

Summary
The Relevance of Participation and Decentralization in Implementing Watershed Development Projects in India: What Works, What Doesn't?

David Ehrlich
Ronald Fernandes
Leviticus Turner II

The successful implementation of watershed projects is the most challenging policy challenge for governments, NGOs, and other organizations. Rural water policy theory is a contested area of nonprofit research; while most programs intend to include the popular concepts of implementation success in rural water supply, such as decentralization, participation, and appropriate and inexpensive technologies, considerable criticism has been leveled at organizations such as the World Bank for their failure to design and encourage these attributes into projects.

Due to challenging implementation complexities, most policies do not achieve their stated goals and suffer poor results and unintended consequences. This study focuses on measuring two concepts critical to the sustainable implementation of social change programs: participation and decentralization. The tension between top-down/centralized and bottom-up/decentralized management and policy implementation is strong across the literature and within organizations such as the World Bank.

We examine internal evaluation data on 58 rural village efforts to develop watershed and other community projects between 1995 and 2006 in Maharashtra, India. The projects were assisted by the Watershed Organization Trust, an umbrella nongovernmental organization initiated with funding from bilateral German aid in 1987. After much experimentation, WOTR's in 1993 adopted a more participatory approach. The new approach was designed to include the rural people as stakeholders and as equal partners in the social change process, with WOTR's role as "an enabling partner and catalyst." Development efforts have long sought replicable, scalable, and effective models; WOTR's success and growth provides just such a promising model: "[A]pproaches to watershed planning and implementation which are both participatory and easily replicable have remained elusive: most exhibit one or other of these characteristics, but not both (Farrington & Lobo, 1997)."

Our analysis of internal data collected by WOTR appears to reflect effective implementation of watershed projects. There is a strong linear relationship between better outcomes and several measures of greater participation and decentralization. Factor analysis loadings show separate clustering around both outcome and implementation factors. In sum, our analysis show that broad participation and decentralized control are related to a wide range of successful village development outcomes. Contrary to many writer's pessimism that successful implementation initiatives are too complex and contextual to be successfully replicated, decentralized and participatory implementation may be more replicable than centralized and comprehensive planning.