

Integrating Stakeholders in Natural Resource Management in the tribal communities

Jatin Sheth, Ramesh Patel

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VIKSAT
Nehru Foundation for Development
Thaltej Tekra, Ahmedabad-380054
email: viksat@gmail.com, w: www.viksatsat.org

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Jatin Sheth¹, jatin.sheth@viksat.org
Ramesh Patel², viksat@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The paper describes VIKSAT's experiences of Capacity Building of Stakeholders, initiatives, insights and lessons learned in Water Resources Sector while facilitating NABARD supported watershed project through community participation in an entirely new (for VIKSAT) tribal area of Khedbrahma taluka, Sabarkantha district, Gujarat since 2005 for the purpose of improving socio-economic conditions of the tribal community of the seven villages.

This paper is about participatory natural resource management and a practical experience in stakeholder approaches by people who had been directly involved in the processes described; in many respects, the contents of the paper therefore reflects the personal experience of VIKSAT Kheroj Field team members, who have reflected their own work in the field, and have drawn lessons from it.

The paper describes the initial experiences since the watershed project is under implementation and the major phase of implementation i.e 'Full Implementation Phase' has started only recently, The major task of identifying and developing rapport with the stakeholders and motivating them for their active participation has been an important component for the success of the project to be encountered at the initial stages of the project implementation and therefore the learning described in this paper could be significant..

¹ Jatin Sheth is Coordinator (water programme at VIKSAT, Ahmedabad)

² Ramesh Patel is Field coordinator (watershed project, Kheroj, Sabarkantha District, VIKSAT)

Introduction

VIKSAT received an opportunity to visit Khedbrahma taluka while preparing perspective plan for Sabarkantha district in February 2004 as a part of an assignment under 'Food for Work' scheme promoted by the government. During the visit, it was observed that there was a substantial potential for the watershed development activity, a holistic programme, in number of tribal dominated villages where the people were marginalized / underprivileged, land was highly undulating and soil erosion was severe. Further, the irrigation facilities were grossly inadequate and majority farmers depended for their livelihood on rain fed farming. More over, they depended on government relief works or migrated for labour work after harvesting the kharif crops.

In 2005, VIKSAT approached NABARD to enquire their willingness to support watershed programme in such area. With the informal consent from NABARD, VIKSAT identified Sembaliya watershed area after studying topo sheets meeting the NABARD criteria for supporting watershed programme.

Situation Analysis

The project area is spread over 7 villages, six of them located in Khedbrahma taluka and one namely, Nayavas, only a fraction of the village area covered under selected watershed is located in Kotda taluka of Rajasthan State.

The population of the watershed area is 8756 with 1458 households. The tribal population is 94.3 per cent. The literacy rate is 29.79 % as per Census 2001. The main livelihood activity is rain fed farming due to lack of irrigation facilities in most of the fields. Land holding per family is less than 1 Acre in majority cases and therefore unable to commission GGRC promoted MIS as it is viable only if the minimum land holding is 1 Ha (4.5 Acres); in spite of water scarcity and 75% subsidy offered to tribal, the community is unable to take advantage of the GGRC scheme. The average rainfall of Khedbrahma taluka is 728 mm calculated over a period of 30 years. On an average, every third year is a draught year. Over the entire project area, there are only 12 bore wells and 170 dug wells out of which 57 are defunct. The land holding of the majority of

the farmers is less than 1 acre. The land is highly undulating and degraded due to soil erosion and with low fertile soil which is one of the reasons for low farm production. The another livelihood activity is wage labour under government works and in absence of it, people often migrate after harvesting kharif crops to nearby towns to work as labourers in private construction works. Due to illiteracy and villages located in interior areas, the scientific interventions are negligible and therefore majority of farmers are farming with traditional practices which is also a reason for low farm production

It has been observed that the people have developed dependency on government schemes due to poverty, illiteracy and their tribal status and the women participation in development activities is almost minimal due to widespread illiteracy.

From the watershed development point of view, it is experienced that farmers avoid construction of earthen bunds which has a larger cross section; instead they prefer stone bund which has a smaller cross section but they are expensive as stones have to be purchased which they can ill afford. Under the circumstances, they do not construct bunds to conserve rain water leading to low farm production in absence of retained moisture in the soil.

Major Activities of the project:

Mainly, there are three types of soil and water conservation activities namely area treatment, drainage line treatment and vegetative cover improving treatment are carried out under watershed development. The activities include such as development of farm bunds, stone bunds, continuous contour trench, gabion structures, check dams, grass seeding, plantation etc.

The other allied activities included are watershed development trainings, agricultural demonstrations, human and cattle medical camps and SHG promotional activities.

Implementation Processes

It was a challenging task for the VIKSAT field team to motivate the tribal community without having any previous rapport to come forward for mandatory shramdaan for four days without receiving any compensation. VIKSAT field team initially approached

Panchayat Members and Village Leaders and explained them about the need of implementing watershed project in the project area and benefits that may accrue from the project. Though they realized the importance and usefulness of the project, they felt that it was difficult to convince people to come forward for shramdaan even before the project was started. They believed and they were right also in their belief that the majority of the community was poor and can't afford to work without receiving any compensation. The community had never done so before. This was not an unexpected response but it helped to establish rapport with the village leaders which was an essential step from the entry point of view.

