

# Watersheds: Putting the Cart before the Horse

R S DESHPANDE

A continuation of the discussion on new structures for watershed development programmes (July 8, 2006; October 7, 2006 and December 9, 2006) and a highlighting of the issues that the National Rainfed Area Authority has to address if it is to be successful in revitalising watershed development and rainfed agriculture.

The Technical Committee (2005) constituted by the ministry of rural development to review the Drought Prone Area Programme (DPAP), Desert Development Programme (DDP) and Integrated Wasteland Development Project (IWDP) under the chairmanship of S Parthasarathy submitted its Report in January 2006, creating a glimmer of hope for rainfed agriculture. Most prominently, the Parthasarathy Committee Report (PCR) recommended the formation of the National Authority for Sustainable Development of Rainfed Areas (NASDORA), and the new authority, the National Rainfed Area Authority (NRAA) came into being sans “sustainable development” in its name.

The PCR is also considered as the new Neeranchal guidelines for watershed development programmes in the country and unfolds a very ambitious structure to govern watershed developments. This is the ninth set of guidelines for watershed development programmes during the last two decades, almost averaging two years of life for every set of guidelines.

After the PCR was submitted, the NRAA was not established after almost nine months due to the tussles between the ministry bhavans in New Delhi and due to unknown bottlenecks. Even now one cannot say that the establishment of NRAA follows in full measure the recommendations of the PCR in letter and spirit. But those concerned with rainfed agriculture must welcome this pragmatic step. J S Samra, a renowned soil scientist has been appointed as chief executive officer (CEO) of the organisation and one can perceive an optimistic future for the NRAA.

This is an attempt to visit some of the issues that need to be brought to the fore for streamlining policy. A number

of pages have been written on the PCR, including in this journal (July 8, 2006). Now that the NRAA has been established, it is essential to revisit the issues raised and set the tone for its implementation.

## Precincts of PCR

PCR was commissioned broadly to (i) modify the existing criteria for categorisation of arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas taking into consideration the climatic and biotic factors and identifying the blocks for DDP and DPAP; (ii) examine peoples’ participation, alternative livelihood and maintenance of assets for effective delivery of benefits; (iii) examine DPAP, DDP, IWDP, National Watershed Development Programme for Rainfed Areas (NWDPRRA) and other programmes for convergence; and (iv) examine public private partnership in these areas [PCR 2006: TOR, p 221]. The report has addressed the terms of reference (TOR). But the entire focus was on restructuring the programmes and establishment of NASDORA. Some of the important principles recommended include professionalism, opening up, accountability of performance, security of tenure, convergence, sustainable livelihood, answerability to panchayati raj institutions (PRIs), stakeholders’ participation, and social and physical audit.

The discussion in this journal on the PCR offered a very limited critique and largely endorsed the recommendations. The one positive critique was of V Ratna Reddy (October 7, 2006) but that was strongly critiqued by Mihir Shah (December 9, 2006).

Most of the authors who contributed earlier in the discussion on the report specifically emphasised that PCR will cause significant reforms in the ongoing watershed development programmes, and that everything would be set right. With a slow but steadily drifting away from the focus of the TOR, the PCR emphasised NASDORA, sidelining the first two issues of the TOR. The emphasis was on creation of an institutional structure, which it was claimed would eliminate all the problems in the

R S Deshpande ([deshpande@isec.ac.in](mailto:deshpande@isec.ac.in)) is at the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore.

present system, interestingly borrowing knowledge and personnel from the existing system itself.

### One-sided Review

The PCR claimed it offered a review of the watershed development programme in the country and had had discussions with many. These, however, seemed to be totally one-sided and did not do justice to the state sector programmes. It is noted that the committee had discussions with the officers of various state governments, and we believe that the statements made in EPW by Shah (one of the members of the committee) about the state-led watershed development programmes emerge out of the discussions with the officers of the ministry of rural development and state governments. If that is so, then the success of NRAA is also doubtful. Shah said on the role of the existing state sector watershed development programmes:

a key factor explaining its (watershed development programmes under government implementation) failures that the overwhelming proportion of the programme has been implemented by all manner of government officials – unmotivated, overworked, cynical, corrupt and fragmented. These officials have not involved stakeholders in the programme and made little efforts to build local institutions, characterised by equity. The best work has undoubtedly been done by the voluntary sector. Oases of excellence in vast desert of incompetence, corruption and lassitude [Mihir Shah 2006a: 2982].

