

India:
Mainstreaming Gender in Participatory Irrigation Management:
The Case of AKRSP

Established in 1983, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) of India is a non-profit organisation working to organise and empower rural communities and marginalized groups, particularly women, through natural resource management interventions in three districts of Gujarat. Central to these capacity building efforts is the organisation of a variety of formal and informal village level institutions where AKRSP facilitates participatory planning and mechanisms for conflict resolution as well as mainstreaming gender concerns. In addition, since the early 1990s AKRSP has been systematically involved in both policy advocacy on Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) as well as in organizing farmers to manage their own canal irrigation systems through water user associations and irrigation cooperatives. Involving women in such efforts is a more recent development, partly arising from AKRSP's own re-thinking about the need to address gender equity concerns in PIM right from the beginning, and partly from ongoing efforts at gender-sensitive organisational transformation. Significantly, these engendering processes were facilitated by AKRSP's second director, a man committed to addressing gender inequalities. In the process, AKRSP has been consistently trying to demystify commonly held perceptions which view farming and irrigation as primarily male occupations, by illustrating rural women's predominant role in the larger agriculture system, which includes irrigation.

Insights on gender differences were drawn from participatory exercises with a range of canal irrigation societies in AKRSP's programmes dominated by *adivasi* (indigenous people in the area of South Gujarat). Shilpa Vasavada (2000) argues that women are involved in a number of irrigation activities, such as canal maintenance, field bunding, watering and/or supervising during the day and at night and conflict management on fields and along canals. Yet despite these roles, women often have little say in decision-making as they are only nominal members of the canal societies.

Participatory irrigation and the state

In 1995, the Gujarat government declared a policy on Participatory Irrigation Management, calling for the participation of farmers in the planning, implementation and management of medium and minor irrigation projects. The government also sought the cooperation of NGOs as catalysts for implementation of the policy. A legal framework for involving NGOs and farmers was established and ambitious targets for bringing in 50 per cent of the total irrigable command area under PIM by the year 2003 were defined.

However, except for the limited efforts of a handful of NGOs, such as AKRSP, little was achieved in terms of handing over responsibility for water distribution at the tertiary level to farmers. The chief reason for this was the sheer reluctance of the bureaucracy to share decision-making power with the farmers or to give up the rent-seeking practices that are now endemic to public management systems. Some efforts were made in 1996-1997 to initiate participatory training for the irrigation bureaucracy to influence their attitudes and

behaviour, but their stubborn resistance to attend such trainings meant that even this initiative was eventually abandoned.

AKRSP: addressing gender concerns

Meanwhile, discussions were initiated in AKRSP concerning the need to integrate gender in irrigation. Several staff members, though acknowledging the principles of gender equity, found it difficult to integrate such concerns as an 'add on' in already existing projects. Not only was the task of organizing (male) farmers itself massive, the reluctance from the state government to any sort of power sharing, let alone addressing gender, was considerable. It was not till 1997-98 that opportunities emerged for AKRSP to look at gender in new canal projects, making efforts to involve women right from the project inception stage.

Support for AKRSP's efforts at enhancing women's membership in PIM societies came, not surprisingly, from *adivasi* men. Interviews with *adivasi* men in a cross section of PIM societies revealed that they felt strongly about women's inherent capabilities in handling conflicts better than men and in exhibiting more self-discipline when it comes to framing and enforcing rules (Vasavada, 2000). Men claimed that women are more sincere both in terms of collecting irrigation dues and saving money at the household level. In cases where women have been trained as canal supervisors, they have also been more effective than men in ensuring that water is not wasted and that irrigators do not take water out of turn.

In addition to these direct impacts of involving women in irrigation decision-making, the AKRSP case illustrates that canal water has multiple uses for women, such as bathing and washing clothes and utensils, as well as for livestock. It is increasingly being recognized that these gendered needs ought to be addressed in the design of irrigation systems and the adoption of rules governing access to water by PIM societies. However, such efforts will not be sustainable unless gender concerns in PIM are placed in the larger context of equity where water needs of the landless and other stakeholders also need to be addressed.

To summarise some of the key findings of AKRSP's strategy:

- As an important starting point, AKRSP has been systematically undertaking gender sensitization training of its staff at all levels to challenge perceptions and attitudes on women's roles and capabilities in natural resource management.
- Building on the success of similar endeavours is essential – for example, women in other project villages had been managing group-well irrigation schemes successfully before AKRSP thought of involving women in PIM.
- Capacity building is important. This includes exposure to other development organisations where women are managing irrigation interventions effectively.
- Women need to be involved from the beginning so that they can also be exposed to the negotiation process with the irrigation bureaucracy, rather than waiting for irrigation societies to start functioning efficiently before addressing equity.
- To facilitate and encourage women's participation in PIM, it is necessary not only to convince women, but also to involve them in other development interventions

which address their practical gender needs, such as savings and credit groups. Strong group formation, both mixed and women only, are integral to AKRSP's success in its efforts to involve women in PIM.

AKRSP's success shows that NGOs can and should demonstrate models that challenge legal criteria for membership which link water rights to landownership. Such models must illustrate that involving women is not only a question of empowering them, but also of managing community irrigation more efficiently, effectively and equitably, in order to have a strong role in influencing policy and legislation.

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