

# Can grassroots influence policy?

Reducing poverty and preserving natural resources for use by future generations are among the principal aims declared by many state governments in semi-arid areas of India. Yet it is paradoxical that many of the programmes implemented to achieve these aims have unintentionally been responsible for undermining them.

## COMMON POOL RESOURCES

The poor and disadvantaged have traditionally relied upon natural resources such as forests, community pastures and ponds as an invaluable source of sustenance and income for household survival, opportunities for risk sharing and coping with seasonal crises or shocks such as sickness and drought. Most are landless and so do not own resources in the normal sense of the word but they use them in an apparently unregulated fashion commonly described as open access, which means there is no effective owner or secured rights. The resources they use are often called *Common Pool Resources* (CPRs) and include village pastures, threshing grounds, waste dumping sites, firewood collection areas, sites for religious functions and burial grounds. Farmers' fields can also be very important seasonal CPRs to which others have customary rights to graze their animals during the postharvest period.

It is unfortunate that many of the current state development policies aimed principally at improving the management of natural resources have actually led to a significant reduction in CPRs and this in turn has tended to further marginalise the poor and disadvantaged. The introduction of large-scale privatisation of



*It is paradoxical that many development programmes designed to help the poor have unintentionally had the opposite effect*

common grazing lands and their enclosure by forest and watershed management projects, for example, has resulted in a dramatic reduction in common grazing land and many landless people have had to sell their livestock as a result. New local governments and electoral politics have also exacerbated the problem by breaking down the old feudal management systems, which were largely responsible for their stability and proper maintenance. At the same time, many of the new large-scale development initiatives have given rise to other forms of common property that require new and appropriate management regimes for their sustained and equitable use.

Innovative ways of managing existing and new CPRs are needed to ensure that the poor and landless engage more fully at the grassroots level. But equally important is the need to find ways in which these grassroots issues can be fed back into the formulation of state policies so that account can be taken of the importance of CPRs and the

## *New ways of managing CPRs are needed to ensure that the poor and landless engage fully at the grassroots*

complex local political issues that surround them. Planners too can then begin to appreciate the dependence of poor communities on them.

The Natural Resources Institute in UK in association with the Central Research Institute for Dryland Agriculture, Hyderabad and two Indian NGOs have been investigating these issues with the aim of understanding the current status, trends, dynamics, livelihood contributions and management systems of CPRs in India.

This has led to a number of important findings and the identification of key researchable issues that would enable new management strategies to be introduced and tested.

### IN ANDHRA PRADESH AND GUJARAT

Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat were the states chosen for the study. They contain vast semi-arid areas where CPRs have made a significant contribution to most people's livelihoods but have been severely degraded in recent years. A review of existing literature and data was complemented with stakeholder consultations undertaken by two local NGOs who examined case studies of both successful and unsuccessful CPR management systems in these states.

#### The problems

In both states, policies have encouraged the privatisation of land based CPRs. In Andhra Pradesh land reforms have meant that common land was converted into private land and a blind eye was often turned to privatisation through encroachment. Privatisation of CPRs is often justified on the grounds of increasing productivity and efficiency but this ignores the

issue of equity. Productivity and efficiency are important but how to build in equity and sustainability is a crucial question.

A major issue was the rapid expansion in the use of groundwater for irrigation. Over-exploitation of this source of water, fuelled by subsidies, has meant that only the wealthier farmers are able to afford the technology to pump the deeper water. Those relying on surface pumps are literally left high and dry. Excessive pumping has also led to seasonal drinking water shortages and saline intrusion in coastal aquifers.

Where formal attempts were made to set up community management systems they have not always met with success. In some cases they have led to the direct exclusion of stakeholders. A newly created Water User Association, for example, only recognised command area farmers as members. Other users of water such as fisherfolk, washers and cattle herders were excluded by law. Women too were excluded because membership was conditional upon having land titles.

An evaluation of a watershed development programme in Andhra Pradesh showed that stakeholders in 17 out of 27 watersheds had not been organised into groups. Where groups were formed, their roles and responsibilities were not always clear and they were liable to become defunct within a few years unless they were soundly constituted, and carefully nurtured in the initial stages.

Conflict within CPR management groups, and between those groups and neighbouring villages and hamlets was common, and tended to undermine management initiatives. The rigid nature of some development agency interventions did not help to resolve such conflicts, nor did the lack of a coherent policy



framework on CPRs among government departments that tended to deal with them in different ways. Some insist on uniformity, such as single village management units as opposed to multi-village or other arrangements when it is clear that this approach is inconsistent with the diverse social arrangements and relationships that exist in rural India.

