Best Practice of Mokasar Watershed Association

Formation of Watershed Association at village level and Importance of Gram Sabha. AKRSP (I)-Mokasar Experience.

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1) Preface

A working definition of a **Best Practice'** is: "An environmentally sound, socially just, culturally sensitive, economically viable, coherent set of actions with a better than average effect toward the goals to be achieved in the framework of Sustainable Development." (InterSard Team, December 2002).

Best practice description should contain some reference to a normal local situation, and why the proposed or applied action is better. It also refers to a practice that has been tested and proven relevant in the local situation. So **Best Practices** should be viewed in the local context. It is therefore important to specify the goals that local actors want or wanted to achieve with the innovations or activities, in their perception of problems and solutions with regard to sustainability. In other words, a **Best Practice** description should highlight to some extent why a practice is good or best, in the view of the local actors, and in the perspective of sustainability.

1.1)   Need for Documenting the Best Practice

Development Support Centre (DSC) has found that certain essential features in watershed development are not being properly implemented owing to the difficulties encountered. Some of the difficulties may be serious; others reflect the lack of exertion on the part of Project Implementation Agency PIA. In the present case, Sustainable Community Based Livelihood Enhancement Programme (SCALE) supported by European Union and Aga Foundation, India aims at extending the enriching experiences of Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, India (AKRSP-I) to other organisations, who are finding it difficult to internalise some essential features of important programmes like watershed development.

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This study will document the enriching experiences in Natural Resource Management (NRM) and share it with various organisations so that they can draw lessons from them and incorporate them in their programmes. DSC has listed these features and preliminary discussions with AKRSP(I) have been held to identify the field areas where **"Best Practices"** have taken place. Various aspects of the **"Best Practices"** will be analysed, including why they are considered so and how they can be replicated in other areas.

1.2)   Background

Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) issued the Guidelines on watershed development in October'94 which has elaborated about importance of formation of watershed Association (WA) at the village level. MoRD guidelines says that watershed association will meet atleast, twice a year to evolve/improve the watershed development plan, monitor and review its progress, approve the statement of accounts, formation of user groups/self help groups, approve the arrangement for collection of public/voluntary donations and contribution from the community and individual members, lay down procedures for operation and maintenance of assets created, approve the activities that can be taken up with the money available in watershed development fund, nominate members of watershed committee from amongst the user groups/self help groups by a system of rotation, and take disciplinary action of removal of membership from watershed committee or user groups and whatever other disciplinary action it deems fit. The WA will elect its own president, who shall also be Chairman of Watershed Committee. The watershed secretary shall assist the President of WA in the discharge of the responsibilities entrusted to the WA.

1.3) Problem in formation of watershed association

- θ In most of the cases it has been noted that watershed association is in name only. Watershed Committee becomes more powerful watershed association.
- θ It is very difficult to organise all the sections of villagers in watershed association. People who are getting the direct benefits are more interested in the meetings of watershed association and others have no interest in attending the WA meetings.
- θ It is the WC which takes all the decisions and there is limited involvement of all the stakeholders in the decision making process.
- θ There is no transparency in the implementation and information does not percolate to all the sections of the society.
- θ Caste based leadership existing within the village dominate the meetings of WA as result fair representation of villagers doesn't takes place

2) Evolving the Best Practice

Mokasar village is located in Chotila Taluka of Surendranagar District in Gujarat. AKRSP (I) started work in Mokasar in 1994-1995. Then they were following stream-based approach. Interested villagers along the stream were organised into different groups along the stream and started saving and credit activity. Initially these groups focus was limited to saving and credit as well as organising regular group meetings. Then after 6 months when the groups became little bit matured, physical works were started. Most of the physical activities that were done were limited to construction of check dams and land leveling. However work was scattered and it was done on patches. This was not leading to soil and water conservation of the village .At that time major funding source from European Commission which had a different approach to watershed development. Apart from that only those who were getting the benefits were interested in the programme and rest of the village remained an isolated

community. Overall village and community development which is an objective of the watershed programme remained a utopia.

In 1999-2000 when District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) approved an watershed programme for Mokasar village, then AKRSP (I) which was the Project Implementing Agency (PIA) thought of changing the earlier adopted procedure of stream based watershed implementation to a more community based people centered watershed development programme involving the whole village community. In the first phase from each hamlet in the village a leader who will represent that hamlet was elected. In all there were 9 leaders elected. These leaders were not part of the traditional social leadership existing within the village. This approach was very beneficial as it helped to reduce the caste conflict and echo the impartial view of all the villagers.

