

Enabling Equitable Participation and Contribution: Experiences of Gram Vikas



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Gram Vikas is a rural development organisation working with the poor and marginalised communities of Orissa since 1979, towards making sustainable improvements in the quality of life of the rural poor.

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Liby T Johnson¹

Introduction

Contribution norms in the watershed project design require that user groups, or those benefiting from an activity pay 5 to 10% of the cost of the work as contribution to the watershed development fund. Ensuring such contribution is a challenge for the implementing agencies, particularly working in less developed areas.

Contribution from users/beneficiaries involved in natural resource development activities is a critical area. In many cases it is found that there is inequity in terms of benefit received and contribution made. In the watershed development projects this is particularly stark, as the institutional mechanism in place, many times, do not take care of the needs of the very poor. Thus the very poor, landless, who work as labourers end up paying a part of their wages towards the contribution. While this injustice is not prominent in case of works carried out on private land, where the landowner pays the contribution, it is severe in case of works carried out on common properties.

Collecting contribution from benefiting farmers becomes a difficult issue in very poor regions. Even where a family may own large tracts of land that could benefit from watershed treatment, their current situation may not permit them to make upfront cash contributions. This is dilemmatic situation which implementing agencies and watershed committees get caught in.

Gram Vikas is implementing watershed development projects in one of the poorest regions of Orissa, Bangomunda block of Bolangir district. In many cases we find it difficult to ensure equity in contributions made to the watershed development fund. However, another intervention of Gram Vikas, in implementing community managed water supply and sanitation systems bears out a very different experience.

This paper looks at the issue of equitable contribution from benefiting people in the context of delivery of goods and services fundamental

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to their subsistence, using the Rural Health and Environment Programme (RHEP) of Gram Vikas as a case. It examines the institutional mechanisms that ensure equity, as well as motivate people to pay. It tries to draw lessons relevant in the context of watershed development programmes from the experiences in water supply and sanitation.

Rural Health and Environment Programme

The Rural Health and Environment Programme (RHEP) is an integrated rural development intervention being implemented by Gram Vikas in very backward and poor villages of Orissa. The mission of RHEP is to improve the quality of life of the rural communities in terms of both physical conditions of living as well as economic opportunities, to engineer a process of 'reverse migration' from urban centres to villages.

RHEP's primary focus is on adivasi, dalit and poor and marginalized sections like landless, small and marginal farmers. In every village covered more than 70% population belong to the category of Below Poverty Line (BPL) families. RHEP was initiated in 1992 in five pilot villages covering 337 families in the districts of Ganjam and Bargarh. As of today, the programme has reached about 150 villages in 14 districts of Orissa covering close of 12,000 families.

RHEP Concept

The concept of RHEP rises from the aggregation of the experiences Gram Vikas gained as an implementer of the Biogas programme. During this period Gram Vikas constructed nearly 54,000 biogas plants in around 6000 villages, thus coming into contact with a large number of poor and backward communities all over Orissa. On examining the reasons behind their poverty and backwardness, Gram Vikas struck upon a very intriguing factor – the widespread morbidity and high mortality caused by water borne diseases. On probing deeper it was found that the people were using the same source of water, normally the village pond, for all their water needs. Very few villages had access to any safe source of drinking water. The habit of defecating in the open resulted in large-scale spreading of water-borne diseases.

Altogether, unclean habits of sanitation and absence of protected drinking water were affecting not just the health of people, but also each and every aspect of their life. Gram Vikas realised that any development intervention in these villages would first have to address these problems.

Implementation process

The primary entry point in every RHEP village is the bringing together of the village community to develop the infrastructure needed to ensure proper sanitation and availability of protected water throughout the year. Prior to the RHEP intervention, houses in these villages did not have individual toilets. Defecation in the open was common. A number of health problems and high morbidity/mortality rates were directly traceable to unprotected and contaminated water sources.

The preparatory process to initiate an RHEP project in a given village begins with a series of negotiations with community involvement. The intent of this mobilization phase is to ensure that all families in the habitation will have access to the same minimum level of products and services arising from the intervention – toilets and bathing rooms in every house, and piped water supply including the construction of a water tank as a community asset. This necessitates and ensures that conflicts are resolved and everyone willingly participates. This preparatory phase has taken 2-3 years or more in some villages. In others, the processes have been delayed because of Gram Vikas' insistence on women's participation in community level decision-making. A 100% approach is considered critical to the water and sanitation programme. Even one family left out, or one defaulter, would mean that water bodies would continue to get polluted. It is in the best interests of all, in other words the common good, to ensure that even the poorest have access to the minimum level of services.

