

A Prosperous Watershed Management Program in Mysore, India, and Sustainability

by Christine Etienne¹



Watershed management is vital for the survival of many drought prone villages in India. Fortunately, a local NGO in Mysore considers water management as a top priority, and its target-orientated project is a real success with regard to the technical part. The experience may serve as a model for a professionally implemented project. Villagers have been associated and participated well in terms of carrying out the work. However, they never were the real protagonists and main actors. The debilities in the local NGO's concept of participation and social ownership threaten now the sustainability.

1. Background

Since 1997 Caritas Switzerland has been supporting a watershed management project in the South of India through a local NGO. The three participating villages Bisalavadi, Channapanapura and Kodiugane in Karnataka State are located in a drought prone region and have a large number of families who are very poor and belong to the (former) caste of the untouchable. The majority of the target people are either landless or farmers with marginal landholdings. Productivity is low, and cultivation depends on rains, which are erratic or insufficient.

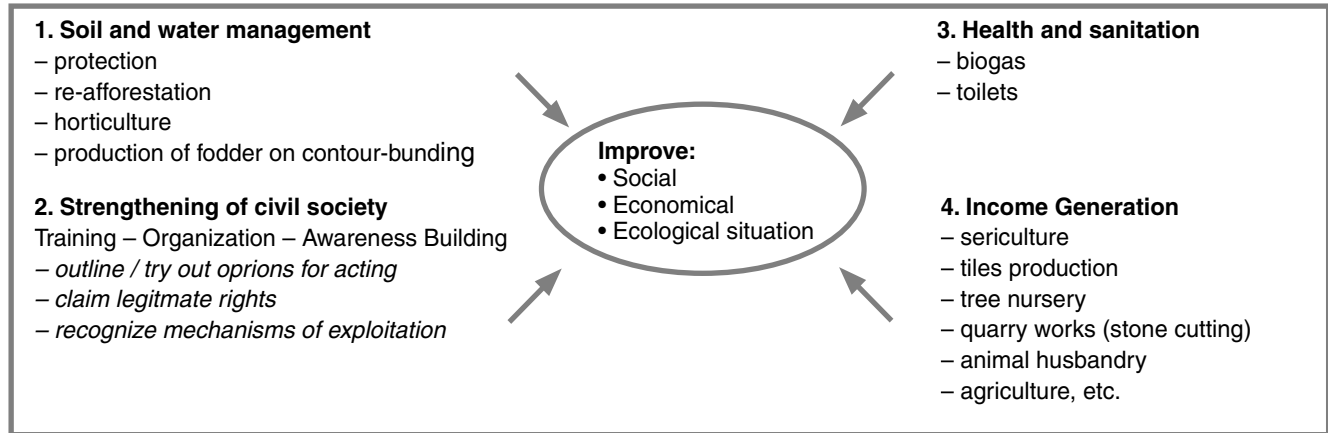
2. Objectives and activities

At the beginning the project has made a strategic choice of focusing on land and water conservation by watershed management through earthen bunding, stone bunding, gully plugs, earthen dams, check dams, percolation tanks, desiltation of tanks, community irrigation bore wells and tree planting. Organiza-

¹ Christine Etienne has been involved for 30 years in development cooperation and emergency aid. She has experience in working with government institutions as well as NGOs in many countries on several continents. Today she works as an independent consultant.

tional aspects and other components were integrated later. Graphic I shows the multitude of objectives and project activities aiming at the improvement of the social, economical and ecological situation in the villages:

Graphic 1: Project objectives and activities



3. Project achievements

3.1 Watershed management

The technical aspects of watershed management have been implemented professionally. 850 ha of land have been treated, having a positive impact on soil and water conservation and also on villagers.



Stone bunding

3.2 Additional project components

Project's saving-loan scheme, the biogas and part of the income generation programs are highly attractive for the people and have therefore an excellent acceptance. Women state that the biogas permits a lot of gain in time, reduces the extremely hard work of wood collection and improves definitely hygiene. They appreciate enormously to have neither smoke in their houses, nor carbon on their shiny clean kitchen implements.

