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Common Guidelines for Watershed Development: Some Reflections

FORUM FOR WATERSHED RESEARCH AND POLICY DIALOGUE

The *Common Guidelines for Watershed Development Projects*, brought out by the union government, is an adapted version of the Parthasarathy Committee Report. This article highlights some of the major features of the guidelines and discusses ways to take forward the main concerns that have engaged much of the recent policy discourse on watershed development.

The *Common Guidelines (CG) for Watershed Development Projects*, brought out by the government of India (GOI) is the first set of guidelines that apply to watershed development (WSD) projects across three GOI ministries – ministry of rural development (MORD), ministry of agriculture (MOA) and ministry of environment and forest (MOEF).¹ Recently, the committee under the chairpersonship of Parthasarathy, appointed by MORD submitted its widely discussed report (Parthasarathy Committee Report hereafter referred to as PCR) titled 'From Hariyali to Neeranchal'. The PCR has recommended several important changes in the normative framework, operational mechanisms and institutional structures governing WSD. It has also laid a special emphasis on a coordinated approach across ministries and on convergence with similar programmes being undertaken by the central and state governments leading to one of its core ideas – the concept of a national authority for sustainable development of rain-fed areas (NASDORA) [Shah 2008]. The setting up of the national authority for rain-fed agriculture and CG announced recently, are a culmination of the approach suggested by the PCR.²

Policy Formulation

The recent developments, especially since the formulation of Hariyali Guidelines in 2003, offer significant lessons from the viewpoint of policy formulation processes in the context of the democratic set-up within the country. Firstly, they reveal deep-rooted departmental vested interests working against any move towards an integrated, holistic vision of development. Similarly, they also reveal the difficulties in breaking out of the mindset of a fragmented view of schemes and programmes and effecting a broad paradigm shift towards sustainable agriculture in general,

and rain-fed agriculture in particular, that involves simultaneous changes in a range of macroeconomic policies pertaining to technology, public expenditure in natural resources development, subsidies, pricing, etc. In the absence of such a shift, in the name of enhancing food production, containing the rising food prices and providing food security for the poor, the basic agenda of sustainable agriculture could be hijacked by the rapidly emerging policy prescriptions in favour of privatisation and corporatisation, especially of small farm agriculture [TOI 2008]. Finally, they offer a gradual expanding space for democratic intervention in field implementation and policy formulation. On this backdrop, this note highlights some of the major features of the CG and discusses ways to take forward some of the important concerns that have engaged much of the recent policy discourse on watershed development, including the PCR pertaining to enhancement of productivity, sustainability and equity.

The CG may be seen as an adapted – and somewhat diluted – version of the PCR. Hence, though it may not be worthwhile to get into a detailed comparison of the two, it may be useful to reflect on some of the important aspects of the PCR that could have received greater acceptance in the CG. The idea is to identify the areas that need further attention, especially while translating the guidelines into action plans, implementing them and creating capacities. Fortunately, the CG provide for a lot of space at the state level to calibrate the actual implementation; hopefully this space could be used for appropriately incorporating some of the loose links or missing emphases in the guidelines.

Common Guidelines: Highlights

The CG reinstate the centrality of participatory processes and community-based institutions for planning, implementation, and future management of the assets created by watershed projects. It endorses the three phases of project implementation suggested by the PCR, namely, preparatory phase, watershed works, and consolidation and withdrawal phase, extends the project duration from four to seven years, with a likely hike in the cost norm of up to

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Rs 9,000 to 10,000 per ha as per the Eleventh Five-Year Plan.³

The CG also emphasise: (1) adopting a cluster of micro watersheds with an average of 1,000-5,000 ha as unit of implementation; (2) multitier strategy based on ridge to valley approach, with forest department (FD) and joint forest management committees (JFMCS), playing an important role in the upper reaches mainly in hilly and forest areas; (3) scientific planning and monitoring using remotely sensed data and creation of database both at national and state levels; (4) focus on livelihood while ensuring resource conservation and regeneration; and (5) dedicated institutions at central, state and district levels with professional personnel and devolution of finances.

The CG make a special reference to convergence with other schemes like national rural employment guarantee scheme (NREGS), Bharat Nirman and Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF). They emphasise differential rates of cost-sharing privileging the resource-poor sections like scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) and clearly specify that the user groups in close collaboration with panchayats/gram sabha should maintain structures and assets by using the watershed development fund.

