

## **Learning from the Past: India Uttar Pradesh Sodic Lands Reclamation Project**

### **Social Development Best Practice Elements**

- Multi-dimensional approach to poverty reduction aimed at enhancing opportunities, capabilities, empowerment, and security of the poor
- Institutionalized mechanisms for participation and decentralized implementation
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of social development outcomes by the government and community

Land reclamation is a pressing matter for the people in Uttar Pradesh, since the state is one of the poorest in India and agriculture is the central livelihood of 75 percent of the population. In the last decade, the urgency of the problem has intensified due to the decline in productivity of food grains, especially rice and wheat. This decline has resulted from the increase of sodium in soils, making them unsuitable for crop cultivation. In Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) focus group discussions conducted in 25 villages as a part of the social assessment, the male members revealed that drainage and sodicity are their main problems. They were eager to become involved in the project to remedy the issue.

### **Project Objectives**

India Uttar Pradesh Sodic Lands Reclamation Project has two objectives. First, it seeks to reverse the decline of productivity through sustainable reclamation of sodic lands. Second, it is intended to prevent additional increases in sodicity through

strengthening local institutions and enabling effective management of such programs with strong beneficiary participation and nongovernmental organization (NGO) support. This objective contributes to the alleviation of poverty of families managing sodic lands.

### **Try, Try Again**

The old maxim, "If at first you do not succeed, try, try again," may be an appropriate description of the many failed government programs that have been aimed at land reclamation in Uttar Pradesh. Previous programs focused primarily on giving subsidies and not on building local capacity. Technical solutions to reclaim unusable land parcels and ensure that the land was productively used had long been in place. However, what was missing were important social and institutional mechanisms to enable the local landowners to apply the technical knowledge and reap the benefits of a coordinated community effort.

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This project was recognized as Best Practice in Social Development by the Social Development Family and received an award for Excellence in Supervision (QSR) from the Quality Assurance Group (QAG). The task team leader was M. Balasubramanian. This best practice note was prepared by Kathleen Kuehnast.

The resounding success of the project is that it has reclaimed nearly 45,000 hectares in which farmers are now growing crops for their own consumption and for production. It also has provided land to 58,000 formerly landless laborers.

The Sodic Lands Reclamation Project has used not only the latest in technological improvements but also important social development practices to ensure the long-term success of reclaimed lands. Participatory problem-solving approaches provide the missing element to create stakeholder commitment and “ownership,” which were lacking in previous programs. Establishing property rights for poor farmers allowed for transparent land titling, which ensured that those who worked the land also gained financially from their own efforts. Communities were mobilized through the development of non-partisan NGOs. These groups were essential for developing a coordinated effort between the farmers and a fairly regulated and reliable water supply. Through the creation of Water Users Groups (WUGs), these groups were responsible for buying equipment, maintaining their access to irrigation water, and draining the land.

### **Social Assessment Objectives**

In this project, the Social Assessment objectives sought to identify and illuminate:

- Poverty levels
- Inequity in agricultural land holdings
- Caste and religious reinforcement of inequity
- Gender inequality
- Social indicators: literacy levels, birth and death rates, and life expectancy.

The methods used to achieve these objectives included:

- Beneficiary assessment
- Stakeholder analysis
- Social impact assessment
- Risk analysis
- Baseline study of the livelihood systems of potential beneficiaries
- Micro-level study based on 1,500 sample households
- Macro-level study of some 50 villages employing participatory rural appraisal techniques.

### **Inheriting Age-Old Problems; Learning New Solutions**

After independence in 1947, the Indian government instituted a series of land reform laws to make land distribution more equitable. It enacted land ceilings that directed large landowners to give up excess land. In many instances, the land that they chose to surrender was often unusable soil with little access to irrigation, leaving new owners who acquired such land with few options except to build a house on it.

To remedy this growing problem, the government launched a series of programs to improve the land parcels for farming. Typically, these programs involved granting subsidies to occupants of the land but offered little or no technical assistance to the local landowner. Even more problematic was the lack of capacity building at the village level, especially since land reclamation requires a systematic approach to be successful. The results were repeatedly disappointing and only served to deepen antagonisms between the local farmers, the landless poor, and the government.

For an effective program design, the sodic land predicament in UP required both technical and social solutions. Such a reclamation project demanded systematically applying technical knowledge, revamping the land titling process, coordinating farmers, ensuring water access, and modernizing the main drain.

The key stakeholders in the project included those directly involved—the landowners—and those indirectly involved—the NGOs and commercial and regional banks. To gain the support of the landowners, establishing unambiguous ownership rights was a necessary precursor to any other project components. Previous land titling had failed to establish property rights for poor farmers. Even though it was a tedious process to reconcile land occupancy with 20-year-old ownership records, creating a transparent process of land titling eliminated discrepancies about who actually owned the land.