The income generating programs are partly successful. Most income is generated trough sericulture, modest income also through stone cutting, tiles production and animal husbandry. The latter permits in any case to improve significantly families' alimentation. The couple Mahadevamma and Siddamalu may represent one example of project beneficiaries whose lives have changed.

Five years ago, when their daughter got married they had to put in pledge their land. Thanks to the saving-loan scheme they experienced that saving is possible and succeeded to pay back their debts and then purchase some sheeps.



Mahadevamma and Siddamalu with their newly aquired sheeps.

3.3 Organization of villagers

A total of ten self-help groups, – 8 women shangas (groups) and 2 men's groups integrating altogether 218 members – have been formed. Three representatives of each group – president, treasurer, secretary – form the heart of the people's organization, the Central Committee (CC). It's main function is planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating watershed and economical & social activities. The CC meets once a month to decide on project relevant issues and loans to members of self-help groups. 11 members of the Central Committee form a core committee. The core committee meets on necessity. It's composition signifies an important step to more participation of women and landless: four men and seven women, four landless and seven landowners. The mixed meetings between men's groups and women shangas give evidence of a high gender sensitivity and signify a change and breakthrough in habits.

However, so far the Central Committee has only elaborated very rudimentary rules on it's functioning and is mainly busy with the administration of the loans. It is evident that the interest for self help groups is linked to the saving – loan scheme and government subsidies available more than to watershed activities.

4. Sustainability

The project has been very successful in the technical part of watershed management. A lot remains to be done in the educational and organizational part. Though in a workshop the participants – including beneficiaries and NGO representatives – have defined participation and ownership as mentioned below, in reality this objective is far from being reached for the watershed component:

Participation: people taking initiative and responsibility for their own community and village development and for natural resources.

Ownership: People having access, control and responsibility with rights and duties over resources and assets.

4.1 Obstacles to social ownership, participation & sustainability

At the beginning and until now the project management's attention has been focused more to the achievement of the project components and less to the process orientated participation and involvement of the people. For instance the enormous work of bunding and constructing dams has been paid work, and when earning opportunities are scarce, even small wages can be a decisive incentive. Out of a total population



Bunding retains water, thus the yield increases remarkably.

of 1600 families in the three villages (800 living within the watershed area), 160 families have been directly involved in watershed management activities. However, 422 families have benefited from land treatment. Though watershed management activities benefit to many and are much appreciated by the whole population, few are directly involved. Thus awareness for necessary self-reliance in maintenance and for proper efforts and contributions towards strengthening land and water conservation remains limited.

The income generation programs such as tiles production, tree nursery and quarry working have so far totally been owned by the project management who did not try to organize villagers but simply paid wages.

A community hall has been constructed without involvement of villagers in decision making and with only marginal participation in construction. Moreover the land cannot be transferred to the ownership of the villagers.

