

Watershed Development in Madhya Pradesh: Implications for Women
Experiences of Action for Social Advancement (ASA), Bhopal

Action for Social Advancement (ASA)¹, has over 10 years experience developing rural livelihood security amongst the predominantly Bhil tribal communities in western M.P. and eastern Gujarat. It delivers an integrated package of interventions into a community, based on an intensive process of natural resource development and local institutional development. Bhil tribal women play the role of supporter, responsible for numerous household and agricultural-related activities that generally carry low status. Natural resource management has traditionally not been their responsibility. However, they are responsible for a number of household-level socio-economic decisions. ASA’s experience of promoting women’s participation in watershed development is mixed: practical needs can be met and strategic space can be created directly within the watershed development process (eg. attendance on Watershed Development Committees). However that does not guarantee that women will be able or willing to take that space up. The most successful vehicle for promoting women’s empowerment at the village level comes in the form of SHGs set up for micro-finance purposes. This is the case in ASA’s project area, where strong groups exist and are supported by a SHG Federation. The challenge for ASA now is how to use these strong women-led, women-promoting institutions outside their micro-finance remit to influence the process of village development. This paper summarises the main activities undertaken by ASA in its approach to women’s empowerment and the key lessons learned from implementing each of these activities.

1. Background to ASA

Action for Social Advancement (ASA) has been working for over 10 years on rural livelihood security of the predominantly tribal communities living in western Madhya Pradesh and eastern Gujarat (districts of Jhabua, Ratlam, Barwani, Khargone, Ujjain in M.P. and Dahod and Godhra in Gujarat).

ASA’s typical project area is characterised by large Bhil and Bhilala tribal populations, who depend on a degraded natural resource base and out-of-date agricultural technologies, which results in poor land productivity (5-8 times lower than state average), high food insecurity and poor livelihood security. Migration levels are high, literacy rates remain low and exploitative loaning by moneylenders is the norm.

Taking cognisance of the fact that rural livelihoods are intrinsically linked with the local environs, ASA’s basic strategy has been to identify the key environmental problem underlying people’s livelihood insecurity and tackle it head on. Its watershed development programme, following a “watershed plus” approach, consists of:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-situ soil and moisture conservation • Water resources development (construction of small and large harvesting structures, irrigation management) • Strategic plantations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural extension and development • Common property resource management • Human and institutional resources development, together with • Micro-finance activities.
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ASA believes that integrating value addition and income generating measures into the watershed development approach from the design and planning stages, results in a better and more sustained impact and less conflict during the implementation process.

¹ Based in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, ASA has a presence in about 800 villages spread across the three states of Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Gujarat. Its various initiatives for livelihood augmentation in rainfed and tribal regions of central India include watershed and WRD, PIM, micro-finance, PVSP, agriculture research and extension, training and consultancy etc.

2. Women in ASA's project area

The baseline PRAs undertaken in ASA's project villages conclude that tribal women's lives are characterised by low literacy, a lack of access to fuelwood, diminishing access to water, and a heavy workload of reproductive and productive household duties. Her life remains that of a supporter to her husband, with her tasks carrying low status – including food preparation; water and fuel collection; cleaning; lifting cow dung; washing, pounding and grinding corn; fodder and NTFP collection; as well as agricultural activities like field preparation, sowing, weeding, harvesting and threshing. She is an essential resource for animal and child care and family health. Women also play a vital part in managing the cropping pattern which takes care of maximising food and fodder availability while minimising production risks.

In relation to watershed development, gender inequality exists in the following manner:

- Fewer women than men participate and their involvement in planning and decision-making is marginal;
- In most activities, women are neither able to exert control over the implementation process nor gain control over direct benefits;
- Managerial skills and decision-making authority remain “men's prerogative” – the men's domain.

3. ASA's approach for inclusion of women (during design and implementation)

- (i) Collected sufficient, relevant and correct baseline data on women
- (ii) Decided what is feasible in the local context
- (iii) Created practical space for women to participate
- (iv) Created strategic space for women to participate
- (v) Raised awareness amongst both men and women community on inclusion of women.

(i) Collected sufficient, relevant and correct baseline data on women

This may seem basic, but it is critical that correct and relevant information on women is collected during the baseline assessment. Guidelines on what to collect and how to collect it should be developed beforehand. When beginning activities in a village, ASA undertakes a PRA to collect data from which the village action plan is developed. The data on women includes: typical division of labour, a typical day in a women's life, the role of women in decision-making at the household level (rights, role, responsibilities), and the problems and restraints to development of women in the village. With this information, one can identify women's practical and strategic needs, which inform the design of a gender implementation strategy.

Lessons Learned

The data collected and the process through which it was collected provided ASA with a solid understanding of women's roles and responsibilities. Data collectors and reporters must take care to undertake this exercise thoroughly and not extrapolate the same data across a large number of villages, thereby missing out on potential important variations in women's situation.