The first Watershed Association meeting that was held, there were few participants. Interested villagers and PIA members tried in vain to involve other people. In the second meeting efforts were made to include more persons from each hamlet and make them understand the overall objectives of the watershed programme. However participation was abysmally low. Villagers have seen that before the watershed programme was launched, group members in AKRSP(I) supported programme have benefited from the physical structures and saving and credit activities. Other villagers who were not part of the groups could also understand the importance of being part of the group and the extent of benefit they can receive.

130 villagers were taken on an exposure visit to Kophala in Rakjot. This exposure visit gave an opportunity to the villagers of Mokasar to understand how people involvement and participation has helped the Kophala watershed programme to be successful. The exposure visit was eye opener to the villagers. They understood that villagers themselves have to be part of the overall planning and implementation of the programme then only it can ensure success of the

programme. These villagers after returning back from the exposure visit told the other villagers about the success story of Kophala.

Then leaders of the village who can perceive the long-term benefits of the watershed programme thought of adopting a different strategy for involving the whole village in the watershed programme. A door-to-door campaign was launched to make the people aware about the importance of watershed association. Villagers were told that those who will not be part of the watershed association would not receive the benefit from the watershed development programme. Villagers were also informed that if within the next days funds allotted by DRDA is not utilised then DRDA will take back the fund and then no work will be possible within the village. This triggered a sense of urgency among the people and in the third meeting of the watershed association whole village came together to share their views and understand the concept of the watershed programme.

After 3 months from the first watershed association meeting, in the fourth Gram Sabha whole village came to the forefront and participated enthusiastically in the meeting. People started sharing their values, ideas, and new problems that arise and then letting the group discuss and shape them. From each household, one member became part of WA. Watershed Association was formed and there were 91 members in WA. WC secretary and WA president was elected in the Gram Sabha. Panchayat Sarpanch and up-Sarpanch were also elected to be part of the watershed committee. In that Gram Sabha rules and regulation were formed and it was decided to involve the whole village in the process of watershed implementation so that it can lead to equitable distribution of benefits. After that Watershed Association has been registered under Registration of Societies Act, 1860.

3) Rules and Regulations

- Only members of watershed association can receive the watershed benefits.
- Each watershed association member shall pay Rs.41 as membership fee for four years.
- Each beneficiary shall pay Rs.500 as nonrefundable survey charge for the construction of Water Harvesting Structure (WHS).
- If any user group member does not pay user charges for the physical work done on his field, then his work will be stopped or he will not be entitled to receive the benefits from the structure.
- If there are four members in a User Group (UG) and any one of them decides not to be part of the UG then the fourth member's user charges shall be paid by other three members
- Those who will not come to the Gram Sabha will not receive the Watershed benefits.
- Any problem arising in the Gram Sabha shall be resolved peacefully.
- There will be two women leaders in the watershed association who will try to manage if women members face any problem.
- Watershed Association shall ensure equitable distribution of benefits among the villagers.
- Panchayat members shall be part of the watershed association.
- In each Gram Sabha, statement of income, expenditure as well as achievement against the plan to be given and plan for the next six months to be highlighted.

4) A New Beginning by Meaningful Stakeholder Involvement

Watershed Committee played a major role in strengthening the watershed association and helping to make gram sabha a regular feature. It is the watershed committee that makes full preparation before conducting the gram sabha. Few days before the gram sabha, watershed committee has its meeting where they discuss about the agenda for the gram sabha, detail write up of the plan against achievement is prepared. Members of each hamlet who are part of watershed committee is given responsibility to organise villagers from their hamlet to participate in the gram sabha.