Such a comment has been made without any pragmatic analysis of the programmes in the government sector, leave alone learn from them. Unfortunately, this comes without analysing a single case of watershed development programme under the government sector. Should we believe that these findings are from the experience of the officers involved with the PCR and the discussions PCR had with the state governments? More than that in order to advance the case of the new guidelines, it was not necessary to criticise so strongly un-named officers of the government, many of whom managed the programmes effectively and have set examples. But beyond that the remarks will reflect on the working of the NRAA as officers of similar vintage will be on the scene in the proposed structure.

It is painful that PCR neither attempted any analysis of government sector programmes nor bothered to scan through the literature on the programmes (except a few scattered references). Under the TOR, PCR was required to examine the integration of various programmes, and that required looking into the existing programmes and the causes of their failures. One fails to understand why the PCR ignored studies on NWDPR, Sujala and other successful state government programmes, where definite success has been recorded.

While writing on PCR, Vaidyanathan (2006) has been more careful and emphasises that technology and knowledge base deserve greater attention than they are given in the report. He also forewarns the likely sources of resistance, knowing fully well the assimilation of the changing structure in the present bureaucratic and political set-up. The beginning of it was seen in the delay in formation of NASDORA. He also stated that, “the idea of a single unified watershed programme from the micro shed upward, however, seems unlikely for reasons cited” [Vaidyanathan 2006: 2987].

### Getting Implementation Right

Let me revisit the first and the only critical appraisal made by V Ratna Reddy (2006). Reddy tried to critically appraise the incremental contributions of the Neeranchal guidelines for improving the “effectiveness of the programme”. He records nine guidelines and found a little deviation in the last three guidelines. It is well taken that guidelines should be flexible with the changing policies in dynamic processes, but the pace at which such changes take place did not allow any degrees of freedom for understanding and stabilising even the process of implementation. With this background, Reddy attempted to assess the merit of the Neeranchal guidelines (or PCR) comparing them with the earlier two existing watershed guidelines [GoI 1994 and GoI 2006]. Despite participation of NGOs in the watershed development programmes (Sujala of Karnataka) and adopting different sets of guidelines, the overall performance of the programmes remained at the same level as in pre-1994 guidelines. Besides the six major

changes (recorded by VRR), the Neeranchal guidelines do not deviate from the earlier two guidelines in either content or spirit of the programme. Hence, VRR rightly concluded that the crux lies in better implementation rather than changes in the organisational structure of the programme.

Considering the creation of the apex body, NASDORA, Reddy pointed out that the body has a narrow mandate of managing primarily central government and funded watershed programmes. Quite correctly Reddy warned that without departmental integration, the livelihood issues could not be effectively addressed for making watershed development central in the context of overall rural development. And this cannot be achieved by hiring persons from outside the system. What comes out of the formation of NRAA vindicates what VRR has stated, “Instead of correcting the problems at the implementation level, new implementation structures are invented” [Reddy 2006: 4295]. He very correctly raised doubts about the efficacy of hiring professionals from line departments, NGOs or from the market. It needs to be recognised that implementation of the programme critically depends on the quality of government bureaucrats and NGOs. The earlier experience in Indian administration of deputation out of line departments has not been very encouraging as the officers will have to continue their ties with the parent department and hence the approach is usually half-hearted.

Shah stated that, “PCR suggests ‘shedding watershed fundamentalism’ and linking activities of watershed projects to the larger question of sustainable livelihood” [Shah 2006b: 5086]. Even in the mandate NRAA finds only an incidental mention of this and one tends to go by VRR’s observation that “Unless the bottlenecks in effective implementation are identified and corrected, there is no rationale for adding new guidelines” [Reddy 2006: 4295]. VRR also critiqued the creation of milli-watersheds since it militates against the participatory philosophy. It is true that the source of limited participation has not been the size of the programme, rather it is the conflict in the prioritisation of works, administrative hierarchies and nature of involvement.

This is the ground truth. According to VRR, a substantial improvement in livelihood can only be achieved in the regions where there is significant improvement in water availability and irrigated agriculture. In the regions having average rainfall below 700 mm, the spread of benefits would be limited unless effective resource management strategies and non-farm supporting activities are encouraged. This again has to be an important component of the mandate for NRAA. Finally, the critical issue that VRR stressed is that as long as these structures (proposed by PCR) have to operate in the same environment (socio-economic and political and policy), the expected outcomes will not be very different. Therefore, attempts should be made in the direction of changing the implementation environment. Are these on the way in the NRAA?

