

Solution for the water crisis – Democratisation, not Privatisation!

Promising stories from Tamil Nadu, India

By

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“Our people may be poor in resources, but not in spirit! When you struggle to obtain a single drop of water, you also know how to save it. Share with the rest of the world, particularly in water starved regions, that what we need are partners to find solutions and not more funds or technical quickfixes which will enslave us to technology, hook us to external funds and alienate us from our own resources”.

The strong words of Mr. Palanisami, the former Panchayat² President or head man of Palangarai village of Avinashi Taluka in Coimbatore District of Tamil Nadu in South India are justified given the near miracle he helped initiate in his village of 11,000 people. Palangarai, on the best of days had a water supply of 10 litres per person per day which was once in a week during the dry months; ground water was at a depth of over 1200 feet and no one remembered water in wells. Illegal tapping of water by powerful villagers was the norm and arrears in tax payments was the practice.

The grim water situation posed a tough challenge to anyone seeking to find solutions to the water crisis. Water storage had to be augmented to raise water table; vegetation and tree cover needed to be increased to help retain rain water; illegal taps had to be removed; water distribution had to ensure equitable supply to all sections, especially the poorer and traditionally marginalized sections; the community needed to be mobilized to participate and own the changed water system.

The recipe required daring vision; boundless dedication; unquenchable enthusiasm and motivation; willingness to dare and take risks; and the discipline to follow through on time consuming decisions. In short, a changed paradigm of functioning

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² Village Panchayat is the Village Council which includes the main village and a number of hamlets or habitations. It forms the lowest tier of the Indian Constitutional system. The Panchayat President is elected by the entire village.

on the part of the community, its leaders and water engineers responsible for water supply.

In August, 2004 the Palangarai villagers, decided to launch an ambitious programme aimed at changing the face of the water system in their village. Over a period of a year they held scores of meetings involving all social sections, from children to youth to the elderly in the village explaining in simple terms the importance of full participation in measures to solve the water problem. With the help of the water engineers of the state run water agency, Tamil Nadu Water Supplies and Drainage Board (popularly known as TWAD) who provided technical knowhow and knowledge inputs, the villagers created 32 water storage structures by a process of deepening, repairing and constructing new check dams. Over 7,000 tree saplings were planted by children, in their names and in the names of their pets and grand parents, with a survival rate of over 85% at the end of the first year. Encroachments in water storage areas like water tanks, ponds and channels were removed by forging collective consensus; illegal tapping of water was stopped. Timely distribution of water, ensuring quality and prompt response to water distribution related complaints generated confidence amongst the populace.

The well planned efforts bore fruit within a year. By the end of 2006 monsoons water table had risen by 400 feet, from 1200 feet to 800 feet. Increase in plant and tree cover magically attracted birds resulting in changes in the biological profile. Transparency and improved water distribution improved satisfaction so much that the village recorded 100 % collection of annual taxes! In turn, this led to a state award for the village council.

The successful change experiment in Palangarai was not accidental nor is it a stand alone or solitary outcome. Palangarai is one of 153 village Panchayats in 29 of the 30 districts of Tamil Nadu state in south India where a unique process called 'Democratisation of Water Management' had been launched by the TWAD Board. Community led efforts to improve water management in villages were partnered by TWAD engineers throughout the state creating many successful initiatives.

Pushed by the need to find a more sustainable solution to address the severe water challenge in the state, TWAD Board in mid-2004 launched a major reform process within the state level utility covering over 500 engineers across all levels of the organisation.

The thrust of the change initiative was three fold: to bring about attitudinal changes, perspective shifts and institutional transformation within TWAD, in the first instance and in the second stage with community leaders and other stake holders.

The impact of water engineers re-examining their own practices, perspectives and paradigms led to a profound and fundamental shift in the way the TWAD understood its own vision and relevance. Shifting from a technology and investment centred approach, the TWAD engineers committed themselves to optimally utilizing existing schemes, repairing and renewing traditional water sources, improving water distribution systems and availing of new investments only if all these measures were insufficient to improvement water supply. The changed mode of functioning covered the entire state. Additionally pilot change projects were introduced in 455 villages in 153 village Panchayats.

