

POVERTY ALLEVIATION THROUGH BENEFICIARY PARTICIPATION LESSONS FROM MAHAWELI DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME – SRI LANKA

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka (MASL) has changed from an implementing construction management agency to a mechanism capable of efficiently and productively managing natural resources in the Mahaweli River Basin in an environmentally sustainable manner. MASL is now challenged to facilitate sustainable development in the Mahaweli Development program and operate the Mahaweli River System and its irrigation and hydropower network efficiently for the overall benefit of the country. To effectively carry out the tasks of the second phase of development which is called the Human Development Phase, the organization needed an efficient and skilled workforce to promote greater income generation by the settlers, integrate economic, social and environmental, programmes to uplift the communities to develop and implement resource management plans for the Mahaweli River Basin and to commercialise suitable operations. To achieve this task, Mahaweli Development Program had to develop and implement a strategy for sustainable development in the Mahaweli development area. For this purpose MASL has to largely focus the attention to working intensively at grass roots levels.

02. DEVELOPMENT

My experience in regard to the intervention in development work is that the development workers have all kinds of excuses for not achieving the set objectives of development. Instead of the the people or the beneficiaries making mistakes, the development workers themselves make more mistakes in the name of development. People's voice should be heard and listened to.

The main challenge faced by Mahaweli staff, in adopting the participatory approach to development is in taking on the role of facilitator. The settlers were given the central role in their own development, whilst the officers are acting as facilitators, providing the support, encouragement, build skills etc. The concept of participatory development has gained wide acceptance in development thinking. The National Policy of Sri Lanka places strong emphasis on participation of beneficiaries in development activities. Donor agencies, too, have participation as one of the key requirements for development initiatives. The timing is also right in the specific context of the MASL. The organization, which is in the process of re-structuring and rightsizing, envisages transfer of responsibilities to farmer organizations and other stakeholders. This calls for a transformation within the organization to become a facilitator, whilst making room for the farming community to become the driving force in the process of development.

During the second phase of development of Mahaweli, the attention is largely devoted to working intensively at grass root level. During the last four years MASL has pursued this goal satisfactorily and demonstrated that participatory development can be realized within a large state-sector organization like MASL.

03. LEARNING FROM OTHER PROJECTS: KEY STRATEGIES OF THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

The real constraints to development identified in close consultation with the farmers were as follows :

- a “blue print” approach to development, which relegated farmers to a passive role
- dependency on the MASL leading to a loss of self-confidence and self-reliance among the population and sub-optimal use of resources
- lack of appropriate agricultural extension facilities to support farmers to maintain productivity leading to widespread indebtedness
- Poor social cohesion and weak organizational capacity, which adversely affected the local level organizations such as D-Canal Farmer Organizations.

Whilst addressing these constraints which are a hold-over from the earlier phase of development, it was obvious that development efforts could not be sustained without the participation of farmers. Ensuring full participation of farmers meant that farmers, both men and women are recognised as partners in the development process and not as mere recipients. Building such a partnership required two major changes: settlers re-gaining self-reliance in order to take over their responsibilities and manage their own affairs; MASL staff becoming facilitators in this process, recognizing and respecting the knowledge of settlers and supporting them to become self-reliant.

a. Community Mobilization and Organizational Strengthening based on a small group approach

The community mobilization based on participatory principles is an essential pre-requisite for organizational strengthening. If community organizations are to be successful, the people should “own” them. Such ownership is generated when people gain strength and self-confidence to become pro-active in their affairs, overcome their problems and assert their rights. Many community organizations within the Mahaweli settlements have failed because the aspect of mobilization was overlooked.

Analyzing these failures, the small neighborhood groups consisting of 5-10 members as its entry point for community mobilization has been adopted. Sharing of responsibilities, transparency in all group dealings, active participation of all members – both men and women, learning and sharing of experiences, building of social cohesion, fostering of ownership, mutual help and respect, promoting leadership and management at community level are among the many positive aspects of the small group approach. Members of such mobilized groups have the attitudes and skills to form the backbone of local organizations and to strengthen and sustain them as has been displayed through the Farmer Organization Strengthening Program initiated in MASL during this phase.

b. Farm Resource Management through farm planning, farmer experimentation and farmer to farmer extension

The mainstay of settlers in Mahaweli Settlements is agriculture, predominantly rice farming. Optimal use and management of farm resources (land, water, and labour) is therefore a key ingredient for sustainability. Aspects such as diversification (crops and livestock), mechanization, soil and water conservation, soil fertility have to be given their due place.

By promoting a Participatory Technology Development (PTD) approach, the knowledge of farmers is combined with that of outsiders (extensionists, researchers) and through a process of farmer experimentation, both parties collaborate actively in finding more locally - adapted and sustainable solutions to problems. This aspect was tested for reliability and adopted. Farm planning takes a holistic view of the home garden and paddy field as components of the farm in developing it sustainably, and gives farmers the key role in managing it. Farmers do

not only gain more insight into agricultural practices, but re-gain self reliance through enhancement of their problem-solving and decision- making capacity. Farmer to farmer extension is an effective way of spreading experiences and results.