(ii) Decided what is feasible in the local context

From project outset, one must decide what can realistically be achieved in terms of women's empowerment, given the project resources, timeframe and local community dynamics. This decision must be based on a thorough assessment of the local women's situation in terms of participation in community affairs and barriers to participation. It must then be boiled down into a set of inputs that will result in set of outputs, outcomes and impacts, over a specified timeframe.

ASA set out the following as achievable objectives of empowerment in its watershed programme:

1. Raise awareness amongst women of the role they can play in decision-making (including awareness on why their opinion is important).
2. Raise awareness amongst men as to the role of women and why their inclusion is important.
3. Create practical space for women to participate: ie. by reducing time spent in meeting practical needs (eg. collection of drinking water, firewood); by making a policy to encourage women's participation in training programmes; by working on financial empowerment. This will also engender feelings of trust in women about the project.
4. Create strategic space for women to participate: (whether sustainable or not) – through mandatory inclusion of women on Watershed Development Committees (WDCs), formation of women-only Watershed Development Committees and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and prioritisation of those.

Lessons Learned

Whilst ASA has always outlined key objectives related to women's empowerment under watershed development, it has not framed these within an overall gender strategy, and has ultimately not identified the realistic impact that can be achieved. This impact might be eg. enabling women to participate on an equal footing with men in the decision-making process regarding watershed management. Having this frame plus an overall goal to work towards, that is closely monitored throughout implementation, may have deepened the impact ASA has had, bringing gender mainstreaming in as a central focus to its programme.

A separate example illustrates this point:

As part of a separate Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) project, ASA developed a systematic gender-orientated strategy to promote active involvement of women in community affairs related to canal restoration and maintenance. The objectives of the strategy were: (a) to create an environment more responsive and sensitive to women's needs; (b) to ensure equal access to participation and decision-making; and (c) to ensure equal access for women to their fundamental legal and social rights.

A two-pronged intervention strategy was developed, part one being capacity building of women and part two (equally important) - gender sensitisation of the male population. As a result of the strategy, ASA achieved a number of policy changes including provision of voting rights to the spouses of Water User Association members, mandatory inclusion of one female member in the management committee, and formation of women sub-committees. The next step forward will be getting 33% reservation for women on the management committee. The impact of this strategy so far has included the exercise of voting rights during election of Water Users Associations.

However, ASA's objectives for women's empowerment in watershed development have always been realistic, and based on the assumptions that it is a long term goal and that not all activities aimed at women will be successful. In this context, often the process is as important as the results.

(iii) Created practical space for women to participate

A project must enable women to participate. It must therefore address their most immediate practical needs, as the tasks required to fulfil them are typically time-intensive and often a barrier to regular and sustained participation.

ASA's approach to meeting practical needs of tribal women include:

- Ensuring that watershed development activities provided solutions to women's critical needs/duties related to water, fuelwood and fodder.
- Making it mandatory for 50% of participants on all training courses and exposure visits under watershed development to be women.
- Providing for financial needs of women through establishment of SHGs, and enabling women to access and avail of low interest credit.

Lessons Learned

Without addressing these needs, it is very difficult for women to participate. Addressing such needs not only frees up women's time, but as importantly, shows women that the project is relevant to and interested in her. This forms a solid basis for a mutual relationship of trust.

Having a policy is one issue yet enforcing it is another, particularly when there are practical constraints. Sometimes, pressure on field staff to meet training targets means that policies get overlooked. This happened for a while at ASA, where the 50% women participants rule was not enforced. Also creating the space for women to use their newly enhanced/developed skills is critical.

(iv) Created strategic space for women to participate

A project must create strategic space that is acceptable both to women and the wider community. Experience has shown that tribal women (whilst having a significant role in household level socio-economic decision-making) are hesitant or are otherwise socially restricted to be vocal in public fora where major village decisions are taken, eg. a Gram Sabha. In Bhil society, this is often because villages are composed of tight-knit kin groups where every person is a member of a woman's in-laws. She must therefore observe a certain code of conduct towards them in meetings.

In this tribal society, small kinship groups which are socially and economically homogenous already exist. These groups are based upon existing co-operative social units with social and economic exchange and networks of mutual assistance. Past experience of ASA suggested that participation in planning and decision-making is achieved through working in small hamlet-based groups. The implementation of activities through such groups has worked out to be the best strategy for developing skills, confidence and new management capabilities.

The question for ASA therefore became, "Which CBO?". In deciding this, comes the acceptance that:

- a) there will certain CBOs which are more acceptable to women and to wider society, and to which women more readily will be part of.
- b) the space created for women in CBOs by a project won't necessarily be sustainable. However, one outcome is to leave behind examples of participation that will be remembered and which may be built upon again in the future.