The results were stunning. Savings of about US \$ 5 million in scheme implementation was registered in a 2 year period between 2004-06. Sharing full information about water availability, appropriate technology and sustainable water systems reflected in the choice of water schemes in the 455 villages. As contrasted to 41% villages who opted for new water schemes, 47% opted for extension of existing pipelines, expanding existing sources and rehabilitating old schemes! Another dramatic impact has been on reducing 'Operations and Maintenance (O & M) expenses'. With greater citizen involvement in reducing consumption, regulating hours of water pumping and ensuring repairs of leakage has resulted in reducing O & M expenses by about 40-50 % of previous rates, improved collection of water charges and almost 39% improvement in rate of collection as a percentage of expenditure in the 153 village Panchayats. Of utmost importance is the report of a UNICEF supported impact assessment study which concluded that

The TWAD democratisation experiment exemplifies finding solutions to deal with the water challenge by focusing on governance reform rather than by increasing technology or financial investments. The manifold dimensions of the impact of the democratisation process lends support to the finding of the UNDP United Nations World Water Development Report, 'Water for Life, Water for People', 'Governing Water Wisely for Sustainable Development' that

“The water crisis is essentially a crisis of governance ... Weaknesses in governance systems have greatly impeded progress towards sustainable development and the balancing of socio-economic needs with ecological sustainability”.

The clear cut results of the Tamil Nadu experience in water reform seriously challenge the current thrust of IFIs led by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and other institutions to privatize water utilities and to focus on increasing financial investments. Reducing consumption of water as a means to ensuring sustainability of water systems, scaling down system expenses so as to pass on savings to weaker social sections, ensuring equitable supply to marginalized social sections who cannot pay for water and similar thrust areas cannot by definition, be within the framework of private players' agenda in the water sector. Reducing the cost of supplying water while ensuring equitable supply to all citizens can only occur successfully in water systems which function on the recognition that water is a community resource to be shared amongst all, and which is not to be regarded as a commodity from which profits are made.

For the last 25 years the IFIs have succeeded in creating a myth about the efficacy of privatizing the water sector. Using a variety of strategies, including media-campaigns and influencing research institutions through grant of funds, they successfully created a seeming consensus amongst opinion shapers, law makers and intelligentsia against the public utilities as failed enterprises, beyond change and which can no longer be trusted to deliver water; as part of the same logic was the assertion that when water is provided free it will be misused and wasted and imposing a cost on water will help reduce consumption. The final part of the logic was the view that water was an economic commodity which had an economic value as a tradeable object in the water marketplace.

What is less known to most people is that many of the assertions of the IFIs about the nature of water sector reforms including price fixation and privatization are not based on proven research. Yet the logic of the IFIs have become so pervasive and internalised by decision makers that one part of the struggle to reclaim water as a common resource is to break free from the mythologies created by the IFIs as solutions to the water crisis.

It is in this scenario that the TWAD democratisation experiment becomes a critically important success highlighting the potential inherent in focusing on governance reform in the water sector. While not diminishing the importance or need for technical

upgradation or financial investment, the lessons learnt only underscore that these inputs will need to be seen as components of a wider plan for solution, not as the solution itself.

The words of a Village Panchayat President of another democratisation village, Ramainahalli in Dharmapuri district , Mr. Raghunathan sums up best the critical core of the issue confronting the water sector:

“Good governance and community participation in water management are the essential building blocks for water sector reform. Only through a partnership between people who have suffered for want of water and water agencies who believe in democratic functioning can we ensure safe, equitable and adequate water and understand the need for conservation of resources and ensuring sustainable water systems”.

The unreached millions all around the world who suffer for want of water need to be at the centre of any effort to solve the water crisis. The Tamil Nadu experiment with ensuring that water ‘reaches the unreached’ in an ‘equitable’ and ‘sustainable manner’ is an example that a partnership between public service providers and the community is not only possible but can succeed also.

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