VIKSAT team started focused group meetings in the hamlets so that large number of people including women understands the benefits of implementing the watershed project. Initially, people did not trust the VIKSAT team members thinking that it will recover money from the government but does not want to pay to the community for their shramdaan! But consistent interaction with total transparency made them to understand and convince about the sincere and honest intentions of the VIKSAT team. Each hamlet was suggested to select its leader to represent in the village level committee.

Eventually, Dantiya, one of the two villages located on the ridge portion of watershed came forward for voluntary shramdaan as their leaders were positive as they very well understood the importance of sil and water conservation activities. They were convinced that VIKSAT team had come with a proposal in the community interest. The activities proposed were two earthen bunds at a labour cost of Rs. 60,300/- on a private land of a BPL farmer since there was no community land available appropriate for shramdaan. The shramdaan became a reality during December 2006 in which 219 persons participated, one member from each family. There were 113 females and 106 males participants. NABARD being one of the major stakeholders also permitted shramdaan on private land with the condition that the structure must be permanent in nature.

In another village namely Sembaliya where mandatory shramdaan was to be carried out, even after putting untiring efforts and constant interactions through gram sabha and hamlet meetings, the people seemed reluctant to participate. The community did not trust

VIKSAT team. But the team was not disappointed and continued meeting people one to one basis. Here also team members found that the leaders were not ready to talk with them. However majority of the people did not use insulting language but they would leave their homes when our team members tried to visit them at their homes. They would not come for the gram sabha or hamlet meetings. All the team members had to run to bring them to the meeting place. Since consuming country liquor is quite common in the villages of this area, some of the people came to the meetings fully drunk and used abusing language against the team. There were occasions when the team members were asked not to come again and threatened. Under all circumstances, the team members were not frightened and with cool temper, continued to explain that shramdaan was a prerequisite prescribed by NABARD for expressing community willingness to work under watershed programme and the community is united. Further, successful shramdaan, will qualify for award of huge grant from NABARD for implementing soil and water conservation activities in the entire project area. It will also offer them an opportunity to earn their limited livelihood by constructing earthen or stone bunds in their own farms.

After consistent and patient efforts, one hamlet leader came forward for two reasons; one reason was that that the leader of the hamlet had a positive attitude and second reason was that that the shramdaan site was near to their hamlet. Due to proximity of the site, the hamlet community agreed to carry out shramdaan as they felt that this would help them to increase moisture in their surrounding fields and in this way, it would be beneficial to them. This led to the construction of a big earthen bund with pitching and outlet during December 2006 with the participation of 106 members, one member per family with 64 females and 42 males at a labour cost worth Rs. 48,400/-.

The shramdaan was a great and satisfying experience, not only for the VIKSAT team but for the entire community also. When the work was completed, the spirit of the people was that of a celebration of a function. The people happily and proudly gathered to be photographed.

Summary of experiences

The experience has proved *that breaking the ice* in the initial stages of stakeholders' identification and active participation calls for consistent and patient efforts with commitment towards the goal.

Frequent visits to villages to interact with the people in spite of initial poor and harsh response, inviting women in the meetings and showing due respect to them for motivating for active participation and keeping promises without fail and always reaching in time helped in capacity building of the community.

Giving due importance to village leaders often motivated them to contribute their best for community interest, due emphasis given to spread message that NABARD as funding agency deposits money into VWC bank account and therefore community representatives are the real administrators of the project and there is no possibility of siphoning of money by VIKSAT team, maximum efforts made to bring maximum people to meet funding agencies representatives when ever they come for monitoring of the project or to review the progress, avoiding politicians in their capacities as politicians but inviting them as local leaders interested only in the development activity, avoiding political discussion during village meetings to maintain unity are some of the insights gained while facilitating watershed project.

Transparency through frequent gram sabhas / hamlet meetings / individual approach to share information, applying peer pressure techniques in getting desired cooperation of community and payment to the beneficiaries made by the members of the VWC in open meetings have been some of the lessons learned for effective results.

Successful shramdaan culminated into awards of Capacity Building Phase, Interim Phase and finally Full Implementation Phase from NABARD with a total project cost of Rs. 1.65 crores. Adding to that, Sir Ratan Tata Trust sanctioned a grant of Rs. 51 millions to VIKSAT for implementing WatershedPlus activities linked with NABARD watershed project. The activities include chiefly improved agricultural practices through agricultural demonstrations and micro irrigation systems (MIS) can be sum up as significant

outcomes of the interventions. The others can be summarized as formation of Apex Village Watershed committee comprising of two to three representatives from each village with at least 30 per cent women participation, organization of Cattle Camps which were new to the villages due their location in the interior areas; awareness about improved practices of animal husbandry, medical check up camps for human beings, learning to work on group basis as MIS on group basis has been compulsion due to their small land holdings and formation of 12 women SHGs having 130 women as members having saved Rs. 77840 till the date and SHGs bank linkages for credit finance.

Last but not least, truthfulness, transparency, courage to face the consequences but not to get frightened against threats, honesty, sincerity and untiring efforts without getting disappointed against odds are some of the important aspects leading to successful stakeholders approach.
