out in the watershed cluster of study villages and constraints that are experienced by rural women in their empowerment are discussed. It shows from the Table 1 that majority of the women (54.2 %) have a participation in SHG followed by 27.1 per cent in VWC, only 10.2 per cent women participate in the gram sabhas whereas 8.5 per cent participate in other watershed meetings. In the watershed cluster about 26 SHG's are functional and almost all the women of the cluster are a member of some SHG. The result regarding the participation of women in the SHG meetings shows a comfortable trend and the increasing awareness of the village women about savings and to utilize the savings for the household purpose. Many of the women have availed credits from the SHG for the maintenance of their houses for children's education, health related matters of the family, to start small income generating activities by purchasing cows/buffaloes/goats/sheep/ poultry birds, etc. SHG has come up with a helping hand for the rural women. Also, a large amount of indebtedness due to the trap of moneylenders is minimized to a great extent and is almost negligible. To have a maximum number of participant members in SHG meetings more awareness should be generated among the members regarding various schemes available to them through the SHG's and also giving knowledge and skill required for different income generating activities, etc., should be incorporated in the agenda.

The participation of women members in the VWC meetings is found to be much less as compares to the SHG meetings. The reasons for the same as shared by the respondents are that all the financial matters are looked after by only the president and the vice president of the VWC and they are the major beneficiaries of watershed project.



It is also revealed during the field observations and focused group discussions with the villagers that most of the office bearers of the VWC are big farmers/ politically powerful persons in the village. So the participation of the resource poor and especially the women is obviously less. As it is mentioned in various watershed program guidelines and project designs, VWC plays central role in watershed planning, implementation, management, monitoring, financial control and maintenance of the watershed activities. Hence, it is expected that VWC should represent and include all socio-economic groups irrespective of caste/ class/ religion/ financial status/ landholding, etc., which is not happening.

As per the findings from the results it is clear that the participation of women in the gram sabha is still lesser than the SHG and the VWC meetings. The reasons found that the decision making process was male dominated in the gram sabhas and the issues rose by the women members were taken less seriously. Many of the women respondents revealed that they participated in the gram sabhas during the initial phases of the project but later on their participation become less. As the gram sabha is the ultimate decision making body and all the major decisions regarding the watershed activities are to be taken in the gram sabha itself, hence, peoples participation is very much necessary. The participation of the adult members in the watershed area is an essential component and should be encouraged. Participation in the gram sabha is therefore much needed irrespective of the barriers of caste and gender for the overall success of the program.

The Samyukt Mahila Samiti (SMS) is an apex body formed out of the all women SHG's. This body is responsible for coordinating activities of the SHG's and also channelizing the resources needed for women's development activities. Most of the women's development funds are with the bank account of the SMS. The low participation of women in the SMS can be attributed to the fact that it is not independently active in the village and most of the functions are managed by the members of the VWC.

Table 2: Distribution of the Women Respondents according to Training Attended

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Not undergone any training	33	55.9
Undergone one training	22	37.3
Undergone more than one training	4	6.8
Total	59	100

It is noticed from the Table 2 that majority (55.93%) of the respondents had not undergone any training followed by one training (37.29 %) and the remaining (6.78 %) have undergone more than one training for income generation activities. This level of training is reached with the help of the initiatives taken by the PIA/ NGO to provide training about IGA in order to strengthen the SHGs.

Table 3: Distribution of the Women Respondents according to Monthly Savings

Description	Frequency	Percentage
No saving on earning	11	18.6
Upto 30 % of earning	33	55.9
Upto 50% of earning	15	25.4
Total	59	100



It is evident from the Table 3 that majority (55.93 %) of the respondents saves up to 30 per cent of their monthly income followed (25.42 %) save up to 50 per cent of their monthly earnings and the rest (18.64 %) are unable to save any monthly income. The reasons for the poor performance in this regard can be attributed to the fact that the annual income of most of the respondent women is up to the level of sustenance; especially in context of the resource poor women and the activities done by them for income generation are not yielding high profits. They somehow manage to meet the household needs by such income generation activities.

It is a good trend to save the income and to utilize it in times of necessity and should be strengthened by meaningful sources of income generation for the women.