One of the major task was how to start work. Members decided that benefits of watershed should be given to those people who have not received the benefits earlier. For each meeting an agenda was set and open-ended discussions prevailed. People were organised into several Self Help Groups, User Groups. There were separate SHGs for women and landless. Landless were also given missionary training so that they can participate in the construction of checkdams and other physical works. Members of one group included another's perspectives in their thinking. Each group was given regular training and taken on exposure visits for awareness building and generation of new ideas. Regular feedback and training helped the villagers to ask questions, particularly the involvement of women and landless community improved significantly. People started accurately understanding other' s points of view– even when they don' t agree with them. Critical agreements are inclusive, they reflect everyone' s requirements, and typically involve the discovery of new options or approaches. Each member of Watershed Association worked towards implementing and formalizing agreements reached by clarifying tasks, resources, deadlines and oversight responsibilities. Assignments were completed in teams and members report back on progress midway through the process for people to get help if needed. Relationships among group members are continually strengthened through creative approaches like open discussions on various issues affecting villagers. Steps were taken to achieve a broad range of stakeholder involvement;

the elected representatives of the Panchayats were given top priority. Including panchayat members in the watershed committee helped to gradually reduce the conflict between the Panchayat and watershed association and helped in achieving a symbiotic relationship. Panchayat members were taken on an training and exposure visit to AKRSP(I) office at Ahmedabad. They were informed about the overall objectives of the watershed development programme and AKRSP(I)'s sources of fund. They were also given accounts training.

 Each year, two watershed Association meetings are held. In this meeting, Watershed Committee members present the statement of income and expenditure, physical and financial achievement of the programme against the plan and next six months physical-financial plan. This helps to clarify stakeholder concerns and decide what additional information to gather to help in crafting new alternatives, assessing tradeoffs, and making decisions. Watershed Association meetings helps in determining what matters most to stakeholders in order to establish possible alternative actions and create new and better implementation approach ensuring equity and sustainability of the programme. Technical information is clearly highlighted so that people get true picture of how the soil and water conservation works can help in better management of natural resources. At the same time it is made clear that people need to contribute to each benefit they receive. This helped in creating a sense of ownership and inquisitiveness which was reflected in watershed association meetings. In this meeting villagers proactively debated the physical as well as plan and achievement. For each physical work tender was floated and bids invited. This has helped to significantly reduce project cost as lowest bidder was given preference. Transparency in the programme implementation helped in information getting percolated to every section of the village and resulted in confidence building as well as large-scale involvement of the vulnerable section of the society like landless and women who have been traditionally left out of the development programme.

5) Strengths

- An impartial leadership that is free from caste and class dominated politics has helped in equitable distribution of benefits to every section of the society.
- Appointment of leaders from each hamlet and they taking lead role in Gram Sabha has helped in creating a second rank leadership within the village. As a result there are many more people who understand developmental issues and working towards achieving overall objectives of the watershed development.

6) Weaknesses

- People are too much dependent on few leaders. In long term it may have damaging effect as few dominant leaders may corner all the benefits.
- Only the direct beneficiaries are more active in the gram Sabha. Others who are getting indirect benefits do not take active benefits.
- Gram Sabha is a regular feature, however villagers are not clear about the agenda of the gram sabha after completion of the project.

7) Achievements

- Regular meetings of Gram Sabha have helped in whole village getting united for overall development of the village and address the core problem rather than getting involved in trivial matters.
- Villagers have forced Panchayat functionaries to organise the Gram Sabha which was not a regular feature. Now the Panchayat also presents its Annual plan and budget in the Gram Sabha.

8) Reasons why it is considered as successful

It is considered successful because

- θ It has been able to organise regular watershed association meeting where members from all sections of the society has fair representation.
- θ Prevalence of open-ended discussion among the watershed association members resulting in reflection of the needs of everyone and finding solution of these needs leading to equity in benefit distribution.
- θ It has increased the confidence of the vulnerable groups like women and landless poor, enhanced their self respect and transformed them from passive listeners to active participants in village issues.

9) Points to be considered for Replication

- θ Villagers in different groups of women, landless, panchayat members and other beneficiaries should be made clear about the overall objectives of the watershed programme.
- θ Door to door approach is very helpful in making the villagers understand the objectives of the watershed programme and at the same time villagers needs are also articulated to the project implementers.
- θ Exposure visits to large number of successful cases can give the villagers a perspective about how to approach a watershed so that it can be sustainable and successful.
- θ Regular reinforcement of the ideas among the stakeholders ensures long-term involvement of stakeholders in the watershed programme. This helps in people reacting to the development issues and the misunderstanding can be cleared.
- θ Timely gram Sabha with transparency in overall programme implementation results in participation of all the section of the society.
- θ Development of second rank of leaders who are free from caste and class dominated politics helps in ensuring equity in the programme.