The institutional arrangements suggested by the CG strike a balance between different types of project implementing agencies (PIAs) which may include departments, voluntary organisations (VOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), gram sabhas-village panchayats and community-based institutions created under watershed projects. It is imperative that the VOs/NGOs get their due share as PIAs, rather than getting relegated as agencies for community organisation and awareness generation. The CG also stipulate that not more than 25 per cent of projects should be given to VOs/NGOs. This may not be necessary if the emphasis is on identifying capable, well-intentioned local agencies to implement the projects.

The district watershed development unit (DWDU)⁴ is proposed for districts having more than 25,000 ha of watershed area to be treated. For the rest existing institutional arrangements are expected to continue, presumably meaning earlier

departmental methods. Though, unlike earlier guidelines, the CG emphasise the role of the district planning committee, it is still to be seen whether they dilute the watershed agenda and focus.

At the watershed level, institutional arrangements broadly follow the 2001 revised guidelines. Watershed committee (WC) will receive and manage funds with guidance from gram panchayat (GP). If the GP covers more than one village, subcommittees at village level are proposed. When a watershed consists of more than one GP, separate WCs will be organised for each GP. However, allocation and sharing of project funds between these WCs/GPs may be a problem, since they will differ in area and requirements (some areas may require more funds for rehabilitation, upstream areas may require more for area treatment, etc). Such aspects may have to be addressed in the course of preparation of the perspective plan and detailed project document or when the states draw up their own guidelines.

The most critical feature of the CG is the delegation of power to the states: the powers of sanctioning and overseeing the implementation within the CG parameters are to be vested with the state governments. This leaves substantial scope for calibration and fine-tuning of some of the concerns that may need an additional emphasis. A dedicated state level nodal agency (SLNA) shall be constituted by the state government with an independent bank account for direct transfer of the financial assistance from the centre. The SLNA will sign memorandum of understanding with the departments/nodal agencies that may be set up by the ministries in the central government.⁵ "The SLNA will sanction watershed projects as per the approved perspective and strategic plan for the state" (clause 25 of the CG). With SLNA at the helm of affairs there is tremendous scope for integration and convergence at the state level, provided there is a will to go beyond the departmental fundamentalism!

Aspects of this model may be traced to some of the bilateral projects being implemented in different states. However, the fund support to run the agency is envisaged from the department of land resources besides accessing resources from other

national/international agencies, corporate sector, etc. The SLNA is expected to prepare a state level perspective/strategic plan based on district plans. However, it is not clear what this comprises. In earlier guidelines, (especially the revised 2001 guidelines) this plan comprised simply the calculation of the area that required watershed development and the required funds to cover that area.

Areas Requiring More Attention

The CG try to address some of the concerns pertaining to the normative framework (like productivity, sustainability, equity, participation and decentralised democracy)⁶ as part of the guiding principles, but there is also a need for greater attention and fine-tuning. An explicit emphasis is required on access to and effective management of common property land resource (CPLR), especially when it forms part of forest land because development of CPLR is critical in addressing the issues of equity and sustainability. Similarly, regulation and sharing of groundwater among households within the watershed community also needs explicit mention and attention. The importance of privileging domestic water (including drinking water) and water for cattle in watershed management needs to be underlined. Developing institutional arrangements and norms for sharing of newly created or augmented resources like water and biomass is an important area. Gender equity may need an emphasis on positive discrimination in favour of overall empowerment of women by addressing their concerns and providing them representation in various decision-making bodies.

All these aspects constitute the most critical concerns of watershed development and pose the most complex challenges in project implementation – the state level processes may need to translate these principles into action, evolve guidelines and processes by which these concerns can be integrated into the perspective and strategic planning for the state and also the detailed project reports (DPRS) and monitoring of the project implementation. For example, the concern for "equity and gender sensitivity" is more in the nature of a "desirable" principle, while it needs to become a precondition for

graduating to the next phase of watershed works, as it was envisaged in the PCR. Similarly, the welcome step phasing the watershed development programme into three phases can make a difference, if the progression from the one phase to the next is made conditional on meeting the objectives, indicators and targets of the previous phase, otherwise automatic progression would make little difference on the ground.⁷

The issue of transparency and sharing of information or data and putting it in the public domain needs a special attention. Sharing of the findings of the monitoring and evaluation studies/reports conducted by independent agencies may provide timely signals for mid-course corrections and also help generate an informed debate on how to move forward.⁸ Also, while the CG's emphasis on handing over responsibility to panchayats and/or user groups as part of the withdrawal phase is important, there is a need to ensure actual performance or sustenance in the post-project phase⁹ and for long-term monitoring of the project impacts (biophysical, socio-economic and institutional) and the arrangements for future management.

