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Dams and People's Participation

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1. Introduction

Public Participation in the process of development and governance is increasingly being seen as an important precondition to a just and harmonious social order. Perhaps there is no other area where it is more critical than in the planning for, and monitoring of, dams.

Public participation in dam projects, or for that matter in most other projects, is essential for various reasons. Apart from the general requirements in a democracy, especially a participatory democracy, to constantly consult the people, it is also important in order to ensure that interventions into nature and society, and the spending of public funds, are optimal.

The involvement of the public in decision making ensures transparency and inhibits the influence of vested interests. It also ensures that the diverse expertise, knowledge and wisdom present in a society is all brought to bear while taking important decisions. It prevents corruption and ensures answerability of the government. But, perhaps most important, it ensures that the voices of the weakest segments of the society are also heard and that they are not made to pay an unjust or unnecessary price at the altar of development.

Listed below are some of the major areas where it is essential to promote public participation.

2. Developing a Strategic Plan for the Country

Public criticism of dams has been primarily at two levels. At one level there is a feeling that all dams, especially large dams, are bad considering their social and environmental costs. At the other level, specific projects are judged as undesirable, either totally or as currently planned or executed.

Whereas some people might have a fundamental dislike for all large projects that make

serious inroads into the natural order and displace thousands of people, many others have turned against large dams because of past experience. India has over 3000 large dams, but few success stories. In dam after dam the environmental impacts were never studied or considered and thousands of tribals and poor people were uprooted from their homes and never really rehabilitated. The promised benefits never materialised and unanticipated problems like water-logging, the spread of disease and the disruption of fisheries, emerged. Even while these problems were obvious on the field, government reports, at least those made public, continued to deny all problems and to laud the performance of such dams.

It is, therefore, not surprising that a large number of people in India and,indeed, all over the world, have stopped believing in dams as a means of solving social problems and bringing prosperity.

However, despite this, the government wants to continue forcing large dams on an increasingly unwilling population. Initially, dams were being resisted mainly by those who were threatened by displacement, and welcomed by many others. Gradually this is changing to where dams are being welcomed only by those who directly benefit, like those in the command areas (before it gets waterlogged) who anticipate water, by the contractors and by the project authorities, and being opposed by most others. and current trends suggest that opposition to large dams will grow with time, not subside.

In such a situation, it becomes incumbent on the government to start a process through which the past performance of dams can be studied and assessed. It is surprising that no major retrospective cost benefit analysis has been done so far of large dams in India. However, if the government wants to have the moral right to continue building such dams, and a chance at convincing people that dams are not really bad, it must now join hands with people outside the government, with NGOs and institutions, with villagers and urbanites, and jointly conduct such an assessment.

3. Establishing the Need for a Specific Project

Even if one does not believe that all dams are bad, there can still be a good basis for believing that a specific dam is bad. Infact, people participate most vigorously when they are opposing a specific project. Opposition to the Tehri or Narmada dams is an example of this. There are usually good reasons for this.

Many a project is planned without being clear whether there is a need for the project, that is, whether what the project is expected to deliver can be got in some other way. This involves examining alternatives to the project and establishing its optimality, as compared to all the alternatives.

The judgement about the viability of the project, even from the environmental and social view point, cannot be made without assessing the above. Certainly, economic or financial viability is not an adequate measure of the desirability of a dam as most environmental and social "costs" cannot be reduced to rupees and paise. This is because of an inherent weakness in economics. Economic seems to be able to deal with only those 'goods and

services' which are, in one way or another, inputs to , or products of, an economic process. Therefore, the cost of displacement can only be measured in terms of the replacement cost of the economic assets left behind. Similarly, the cost of soil-erosion can only be measured in terms of the resultant 'loss of agricultural produce', or the cost of clay in terms of how many clay pots could be made from it. But when human suffering and emotional links are involved, then economic or financial computation becomes impossible. It, therefore, becomes incumbent on the State to not only establish that the project which is going to displace is overall so beneficial to the society that the social costs are justified, but also that no other, less displacing, alternative is possible.

Similarly for the environment. When 'goods' are essential for 'natural processes', then it becomes difficult to compute economic costs. What is the cost of a tree which cleans air, regulates water flows, fixes nitrogen, absorbs pollutants, produces biomass and provides habitat to other flora and fauna? At best, economics can compute replacement costs' of those of the functions that are replaceable. Replacement cost of firewood can be computed in terms of coal equivalent energy produced through 'economic activities' like generation of electricity, or mining of fossil fuels. But what happens to the irreplaceable. They become priceless and, therefore, go out of economic calculations. Unfortunately, much of nature is irreplaceable, and therefore invaluable. But most economists can only see it as valueless.

It is, therefore, equally impossible to make a decision on whether a project is environmentally viable, purely on an economic analysis.

But, how does one then determine whether a project is viable or not. Apart from outside experts, the concerned and affected people have to be consulted and listened to and any decision that is made has to establish to these people the need, the viability and the optimality of the proposed project. If people are not consulted, heard and convinced, then they must protest and oppose. That is democracy.