### Advocating Reforms

VRR rightly raised the issue of departmental integration and implementation as crucial prerequisites in the context. But Shah took it as an unfounded critique brushing aside this important administrative acceptance. The NRAA is not chaired by the prime minister and a few ministers as vice-chairpersons as recommended by the PCR. Reddy has been vindicated as he understood the Indian administrative system better. Anyone reading the PCR would not have taken long to realise that such an organisation seldom works. Now as the composition and mandate of NRAA is very clear, one must revisit the points of implementation made by VRR.

The necessity of having an integrated approach to address rural livelihood issues made by VRR was critiqued by Shah saying that NASDORA would ensure that. But have we taken note of the various programmes across ministries for improving rural livelihood and could these have been brought under the one umbrella of NASDORA? Integration of departments under different ministries dealing with land, water, forest and people to make watershed development central in the context of overall rural development is needed. But when the simple step of establishing NRAA took so much time between ministries, can one imagine the kind of discussions and confusions at the lower level that would come

up soon? Here one must note the warning of Vaidyanathan quoted above who further added: "The politicians and bureaucracy, being involved in operations at the ground level, have far better opportunities for patronage and corruptions" [Vaidyanathan 2006: 2986]. How one overtakes this is a challenge and that remained unaddressed in PCR and NRAA.

### Tasks before NRAA

The NRAA has been put in place and the tasks before the new agency are multifold. Essentially it begins by pooling together all the programmes on watershed development and rainfed agriculture presently existing under different names. NRAA should attend to a few priority issues. First, as PCR envisaged it did not come about under the prime minister and is thus diluted in its present form. It will therefore be necessary to establish its administrative primacy among the existing structures. Second, it is surprising that the list of experts to be on the NRAA begins with experts in water management, agriculture/horticulture, animal husbandry, etc, and watershed comes at the end of the list.

The priority in implementation should not be in that order and watershed management must become the first task. Livelihood priority or social engineering is totally taken for granted and we find no social scientists among the experts. Third, the body has not remained lean (as expected) and is expected to grow in future. This must be carefully addressed. But given all these limitations, we need to work for the success of NRAA, as it is the dream of the farmers from rainfed areas. Therefore, it will be essential to locate the best practices in the government-led

programmes (not dumping them altogether), as well as in the non-governmental sectors.

Presently, we have two currents in the process of understanding the watershed development programmes in the country. The first one totally condemns the state-led programmes under the government implementing agencies, whereas, the second one only highlights the success of NGOs, brushing under the carpet their failures. Fundamentalism of either type will be detrimental to any effective implementation of the programme. It will be essential therefore to combine the best practices in the state as well as in the non-state sectors. Then we need to address some of the very pertinent questions such as: How do we go about dropping watershed fundamentalism via NRAA? And how do we link activities of watershed projects to the larger question of sustainable livelihood? Has NRAA really got the broad mandate envisaged by PCR? Can NRAA achieve the administrative integration surmised by the PCR, Shah and VRR at the country, state and PRI levels? These questions call for answers.

### REFERENCES

- Government of India (1994): *Guidelines for Watershed Development*, Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi.
- (2003): *Watershed Guidelines*, Hariyali, Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi.
  - (2006): *From Hariyali to Neeranchal*, Report of the Technical Committee on Watershed Programmes in India (Chairman: Parthasarathy), Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi.
- Reddy, V Ratna (2006): 'Getting the Implementation Right - Can the Proposed Watershed Guidelines Help?', *Economic & Political Weekly*, October 7.
- Shah, Mihir (2006a): 'Towards Reforms', *Economic & Political Weekly*, July 8.
- (2006b): 'Reforms for Watershed', *Economic & Political Weekly*, December 9.
- Vaidyanathan, A (2006): 'Restructuring Watershed Development Programmes', *Economic & Political Weekly*, July 8.

### For the Attention of Subscribers and Subscription Agencies Outside India

It has come to our notice that a large number of subscriptions to the EPW from outside the country together with the subscription payments sent to supposed subscription agents in India have not been forwarded to us.

We wish to point out to subscribers and subscription agencies outside India that all foreign subscriptions, together with the appropriate remittances, must be forwarded to us and not to unauthorised third parties in India.

We take no responsibility whatsoever in respect of subscriptions not registered with us.

MANAGER