ASA worked to create institutional space by:

- Ensuring that each Watershed Development Committee (WDC) had a minimum of 35-40% women members (the women themselves being members of SHGs).
- Organising women into women-only SHGs, to gradually but steadily capacitate them so that ultimately, they can participate in the development process. Similarly by giving priority to the formation of women-only groups. ASA's experience in these communities shows that with increasing access to credit and improvement in ability to articulate concerns and views, women's participation with regard to common development issues including natural resources, increases.
- In villages where only women-only groups exist, discouraging men's groups from forming, since experience shows that male groups tend to dominate and give little scope for women's groups to surface as decision-making fora.
- Making provision for grooming of female village-level workers (10th Standard pass) within the project team.

Lessons Learned

In reality, participation of women on WDCs has not been successful, primarily due to a lack of sustained effort and follow-up on the part of ASA, itself due the paucity of funds for capacity building. NRM remains very much the male domain in this society. It must be remembered that creation of institutional space is a long term activity, and will not become a sustainable space over night. Yet as previously mentioned, the process of creating this space and its short-lived existence is also important.

On the other hand, SHGs have proven to be a successful institution for mobilising women in the project area and creating a formal women-led community organisation. On average, each member is availing Rs. 5000 of credit, primarily used to purchase agricultural inputs and implements, itself an indication of women's role in household decision-making. Most of ASA's SHGs are now members of a Federation, which provides loaning funds and makes strategic decisions on their behalf. The issue that ASA now faces is how to use these strong, women's community-based organisations beyond micro-finance activities. They have not yet been mobilised to participate in watershed development activities, but are taking the lead in ASA's WaterAid-funded drinking water and sanitation project that is currently on pilot.

Often it is the small activities that can have a significant impact. ASA's policy of grooming 10th Standard pass local village girls as project workers was a great success, firstly in terms of quality of work completed and secondly, acceptance of their new role within the local communities themselves. Often, they were found to be inspirational characters amongst the local female communities.

(v) Raised awareness amongst male community on inclusion of women

Social norms and opinions of male family members often restrict a woman from participating in development activities. There is occasion to discuss with the male community why women need to be included, and at times, prioritised.

For example, in one village ASA's worker had already completed the necessary groundwork to set up a women's SHG. When the worker arrived in the village to hold the first meeting, men rather than women had turned up, ready with the initial deposit. The worker had to discourage the men and make a fresh proposal with the women's names. Not only was effort needed to convince the women but also effort was required to explain to the willing men why they could not set up a group. ASA workers convinced the men by telling them:

- That women have less chance to interact than men outside the villages, therefore it is necessary to give them the chance to come forward.
- As women are in the village more than men, women's attendance at the SHG meetings should be better, which is more propitious for the household.

4) Impact of ASA's watershed development programme on women's empowerment

Practical needs

- Water resources development has provided women access to a permanent source of water that they can use to bathe, clean clothes and wash. However, drought has affected the effectiveness of this programme.
- The regeneration of common and forest land in some villages has led to an increase in fodder availability, tree species and non-timber forest products – the collection of which is usually a woman's responsibility.
- Women are now able to access credit and save through the SHGs – both significant advancements in terms of their empowerment. This also reduces their exploitation by moneylenders. However their ability to capitalize on this opportunity depends on other issues such as changing social/cultural norms.

Strategic needs

- Training and capacity building has built women's confidence and increased women's ability to participate. However women in the project area are generally quite restricted in their own capacity. The issue of low literacy has not been tackled and is a limiting factor to development.
- Using SHGs as a new platform for formal community organisation amongst women has generally been successful. Their link-up to WDCs by representation in the Committee has not worked as a



method for creating sustainable space for participation. ASA must now look to see how to widen the SHG's remit and get the body involved in village development, as the representative of women's needs and rights.

- Social and cultural norms still very much influence the participation of women in watershed development decisions. However ASA's policies – such as the representation of each SHG on the WDC, women-only SHGs and training and exposure visits going some way to influence these norms. Efforts to increase awareness of the Panchayat and rights is also an important step.

5. Lessons learnt

To summarise, key lessons for ASA in terms on women's empowerment through watershed development are:

- Flexibility in project design and patience in implementation are vital for encouraging women to participate. One might have to undertake activities not viewed as core to a project – eg. micro-finance SHGs in a watershed development project – but which have proven time and again to be the most successful vehicle for promoting women's participation in village development.
- Creating space for women to participate is the first step; getting women to take up this space and use it is the second and more difficult step. This is a long term activity, and might not be realised in the project timeframe.
- Expected outcomes and impacts related to women's empowerment must be clearly defined from outset and based on a thorough understanding of what is achievable in the local community, in the given timeframe.
- Often small activities can have a significant impact on empowerment.

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