#### Investment in CPRs

Significant investment will be needed to rehabilitate CPRs and increase their productivity. But there are those who argue that the costs of rehabilitation are just too high and in any case they are no longer relevant as they do not contribute to people's livelihoods as they did in the past. Evidence also suggests that communities are not good at managing them. These are broad generalisations, which may have relevance in some areas, but there is evidence that such criticisms do not apply to all CPRs and that they should be assessed on a case-by-case, area-by-area basis.

The economic decision is a difficult one as there is a major gap in knowledge of the costs and benefits of rehabilitating CPRs as well as the costs of their community management. Where there are clear and secure returns, or where the operating and maintenance costs are low, people have shown they are prepared to make the investment. Fishing communities in parts of Andhra Pradesh contribute in cash and

kind to maintain tanks and villagers in Gujarat voluntarily protect village pasturelands and repair the boundary wall each year. Policy makers and planners need to have a sound basis for prioritising investments, and research can contribute here, to develop ways to assist the process of prioritisation. The prospects for sustainability of people's livelihoods will be an important part of this research as will a thorough understanding of the complex range of factors that influence it.

#### Managing CPRs

At the grassroots level Panchayats are the elected village councils and they tend to be dominated by the elite. Many people argue that they are the most appropriate body to take on the management of CPRs but the study team did not find any examples of this. The



alternative is management by newly created community-based organisations (CBOs) but recognising that they are likely to include or even comprise the socially and economically deprived sections of society, they will need significant support in the early years. Priority should be given to villages where the prospects for avoiding conflicts or for managing them effectively are good. Criteria include villages with a homogeneous community, small in size and remote, with few or no political or factional conflicts and where their claim to the

resource is relatively undisputed by other villages or communities. In Anantapur District rural communities have evolved very effective arrangements for using irrigation tanks without hurting anyone's interests. One way forward is to learn from past and current situations. It is possible to compare and contrast different community management systems in similar socio-economic and agro-ecological conditions. Finding out the reasons why similar circumstances can produce a variety of approaches, some of which are successful and some not, would provide a valuable source of information for those planning new interventions.

#### Changing policies

At the state level the scaling up of effective participatory approaches to CPR management will undoubtedly require policy changes together with changes in the formulation of procedures and programmes. A re-examination of policies that encourage privatisation of CPRs is needed as well a better understanding of those aspects of policy that oppose or encourage encroachment. Clear guiding principles, operational mechanisms and administrative instruments will also be required to bring such changes into effect at the grassroots.

The livelihoods approach as promoted by DFID also offers an opportunity to work in a more integrated way rather than focusing on a single issue. Importantly, despite widespread problems there are success stories in managing CPRs and understanding the conditions and characteristics that have led to their success can provide insights into the requirements for their sustainable and equitable management. The changing nature of local politics and attempts to modify power relations in India has also provided new opportunities for new alliances and organisations to develop new ways of tackling old conflicts.

Some success

The project's research has clearly shown that effective management regimes do exist. This is in contrast to the commonly perceived picture of irreversible declines in capacity to manage CPRs for the common good. The urgent next step must be to communicate this to policy makers and other key players, such as donors, so that lessons learnt can be translated into policy initiatives.

#### R7877 Common pool resources in semi-arid India; dynamics, management and livelihood contribution

Barbara Adolph  
Natural Resources Institute  
University of Greenwich  
Central Avenue, Chatham Maritime  
Kent ME4 4TB  
Email: [b.adolph@gre.ac.uk](mailto:b.adolph@gre.ac.uk)

M Osman  
Central Research Institute for Dryland  
Agriculture (CRIDA)  
Santoshnagar, Hyderabad 500 059  
Andhra Pradesh  
Email: [mdosman@crida.ap.nic.in](mailto:mdosman@crida.ap.nic.in)

SK Anwar  
Centre for World Solidarity  
House No. 12-13-438, Street No.1  
Tarnaka, Secunderabad 500 017  
Andhra Pradesh  
Email: [cwsy@hd1.vsnl.net.in](mailto:cwsy@hd1.vsnl.net.in)

AK Gupta  
Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India)  
2nd floor, Choice Building  
Swastik Char Rasta, Navrangpura  
Ahmedabad 380 009, Gujarat  
Email: [akrspi@icenet.net](mailto:akrspi@icenet.net)