A typical sequence of events that unfolds after villagers reach a consensus to join the RHEP is as follows:

- Formation of village committee (equal representation of all segments including women and men; the process to register the village

committee as a registered society is also set in motion.)

- Raising the financial corpus (village fund) through contributions from all households
- Construction of individual toilets and bathing rooms in each house (including artisanal training)
- Mobilization to construct the water tank and water distribution system
- Support and facilitate the formation of local governance and management structures, self-help groups, and livelihood options.

Depending on local needs and aspirations, some villages may elect to build other community assets such as community halls, drainage, ponds for community pisciculture, etc. Schools have been built in several villages, drawing support from other Gram Vikas and Government programs. Housing needs have also been met in several RHEP villages, by extending loans to homebuilders through an onward lending program facilitated by Gram Vikas in collaboration with housing finance institutions like HDFC.

Core principles

The RHEP is built around a number of principles that ensure that the intervention has total commitment and participation from the villagers who participate in it. These include:

- ***Inclusion of all***

RHEP is contingent upon 100% agreement and participation of adult men and women in the village. All families in the village establish a minimum standard of facilities, including toilets and bathing rooms for each family, as well as individual connections for piped water supply to all houses.

- ***Equitable financial participation***

All families in the village contribute to a Corpus Fund, poor paying less than the rich. The Corpus Fund is placed in a term deposit, the interest from which goes to extending similar facilities to 'new' families in the village, ensuring 100% coverage at all times.

- ***Sharing of costs***

Mechanisms are evolved whereby the villagers find the means to finance at least 30-40% of the total cost of establishing water and sanitation facilities. Each village prepares a budget on how finances will be raised, including their own contribution of labour and materials,

support from government schemes and from Gram Vikas.

- ***Participation of women***

The success of RHEP is dependent on the participation of women. Women have equal

representation in all village institutions. Self-help groups are formed to increase role of

women in the economic sphere

- ***Clear mechanisms for operations and maintenance***

Village youth are trained in technical skills for operations and maintenance. Common village

resources like ponds and forests are scientifically developed so that they yield greater

returns, contributing to common funds of each village.

- ***Strengthening Village institutions***

RHEP is driven by elected self-governing institutions in each village that represent all

sections, across gender, caste and class differences, and where there is equal opportunity to participate in decision making. The institutions have responsibility to manage and maintain services and facilities and further development activities in the village.

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- ***Contractual approach***

One of the strengths of RHEP is the definitive norms and contractual approach, which is negotiated with the villagers. Gram Vikas and the Village committee are equal partners bringing their respective resources to the negotiation table. The norms are defined contextually within the broad framework for every village. This starts with the method of collection of a financial fund (referred to as corpus in the RHEP), where each village defines

how it will raise the requisite money. This flexibility within the broad framework is seen in every aspect of RHEP and is the key to its success. The following table gives an indication of the people's contributions relative to that made by Gram Vikas and other sources towards RHEP 'hardware':

Table: Sharing of costs – External and people's contribution

External contribution	People's contribution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Required quantity of cement, bricks, aggregate, sand, steel, materials for roof, ceramic pan, water seal, foot rests, door for the toilet, skilled labour amounting to a maximum of Rs.2,500 per family. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Required quantity of stone for up to the plinth level, mud for joining the bricks, centering materials and all unskilled labour, door for bathing room, construction of two soak pits with covers and whitewashing (painting).
Construction of water tank & piped water supply	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Required quantity of cement, brick, aggregate and steel for the overhead tank. Pipe for the main pipeline and motor pump. Partial cost of digging well. Skilled labour for laying main pipeline and all construction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Required quantity of stone for the foundation. Unskilled labour for the foundation, construction of overhead tank, laying of water distribution system and cost of pipes to take water from the main pipeline to individual houses, toilets and bathing rooms.
Drainage systems	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Required quantity of brick and cement. Skilled labour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Required quantity of stone, aggregate, sand. All unskilled labour.

Contributions– the numbers

It is worthwhile to look at some numbers related to community contributions raised through the RHE Programme so far.