Participatory practices in the Uttar Pradesh Sodic Land Reclamation Project followed five basic principles:

1. Transparency
2. Equity

3. Accountability
4. Decentralized decisionmaking
5. Human and institutional capacity building.

### **Empowering NGOs**

Since land reclamation is impossible to do in isolation, the coordination of resources, stakeholders, and technology was essential. Therefore, the Bank and government focused on building local capacity through NGOs. The Social Assessment had identified as many as 20 activities in which NGO involvement was necessary. Thus, the selection of NGO partners with the appropriate human and institutional capacity was critical.

### **NGO Eligibility Criteria and Roles**

To be eligible as a partner under the project, NGOs had to meet the following criteria:

- Legal entity: registered body under applicable State law
- Secular organization: no affiliation with political parties
- Independent governing body: no religious, political, or government representation
- Functioning for a minimum of three years
- Successful proven record of social intermediation
- Staff composition: know local language, one-third women
- Good bookkeeping records
- Good rapport with government
- Free from litigation.

The roles of NGOs in the Reclamation Project are to:

- Identify and create awareness
- Educate
- Mobilize communities
- Form local institutions
- Ensure that a sensitive disposition and participatory process pervades all partners
- Disseminate technology
- Mobilize women
- Link men and women with credit institutions
- Nurture and ensure sustainability.

NGOs became the linchpin of the technical, administrative, and social components of the project. For example, for the rehabilitated lands to

remain productive, the water drainage system had to be maintained by all the farmers who owned land. To reinforce the importance of everyone playing his or her part in maintaining the drainage system, the NGOs acted as gatekeepers. They made sure that farmers demonstrated their commitment to the project and maintained their tracts of land, or else the farmers could not receive any grant assistance.

Initially, the NGOs acted as catalysts to help mobilize the farmers and others into Water Users Groups (WUGs), a Site Implementation Committee (SIC), and a Core Team (CT). In addition, the NGOs disseminated technology and developed effective management procedures. As time went on, the NGOs also enabled the village level institutions to develop links with governmental agencies, including linking groups with credit institutions.

The Water Users Groups proved to be the key factor in the project's success for several reasons. Group formation built capacity. The WUG consists of 10 to 15 farmers, one of whom owns a pump set and shares water with others for use in a four- to five- hectare area, which forms a primary unit. Consequently, farmers have a vested interest in working together versus being adversarial or shirking their responsibility. Since members of all WUGs are also a part of the village Site Implementation Committee (SIC), important capacity building is occurring among the beneficiaries, including learning decisionmaking skills and technical training. The WUG leaders form the Core Team and function as an executive organ of the SIC.

Moreover, the WUGs have played a pivotal role in female mobilization, since women were encouraged to form self-help groups and support farm households with supplementary savings and income. This contribution to social development practices was highly significant in that UP has a deep legacy of discrimination against women. The project has mobilized 30,000 women into Savings and Credit Groups.

### **Building and Nurturing “Champions”**

One of the more difficult hurdles during the project was overcoming the Department of Irrigation's opposition to modernizing the main drain. The department had a history of inefficiency and

opposed mechanizing the system because it meant the loss of jobs. Through earlier capacity building efforts at the state level, the project had found a champion, a senior government official who was in support of the effort to modernize. The inside champion's promoting the mechanization of the main drain enabled the project to cut quickly through the bureaucratic red tape. At the same time, SICs, made up of representatives from the WUGs, were strengthened through the dispute. Whereas previously they basically were solving local conflicts, they now found themselves without the state authorities' support. In effect, they were given more decisionmaking authority.

### **Hand-in-Hand: Technical and Capacity Building at the Village Level**

The India Uttar Pradesh Sodic Lands Reclamation Project demonstrates the need for capacity building to go hand in hand with technical advancements. The technological know-how to rehabilitate sodic lands had been available for years, but reforms continued to fail during the implementation stage, especially at the village level, because of the lack of social mechanisms to organize building capacity and sustain commitment.

It took several years of capacity building at the village level to prepare the institutions and farmers with the skills, technical knowledge and communication experience to carry out the reclamation activity in a planned fashion. The time spent on training, focus groups, surveys, and planning were all critical components of creating durable relationships among institutions, NGOs, farmers, and banks.

### **Lessons Learned**

- Establishing the correct sequence of project activities is a key ingredient of success. In this case, the sequence involved first establishing property rights and land titling, then creating organizations of the poor, and then providing technical solutions and resources for implementation.
- Transparency and participatory problem-solving by stakeholders builds ownership.
- Investment in organizational development and local capacity building lays the groundwork for decentralized management by beneficiaries.

### **Supervision**

Central to the success of this project is that the Bank team has integrated its wealth of knowledge and experience in agricultural development with sound social development practices. Despite the technical bent to the project, the supervision of social development issues has been outstanding. Special focus on beneficiary participation in implementation, monitoring, and institutional development has enabled the project to meet most of its targets.

The project has been monitored systematically using a "Sustainability Index." Its weighted indicators not only monitor sustainability but also help to plan for withdrawal of external support on completion of the project. Beyond its effective, systematic approach to monitoring, the project has thoroughly taken into account the views of its key stakeholders and creatively strengthened mechanisms for their participation in the design, implementation, and sustainability of the project.

