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Water governance and public participation: what matters?

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Major transition in global water governance includes promotion of integrated water resources management, river basin approaches, decentralization, and involvement of stakeholders against traditional top-down and centrally driven decision-making processes. Although participatory approaches are important to enhance sustainable water governance, engaging general public in the water governance process itself is often a challenge across globe. This note draws perspectives on some of the major challenges faced in India to ensure effective participation in water governance with a focus on factors that motivate the general public to get involved in the process and the necessary changes that may facilitate improving the participatory governance.

During the past decade, water governance has experienced a major shift globally, from technology-oriented, centralized approaches towards multi-level, decentralized and user-centred approaches. In both developing and developed countries, inclusion of different levels of governance, decentralization, public participation, promotion of integrated water resource management (IWRM), and the emergence of the river basin as an important scale of planning and intervention are significant trends of changing governance^{1,2}. There is a growing perception that the governance of water resources and water services functions more effectively with an open social structure which enables broader participation by civil society, private enterprises and the media, all networking to support and influence the government³. The requirements and benefits of the inclusion and empowerment of local actors/stakeholders in the water sector are widely discussed in many of the national water policies. Mexican National Water Act, 1992, South African Water Resource Policy, 1997, European Water Framework Directive (WFD), 2000, and Indian National Water Policy (NWP), 2001 are some of the global examples of adapting water law and policy to reflect the changing circumstances facing water resources management⁴.

Structural changes are currently underway in India on how water is governed and managed in order to deal more effectively with challenges of increasing water stress. The Hanumantha Rao Committee (1994) brought a real shift in Indian watershed management and water governance by recommending participatory/user-centred approaches which later got strengthened through NWP, 2001 and 2012, and through several other national programmes and guidelines, including the Integrated Watershed Development Project, Command Area Development Programmes, Hariyali, Western Ghats Development Programme, and National Watershed Development Programme for Rain-fed Areas. In May 2016, the Union Ministry for Water Resources, Government of India released a Draft National Water Bill that stresses on 'people-centred' decentralized water management through encouraging and empowering local initiatives. Though participatory water governance is perceived as a good governance strategy across the world, it is often challenging to ensure involvement of the general public in this process. Also, it is important to address this challenge to ensure sustainable water resources management.

Finding out what motivates the general public to get involved in the water governance process is often difficult.

Perhaps the most important factor in determining an individual's willingness to participate is rooted in socio-cultural milieu⁴. Material incentives (such as funded projects) may encourage participation of citizens or people may contribute their time and resources⁵. Absence of tangible benefits is found to be one of the reasons for non-participation in ground water governance in the villages of Andhra Pradesh, India⁶. Where participation is a voluntary process, financial barriers as well as expectation of rewards for volunteering can be significant in preventing them from participating in the process. There are instances in Kerala where people moved back from the watershed management projects as the Gram Panchayat failed to provide financial incentives for their voluntary participation. During the implementation of integrated watershed management programme in Idukki district, Kerala, people were initially enthusiastic to achieve the goals but after a few weeks they lost interest when they realized that achieving the objectives takes much longer time than anticipated. In a few Panchayats (e.g. Kumili, Kerala), there have been incidents when people participated in the process just expecting financial incentives, and none of them was aware of the objectives of the programme or watershed management goals. After consulting

with several Panchayats, it has been found that in many watershed management projects the concept of 'participatory water management/governance' is being (mis)used only as a means to attract funding, while in some other cases the assumption by higher-level authorities that the general public is not interested in river and water management resulted in attracting minimum participation from them.

A perceived conflict of interest, a controversial issue, or the sense that public values or concerns are being ignored can all motivate a high level of participation. But once these issues are resolved, most people will lose interest, and lead organizations will need to find creative ways to periodically bring perspectives from the wider public into water planning and management processes⁷. The Alappuzha-Sherthalai canal renovation project under Hariyali programme in Alappuzha district, Kerala is a good example of successful canal renovation with peoples' participation. This highly polluted and segmented canal was successfully renovated with community participation in order to promote multiple aspects, including improvement of water quality, development of fisheries and agriculture, community empowerment, etc. A few years later, this attempt has not yielded the desired results mainly due to lack of maintenance following renovation⁸. Continuous public engagement and encouragement to participate is vital to maintain the good status of water resources. Actions and organizational capacity of collective leaders can be useful to improve and retain community participation. Ralegan Siddhi village of Maharashtra is an example that shows involvement and participation of the people is possible provided there is a committed and sincere leadership to educate, organize and motivate them for the attainment of a common goal⁹.

The debates continue over the relative importance of voice or choice¹⁰. Though most of the participatory governance pro-

grammes are successful at the lower scale, they are not successful while up-scaled. When the public feel that their concerns are increasingly bypassed when it comes to decision-making processes at higher administrative levels, they are less likely to participate. Here issues in handling peoples' opinion about management and conservation strategies, lack of feedback from the authorities to the public on their opinions, etc. would limit or restrict participation of the general public in the process. If it is not made adequately clear how the interests, concerns and proposals put forward by the participants have been used, trust tends to be eroded and the public become less willing to participate⁷. Often public participation is a formal bureaucratic exercise carried out only to fulfil procedural requirements, or an exercise designed to propagate government policy¹¹. Participatory management is a continuous process and ensuring sustained participation requires adequate funding, exchange of ideas and learning, trust-building, encouragement for social innovation and, above all, motivation.

In our country, the use of participatory methods in water governance is growing, but there is still a need of strengthening the participatory approaches to promote sustainable water management. In India, along with establishing newer institutions for the effective engagement of local actors, participatory mechanisms should be strengthened in ways which ensure that citizens are aware that their opinions are heard in the decision-making process. In order to achieve this, it is important to: (i) clearly spell out the scope of participation, role of each stakeholder in the decision-making process, clear modalities to meet the aspirations of the people and sharing ownership with them; (ii) ensure that the participants are able to perceive benefits from participation that exceed the cost, which should be done through elaborating the objective of the programme and capacity-building; (iii) institutionalize the participatory

methods backed-up by legislation and associated regulations, policy standardization and centralization and (iv) design monitoring and enforcement powers by higher authorities rather than local actors. Multi-scale participation warrants a wide array of activities as aspiration changes with changing scale of projects. Nevertheless, public participation is essential in water governance, and the challenge is to ensure effective participation.

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