Lastly, the cluster and multitier approaches recommended by the CG may need a special attention while sanctioning of watershed projects in the state. The PCR has suggested a cluster of at least 5,000 ha as unit for planning and implementation in the form of a milli-watershed. The Forum for Watershed Research and Policy Dialogue (FORWARD) had suggested a larger unit of the order of 5 to 10,000 ha, basically the catchment of a stream or a sub-basin for initial planning [Joy et al 2006]. Reducing the proposed size of watershed unit to 1,000-5,000 ha may fail to gain the scale advantage in terms of hydrological features as well as economic activities and also address some of the issues related to externalities. This feature may be reconsidered by the SLNA.

The CG also talk about multitier ridge to valley sequencing of watershed implementation and entrusting the onus of implementation of watershed treatments in the forest areas of the watersheds, in the upper reaches of the watersheds, mainly with the FD and JFMC (see sub-clause ix under clause 9). This issue needs to be revisited

as it can go counter to the spirit of convergence and integration. Experience shows that forest land treatments and lower reach watershed treatments are hardly planned together in an integrated manner to make the ridge to valley implementation possible. This needs to be changed and wherever micro watersheds include forest area, a common treatment programme needs to be evolved under the aegis of the local project implementation mechanism (PIA/WDT/WC/gram sabha) with adequate representation for the FD and JFMC in the process of planning and implementation.

The Next Steps

Before state level initiatives take off under the CG, a few immediate steps are needed to take forward the main features/guiding principles of the PCR and the CG and build further on them.

Firstly, there is a need for a national level workshop, bringing together the major stakeholders from each state, organised preferably under the aegis of the NRAA, to discuss and evolve a shared understanding of (a) what already exists in the CG; and (b) what needs to be further calibrated/emphasised at the state level processes. The discussion should revisit the normative framework of the PCR which reflects a fair amount of consensus but, does not find sufficient space in the CG, and explore ways of meaningfully incorporating it in the state level processes. Secondly, there is a need to constitute a task force with regional subgroups, under the NRAA, to help develop the perspective and the strategic plan for each state. Lastly, capacity-building initiatives may be planned right in the initial stage so as to be able to kick start the two critical activities: (a) collating the requisite database for deciding on the issues like prioritisation, unit of planning and selection of PIAs; and (b) base line survey for preparation of the detailed project plans.

A number of agencies and organisations could help in these initial steps at the national as well as state level. Their contribution is important in ensuring that the CG are translated in each state into a form that is relevant to its situation. The initial processes of setting a new stage for the next phase of watershed development is the most formative and could well

determine the shape it will take once the respective state governments take over the responsibilities. It is important to utilise this democratic space fruitfully before the pressures and compulsions of meeting the annual targets take over!

NOTES

- 1 An earlier effort in 2000 by MoRD and MoA could not operate as a common guideline across the two ministries. Since then the MoRD had revised the guidelines twice, once in 2001 and then in 2003, the last revision being better known as Hariyali Guidelines.
- 2 Also draws from other guidelines and certain features and provisions of the revised guidelines – 2001, (MoRD), WARASA-2000 (MoA) and some of the bilateral projects of Department of International Development (DFID), DANIDA, Indo German Watershed Development Programme (IGWDP), etc.
- 3 While the CG do not make explicit mention of the approved per ha cost norm, which is rather strange, but only mention that the cost per ha would be raised as per Eleventh Plan, the expected revision is likely to be at least up to the level noted above.
- 4 In one place the DWDU seems to be equated with "district data cell" (see clause 30 of the CG).
- 5 It is noted that "whereas the ministry is free to set up its own mechanisms to oversee watershed development programmes, it shall also have the option to set up a nodal agency at the central level in the department for managing and implementing watershed development projects" [Para 18].
- 6 For details see Joy et al (2006).
- 7 This was one of the issues raised by ForWARD in its note to the Parthasarathy Committee [Joy et al 2006].
- 8 Inadequate access to the evaluation studies for the government supported watershed projects emerged as one of the important constraints while carrying out the comprehensive assessment of watershed projects, coordinated by International Crop Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT). GIDR and SOPPECOM were also part of this assessment.
- 9 This is what has been borne out of the rapid assessment of the nearly 1,000 completed micro watershed projects conducted by the forward team in Karnataka, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. For details contact watershed@forward.org.in; also visit www.forward.org.in

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