5. Challenges

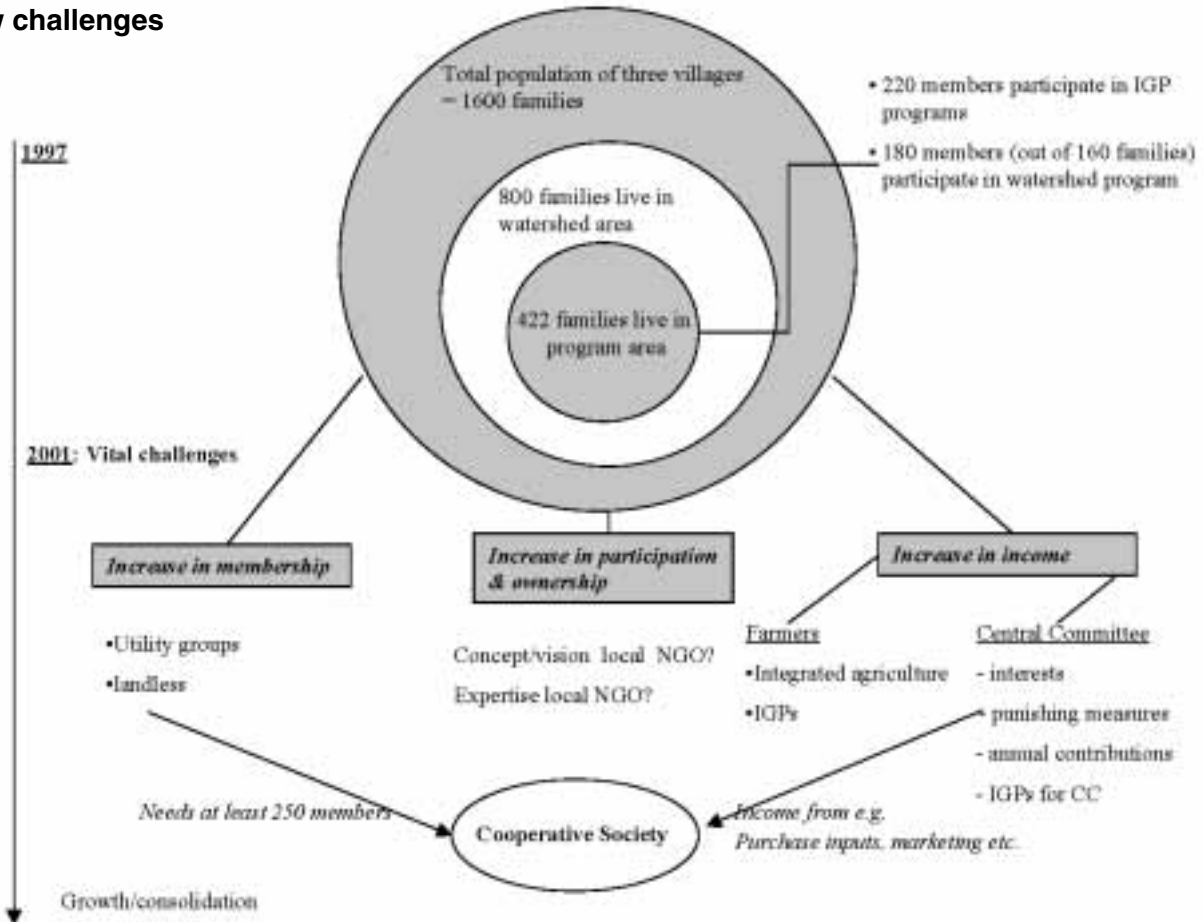
Three topics are vital for sustainability of the watershed program:

Increase in membership, increase in participation & ownership and increase in income for farmers as well as for people's institution (Central Committee).

a) Increase in membership

Increase in membership is vital so that all beneficiaries of watershed programme – including the well off farmers and not only actual self-help group members – may be mobilized for maintenance work in the watershed area. If the Central Committee wants to become a strong cooperative society it also needs more members. Formal official registration alone requires at least 250 members!

New challenges



b) Increase in income

For creating interest in watershed management issues and in the Central Committee, income for farmers must be increased. After the first step of land conservation it is now time to realize the second step and focus on land development, so that yields of crops may increase significantly and justify the heavy investment in land conservation and maintenance work.

The Central Committee also needs income. The only income sources at the moment are the entry fee of Rupees 100 (~US\$ 2.2) per member, income from punishing measures and 1% interest on loans. Income could be increased by annual contributions and/or income generation programmes proper to the CC. If the CC succeeds e.g. to plant trees in wasteland now, it can have a regular income in the future and become a strong cooperative society. As cooperative society it could later have gains from rates on the purchase of inputs and the marketing of farmer's products.

c) Increase in participation and ownership

The partner organization (a local NGO) needs to clarify its concept and vision of participation and ownership. The villagers must become the real actors through promotion of self-managing people's institutions who identify issues and problems by themselves, take collectively decisions and act together.

6. Sustainability requires more than technical professionalism

When villager's life is permanently threatened by droughts it may be justified that an organization promoting rural development programmes gives priority to land treatment and provides incentives to the population for realizing the necessary work quickly, before erosion and water shortage oblige farmers to give up and migrate. The Mysore example shows however once again that real success is not possible without the organization having a very clear concept of participation and social ownership and practising it so that the beneficiaries become actors. If the beneficiaries are not included step by step – and this right from the beginning – in the planning, implementing, evaluation, decision taking and sharing responsibilities, sustainability will be extremely difficult to achieve.



A workshop with the NGO and villagers.