Table 4: Distribution of the Women Respondents according to Women Involvement in Income Generating Activities

The table 4 shows that a majority of women are involved in self employment (33.9 %) for the income generation followed by 28.8 per cent doing watershed works, women doing agricultural labour accounts for 16.9 per cent of the total whereas, poultry accounts for 8.5 per cent and cows/buffalo rearing accounts for the same 8.5 per cent of the income generation and the rest 3.4 per cent women are involved in goat/sheep rearing.

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Livestock rearing (cow and buffalo)	5	8.5
Poultry	5	8.5
Goat/ sheep rearing	2	3.4
Watershed workers	17	28.8
Agricultural labour	10	16.9
Self employment	20	33.9
Total	59	100

The results from the table 37 revealed that most of the women are engaged in self employment like sewing clothes on sewing machine, small shops of stationary and general items, etc., The reasons for the same can be attributed to the ease of availability of credit for such activities by the NABARD and other financial institutions of work. Other reasons for the rest of the income generation activities by the women are due to the availability of watershed works and agricultural labour and also access to credit for activities like poultry, goat/sheep rearing and cows/buffalo rearing.

Table 5: Distribution of the Women Respondents according to Access to Credit

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
No access to credit	16	27.1
Access to credit	43	72.9
Total	59	100

It is noticed from the Table 5 that majority (72.88 %) of the respondents had access to credit. While the remaining (27.12%) do not have any access to credit.

The reasons for the access to credit can be attributed to the fact the NABARD and other financial institutions are giving loans for income generating activities for the social development of the rural masses through SHG's. But it is also noted that such credit is very less and is insufficient to start a respectable income generation activity for which more finance is required.

Table 6: Distribution of the Women Respondents according to the Benefits Derived by Women Respondents

Benefit	Frequency	Percentage
Training on Livelihoods	16	27.1
Enhanced social interaction	20	33.9
Awareness about children's health and education	16	27.1
Awareness about local issues and natural resource conservation	3	5.1
Decision making roles in village issues	4	6.8
Total	59	100

As evident from the table 6 that majority of the women respondents (33.90 %) were enjoying enhanced social interaction in the village community followed by 27.12 per cent of the women have undergone training on livelihood generation activities and a same (27.12 %) of the women became aware about their children's health and education due to increase awareness



about the same. Very less women (6.8 %) enjoy decision making roles in their homes and society and the remaining 5.1 per cent women became aware about the local issues and natural resources conservation in the village. It is also noticed that the benefits are derived by most of the aware women and who are keen in As they were earning substantial income, most of the beneficiaries could able to earn respect from the society as well as from family members. Having self-employed and earned additional income, the self confidence in these women was also increased.

Table 7: Distribution of the Women Respondents according to the Constraints Faced by Women Respondents

Constraints	Frequency	Percentage
Illiteracy	29	49.2
Multiple roles	19	32.2
Health facilities	8	13.6
Family restrictions	3	5.1
Total	59	100

As evident from the table 7, that illiteracy (49.2 %) among the respondents was as a major constraint in women's participation/empowerment in the watershed cluster village. Doing multiple roles in homes, fields and other works is another major constraint which is revealed by 32.2 per cent of the women respondents. Lack of proper medical/health facilities is a constraint for 13.6 per cent of the women whereas 5.1 per cent of the women find family restrictions to involve in social matters as a constraint to their participation/empowerment. Also, it is only woman who has to work in household activity. Therefore, rural women were over burdened with dual responsibilities which are also major constraints in the path of women empowerment.

Conclusion

The community should have an increased role/say in the project related issues such as finance management, local contribution etc. More devolution of authority should occur in congruence with the strategies for increased democratization of the community. For having an effective and empowered participation it requires strategies for democratization and decision-making at the community level. In most of the cases it is observed that most often a couple of watershed committee members are involved in decision-making and other institutions promoted as part of watershed development seldom have any role in the decisions. Even though formation of SHGs and UGs are considered a precondition for watershed development and formation of watershed committees, they hardly have a role in decisions regarding the project administration. The WDP programs appears to be weak with regard to community organization for maintaining the assets created as well as continuing the program through user groups and people's involvement. Grounding of different physical activities seems to be underway before proper groundwork in the watershed villages, in terms of creating homogeneity among the community towards holistic approach for developing the area is needed. The analysis of women's empowerment shows that the women participation was not adequate. Mostly, women lack in mobility, voice in decision making at home or in community. Same is the case with landless members. It seems that the livelihood conditions of landless communities have not been significantly improved. Apart from some minor labour work, there was nothing much to improve their livelihood.

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