Coverage

Total villages covered – 154

Households benefiting – 12698

SHGs organized – 987 groups with 12809 members (85%) women

Village funds mobilized

Village Corpus Fund	Rs.12.90 million
SHG funds saved	Rs. 8.85 million

Cost of hardware creation

Total cost of sanitation and water supply hardware	Rs.89.38 million
External contribution – Government and NGO	Rs.63.39 million (71% of total)
People's own contribution	Rs.25.99 million (29% of total)

Comparison between external and local fund mobilization

Total local funds mobilized	Rs.47.74 million
External funds channeled	Rs.63.39 million
Local funds as % of external funds	75%

Per family contribution

Average contribution per family	Rs.3760
Average external funds per family	Rs.4993

Equity in contributions

What is not apparent from the numbers above is the equitable approach to raising local contributions. In every village, the better off have subsidized the contributions required from the poorer families. Such subsidies have come in the form of cash contributions to the corpus fund. While the corpus contribution is Rs.1000 per family, in many cases the poorer have paid anywhere between Rs.100 to Rs.500 with the better off families covering for the balance.

Village communities as a whole have also supported poorer families in the village in the construction of hardware. Whether through lending a helping hand as labourer or in providing financial support for purchase of materials, these decisions were worked out by the villages themselves.

Factors ensuring participation and contribution

What accounts for this very high level of local contributions? As seen from the tables above, local contributions account for nearly 43% of the total investment made in the creation of water supply and sanitation infrastructure in the villages. Additionally, the benefits from the investment are available to all families in the village, without discrimination, and in a sustainable manner. Our experience suggests that the following factors contributed the most to ensuring this high proportion of local financial contribution.

Tangible benefits to everyone

Water supply and sanitation are uncontested domains. The need for either of the services is common for all castes and classes. Thus presented with an opportunity to obtain very high quality of infrastructure, people, even the poorest, are willing to pay for them. There are no conflicts related to use of resources; everyone stands to gain from them. The tangible outcomes from the investment are the same for everyone – there is no discrimination based on class or caste. Since the benefits offer a win-win situation to everyone involved, the better-off sections, who otherwise

would have taken advantage of the weaknesses of the poorer people, come forward to support the poor with resources.

Inclusion of all

In addition to the tangible benefits that accrue to all, is the fact that the mobilization strategy provides for conscious efforts to bring every person in a village to a common platform. As per the norms of RHEP unless 100% of the families in a village agree to take part in the whole process the programme is not implemented. This condition ensures that the village community as a whole arrives at the decision to participate, considering the views and opinions of every member of the village. This allows the poorer and excluded sections to have a say in the decision made.

Village institutions

RHEP requires that every section in the village be represented equitably in the village executive committee (VEC). The VEC is selected by the general body that consists of all male and female heads of households in the village. Efforts are made to ensure that representatives of women, the poorer sections and hitherto excluded caste groups are given positions of office bearers in the VEC. Since the VEC is the decision-making and implementing body for all development activities in the village, such equitable representation ensures that everyone equitably shares benefits and costs of all interventions. Enabling equitable participation and contribution 9

Mobilization process

The RHEP motivation and mobilization process ensures that activities are sequenced keeping in mind the time required to reach consensus and agreement within a village. Experience with villages of varying socio-economic situations show that the flexibility provided in the early stage of the programme allows the scope for consensus to be reached. This flexibility allows for effective achievement of physical and other targets in the later stages.

Lessons for watershed programmes

Is it possible for some lessons from RHEP to be applied in the context of ensuring equitable and effective contributions from benefiting participants

in the watershed development programme? What elements from those analyzed above would be relevant in a watershed development project?

Flexibility during mobilization stage

The initial stage of implementation is a very crucial one. At this point, when the implementing agency is mobilizing the community to rally around identified common needs, it is important to have flexibility, both in terms of time and achievable outputs. Rushing through a mobilization process will not provide results. It is also difficult to insist on a standard approach to mobilization, as different socio-economic situations would require different approaches. The most important lesson from the RHEP experience in this regard is that a mobilization process taking into consideration the specific situation of the village/watershed can produce effective and sustainable results.

Building village/watershed institutions

Just like the mobilization process, approach to the organization and institution-building components have to provide flexibility to meet local situation. Rather than insisting on a fixed proportion of membership in the watershed committee, the guideline should provide for representation in proportion to the population of each section of

society. Thus in a watershed with larger number of dalit or adivasi population, proportional representation would ensure that the higher castes/ classes do not corner more than proportionate say in decision making.

Building equity in benefit sharing

By definition watershed development activities benefit those who own land or water resources. Thus in many cases a large section of the village population is excluded from tangible, long term benefits. The motivation to participate for these section thus becomes

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