Developing of site-specific solutions to problems, a larger number of replicates which provides more evidence on the suitability of solutions, enhanced decision making and problem solving capacity amongst farmers, improved resource management are among the benefits of this approach recognized by MASL.

c. Capacity Building of MASL staff in using participatory methodologies

Farmers taking the lead in their own development assisted by MASL field staff who take on the role of animators or facilitators of this process provides the basis for making the shift towards participatory development. But changes taking place at field level have to be supported and sustained through all layers within the organization.

04. INCORPORATING KEY STRATEGIES INTO THE MASL INTERVENTIONS FOR WIDE SCALE APPLICATION OF PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

MASL field staff of all the project area has benefited from the capacity building program, resulting in the spread of these strategies, but mostly as initiatives of individual officers. Having decided to institutionalize these strategies, MASL has launched a system-wide implementation of certain interventions to ensure that the participatory approach is fully incorporated into MASL.

05. STRENGTHENING OF D CANAL ORGANISATIONS

In the framework of participatory management, MASL places high priority on strengthening D-canal organizations. The following programme for D-canal strengthening builds on the experiences of Promoting Multi-Functional Household Environment (PMHE) in community mobilization and organizational strengthening in System C and will be undertaken in all systems under the coordination of the Human and Institutional Development Unit.

The programme consists of the following steps:

STEP 1: Identification of Distributory Canal Farmer Organizations (DCFOs)

Involvement: DCFO/Farmer leaders, Block Manager (BM), Unit Manager/Field Assistant (UM/FA) ,Human & Institutional Development Officer (HIDO), Irrigation Engineer (IE).

Identification of DCFOs will be done through a baseline survey to be coordinated by HIDOs in all systems. Attention will be paid to the criteria for selection of DCFOs to start the programmes, especially the expressed need and commitment of members, as the success gained in these first DCFOs creates a catalytic effect in the Block.

STEP 2: Participatory Analysis and Planning (PAP) in the selected DCFOs

Moderated by Block staff member trained in Institutional Development/Office Systems (ID/OS) or Community Mobilisation/Organisational Development (COMMOB/OD) supported by FA/UM

The participatory analysis and planning sessions are undertaken with the total membership of the DCFO and motivates the members to improve the organization as a whole.

STEP 3: Strengthening of Field Canal Groups (FCGSP) and other functional groups

FA and/or UM

This will be launched after step 2 is completed (preferably to coincide with pre-seasonal activities) with at least 50% of the field canal groups in the given DCFO to start with, in clusters of 2-3 field canal groups.

Apart from field canal groups, all other forms of groups will be supported. Attention will be paid to enhancing the involvement of women and youth in particular, and providing support to women and youth groups.

STEP 4: Strengthening specific aspects of the DCFO

MASL staff involved in DCFO strengthening will provide specialized support to one or more of the following activities based on the needs of the farmers.

Close **monitoring** of the DCFO strengthening programme will be done by the Block Manager.

STEP 5: Supporting the formation of farmer companies and federations

The MASL envisages supporting the formation of 1 farmer company per System. MASL will provide capacity building support in the following areas:

- Awareness in legal and managerial aspects related to formation of companies
- Training and business development
- Facilitate linkage building and networking
- Initial support to personnel development for running companies/ federations

06. SUSTAININABLE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE DCFO

A meeting of the Block team was held to decide on the agricultural program for the forthcoming season, with special attention to the DCFOs in the strengthening program.

Groups of farmers were selected for agricultural development activities such as home garden development, special crops, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), seed paddy production etc. An end-season evaluation was done with farmers for re-planning the next season. These plans made at farmer level was then incorporated into the Block plan for the next season.

07. CAPACITY BUILDING OF MASL STAFF IN PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGIES AND MANAGEMENT

MASL was involved in continuing capacity building of staff in participatory methodologies, building on the training areas developed already. Training of MASL Staff was continued to focus on acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Field Assistants and Unit Managers as grass root level workers interact directly with farm families and require a range of skills. HIDOS play an important role in community strengthening and building of local organizations and acquire relevant skills for it. ID/OS training was compulsory for Block Managers who have to manage participation and provide a favorable environment for the staff to pursue participatory approaches. Staff categories were trained according to a schedule and ensured that all-training gaps in Block teams were filled based on training needs assessment.

08. STAFF CATEGORY

Training of Trainers (TOT) in the above subject areas was conducted concurrently for selected officers (with trainers capacities). There were trainers within the MASL, who could conduct these Training of Trainers programs using the Training Modules that have been prepared for this purpose.

Monitoring is essential for effective application of knowledge gained through training.

Field staff who were trained and equipped had to be supported by their managers (superiors) to function effectively. This applies, initially, to Block Managers who were responsible for managing a group of field staff working within a given block. They made the workplace more conducive to support the field workers using participatory approaches. Staff training, flexibility in scheduling fieldwork, budgetary implications etc. were taken into consideration in Block planning. Block plans were based on the outcome of planning done by field staff with farmers, thus reversing the trend of top-down planning. Within the re-structured set up of the MASL, such planning takes on more significance as Block Managers have fewer personnel with larger geographical areas to oversee.

09. CONCLUSION

Internalizing a participatory approach within MASL - a large, centralized state sector agency - calls for a process of internal organizational change. Beginning at Block level, organizational change was required at all levels to support a bottom up flow of communication, which in turn impacts policy making and planning towards increased farmer involvement. Wide scale application of participatory methodologies into action is certainly a big challenge for MASL.