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Whither partnership

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Whither Partnership

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Development strategies in recent years have undergone a dramatic shift, with the emphasis changing from State being a central actor toward greater participation by a variety of other actors, including local governments, NGOs, CBOs and the people themselves. This calls for a major institutional reorientation at the policy level to ensure responsiveness to local demand and to empower and enable local communities to act. Partnership is one such mechanism that is being increasingly sought to get away from state-centric approach. Partnerships are joint initiatives of the public sector in conjunction with the private, for-profit and not-for-profit sectors, also referred to as government, business and civic sectors. Within this arrangement each of the actors contributes resources such as financial, human, technical and intangibles such as information or political support⁵. The present paper examines the sector reforms approach *vis a vis* the traditional PRED-RWS (Panchayatiraj Engineering Division Rural Water Supply) type of providing rural water and sanitation services and makes a case for partnership as a critical institutional mechanism to implement the demand driven approach piloted by government of India in selected districts of the country.

Rural Water and Sanitation Service Sector

National guidelines and investments in rural water supply and sanitation (RWSS) sector have traditionally focused on extending coverage of villages at the expense of quality of services. Public RWSS services are poorly designed and constructed, oftentimes designed and positioned at sites without consideration to community needs or preferences². Planning of RWSS services also took place with out due attention to resource availability or quality and is rarely financially viable. Systems often fail due to poor operation and maintenance. The end result is a government dominated target-driven service that has become unsustainable institutionally, financially and environmentally³.

The Government has realized that investments alone are not enough, as systems are failing to be sustained. Therefore, a new approach based on managing water as a commodity has been proposed in 8th plan document (1992-97). However, the approach was not translated into action during the plan period for want of suitable

mechanisms for implementation⁴. Presently (1999 - 2000 onwards) Government of India is piloting the demand driven approach under Sector Reforms for water and sanitation in 67 districts of the country. The major emphasis in Sector Reforms approach is the changed role of government from provider of service to a promoter and - users having a central role in designing and maintaining the service. A comparison of the new approach with the traditional is summarized in Table 1. Sector reforms evidently turn the conventional departmental approach on its head.

That the new approach, save a few pilot districts, did not catch up yet in implementation even two years after its launch in the country calls for a serious rethink⁷. Given the multiple facets of the program, a partnership approach which ensures that institutions with different capacities and mandates participate in the implementation with shared responsibilities, would be in order.

What the State should do

The greatest contribution government can make towards partnership is to provide space for other actors/ organizations in implementing the rural water and sanitation services. In other words NGOs, CBOs, gram panchayat and private sector should be able to take care of certain tasks specifically devolved to be handled by them. Government officials with departmental affiliations often work in an isolated, monolithic fashion; so in the first place government representatives should be trained so that they can effectively work with the non-government partners. For partnership to flourish it is not enough that Government is permissive, it has to be promotional with regard to other actors. Principle of subsidiarity must be the guiding factor for working with non-state actors. According to this principle if a decision can be taken at lower level it should not be taken at higher level.

NGOs and private consultant firms

NGOs have the advantage of being closer to the target community and their incentive structures, unlike government staff, can often be tailored more easily to match the requirements of the user groups or beneficiaries. However, a majority of them lack capacities and resources. That good NGOs are not available - is the stand often taken by the public sector. A key factor

Table 1—Contrasting features of PRED-RWS and Sector Reforms

Criteria	RWS	Sector Reforms
Central Role	Government	People/users/clients
Dominant feature	Supply/provision of Service	Demand based
Goal	Coverage	Sustainability
Basis for service	Affordability	Willingness to pay
Role of government	Provider	Promoter
Role of people	Recipient	Manager
Role of women	Nil	High
Multiple Actors	State monopoly	Users, panchayat, NGO, State and Private sector
Partnership scope	Nil	High
Capital contribution	100% by Government	Minimum 10% by users
O & M	State	Users
Level of management	Higher level compared to users	Lowest appropriate level-habitation
Capacity requirement in users	Low	High
Need for IEC	Low	High
Dependence on government	High	Low
Resource Management	Water is a basic resource to be provided free of cost	Water is a social and economic commodity and should be managed as such
Basis for prioritization	Need/Problem	Demand/felt need
Source protection	Measures not forthcoming	Integral part of the program
Surveillance and quality monitoring	Limited	Put in place
Life time cost of service	High leading to diseconomies of scale	Low because of preventive maintenance
Political patronage	High, because it provides for free riders	Relatively low because users have to pay
Incentive for officials	High because of their role in decision making	Disincentive, their power is taken away by users

for working with private firms or NGOs appears to be the availability of organizational capacity to perform tasks on a larger scale than they had been previously engaged. Dedicated groups may work exceedingly well on a small scale, during which the focus of their attention and expertise is concentrated on a few users. Once the scale begins to increase, management and organizational complexities begin diluting the group's effectiveness.

Community based Organizations and User groups

Partnerships would be meaningful only when they entail capacities and empowerment to the men and women members of the community who are the ultimate users of water and sanitation services. Otherwise public-

private partnership would be mere Development rhetoric. Access to information, and training are crucial in building up the capacities of user groups. That services are community managed as judged by their - responsibility, authority and control - in designing, owning and managing the infrastructure and service delivery should be the test for proving the effectiveness an efficiency of partnership. A lot of resources and time have to be invested to realize this goal¹.

Local government

Gram panchayats are the lowest tier in the local administrative framework and there are approximately 250,000 Gram panchayats in India, each of which serves

an average population of 5,000. Gram panchayats have the power to make by-laws and constitute statutory bodies with responsibility for handling government funds, collecting revenue and delegating responsibilities. However in practice, Constitutional amendments notwithstanding, their resources and capacities are still limited. Based on broad cost assumptions an estimated Rs 29 billion would be required annually to fund the appropriate level of operations and maintenance of all public rural water supply systems in the country³. Presuming the rural population in the country is 0.67 billion, the per capita cost of O & M works out at Rs 143 per anum. There are very few panchayats in the country which have a matching revenue of that order. Further, village panchayats have responsibility for providing other core services like primary education, health, drainage, rural roads and street lighting as well. Therefore, Sector Reforms Program should be taken as an opportunity for realizing the much needed revenue in the form of user charges. Panchayat provides statutory recognition for users and an organised, capacitated users group will make the service viable and sustainable by taking full responsibility for O & M.

Business sector as a partner

Business sector as a partner in demand driven water and sanitation services certainly holds a promise. But it is important that the user group at village/habitation level should first become "business" so that they will be able to negotiate with the business sector to get what they want for what they are willing to pay for. Otherwise they will have little to gain from for-profit actors⁶.

In sum, the paternalistic departmental approaches of the PRES-RWS should give way to a client-focused, community demand driven orientation in which government facilitates local actions by State and non-state actors in determining local water and sanitation needs and in designing options to address those needs. Government should frame simple rules and procedures

by way of creating enabling environment for NGOs, private consultant firms and other front line workers who, over time, constitute a resource pool. In a community managed context, user groups or their federations should be allowed choice whom to contract from among the resource pool.

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