4. Justifying the Design of a Project

Even when the need, viability and optimality of a dam have been established, the specific design needs to be debated. In many river valley projects a small modification in the height of the dam, or in the design of the project, or in its location, could save a lot of the social and environmental costs. Though this might also adversely affect the expected economic benefits of the project, the viability of the project could significantly go up. It is, therefore, essential that comparative analysis be done, on the basis of relative costs and impacts for different designs of the project, and optimality be decided accordingly. Again, such an analysis has to be done in consultation with the public, especially the affected and other interested people.

Another important consideration is the distribution aspect of the project design, what can be called a class-benefit analysis. It is important to determine what class of people benefit from the project and what class pay the costs. Project viability, in terms of equity, also needs to be assessed.

In order to determine the viability and optimality of the project and of its design, a social and environmental impact assessment needs to be carried out. Currently most dams, and all large dams, need to get clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Government of India, from the environment angle. Such clearances usually stipulate conditions not only on the environmental aspects of the project but also on displacement and rehabilitation issues. However, despite there being a provision for public hearings, most of the environmental assessments have poor or no public participation. They are invariably carried out by official agencies and their hired consultants, who are discouraged from sharing information, especially 'sensitive' information, with the public. Even when public hearings are held, inadequate time and documentation is provided to the people and there is no safeguard that the issues raised by the public would influence decisions.

What is worse is that even when projects are rejected by the expert committees of the MoEF, they are sometimes cleared by theMoEF without making public the reasons why they overruled their own expert committees. All this erodes the confidence of the common person in the integrity and objectivity of the government system of assessment. If you want te people to believe that a particular project is good, then information must be shared and the process of assessment must be transparent. Otherwise they have every right, even an obligation, to assume that it is bad and to oppose it.

5. Monitoring Project Implementation

In order to get environmental clearance, many project documents promise the earth in terms of the measures that would be taken to minimise social and environmental costs. Based on such promises, projects are cleared. However, there is little ability within the government to ensure that the various promised measures are taken, or to stop project construction if the conditions of clearance are clearly violated.

When *pari passu* clearance is given to dams, the situation is even worse. In such cases, the social and environmental impacts of the project are not studied prior to its clearance. It is assumed that the project is viable and clearance is given conditional to the required studies and action being carried out *pari passu* with the construction work. Such a clearance violates the basic tenets of social and environmental planning in so far as it clears a project without assessing its impacts, determining its social, environmental and consequently its economic viability, nor its optimality from among options. What is worse, experience has shown that when such clearances are given the *pari passu* clause is rarely honoured.

Three prominent examples of such a clearance are the Sardar Sarovar (Narmada) project in Gujarat, the Indira Sagar (Narmada) Project in Madhya Pradesh and the Tehri Project in Uttar Pradesh. Each of these three projects were initially considered unfit for environmental clearance by the MoEF. Subsequently, presumably because of political pressure, they were each cleared. However, as most of the assessments required to determine their environmental and social viability were not available, they were given *pari*

passu clearances. They were required to finish studies and develop action plans within specified dates and then to implement the environmental and social actions plans *pari passu* with the construction work. None of these projects honoured the pari passu clause in the clearance letters and despite being warned, no action was taken by the MoEF to stop construction. In the case of Tehri and Sardar Sarovar, it was finally left to the public to agitate and approach the court so that construction could be suspended.

The case of the Narmada is well known and might not be worth repeating here. However, to illustrate the point, given below are some of the findings of the Expert Committee set up by the Government of India, under the Chairmanship of Prof. C.H. Hanumantha Rao, to assess the Tehri Project.

6. Conclusion

According to the CMD. THDC, though studies as per clearance letter could not be completed/Action Plans formulated within the dates stipulated by MoEF, the required studies were completed and their reports submitted to Government before project was accorded investment approval in March, 1994. CMD also stated that having submitted the study reports of MoEF their acceptance had to be assumed in the absence of a communication to the contrary.

However, the committee noted that work on the project was ongoing even before the investment clearance was received, in 1994 and further, the dates for submission of environmental reports and plans, as per the conditions of clearance, were not linked to the date of investment clearance. In any case, it was essential that a comprehensive study of fauna, flora and other aspects of the environment, and the initiation of the required action plans for their conservation, should have been completed before any engineering works were initiated, so as to prevent disturbance and destruction.

The committee felt that clearance cannot be assumed as it is presumably stipulated to ensure the appropriateness and adequacy of the studies.

Conseqnelty, the committee came to the conclusion that the conditions of clearance, as laid down by the MoEF in its letter No.2-19/81-HCT/1A-1 dated 19 July 1990 read with DO letter No.2-19/81-1A-1 dated 11 October 1993, had not been complied with. The status of compliance is summarised in table III.1.2 below and is discussed in the relevant chapters." It will seen from the table that while there have been delays in the submission of studies and action plans. the position is that even several years after such submission there has been neither any final approval by MoEF nor a final rejection followed by consequential action in terms of the conditions of clearance."

Even the studies that had been carried out were judged by the committee to be inappropriate or inadequate. In other words, even after eight years since conditional clearance was obtained, the required studies and action plans had not been completed.

Table III. 1.2

Management Plans/Action Plans	Prescribed date of submission	Actual date of submission	Whether got approved from MoEF	Whether implemented as per conditions
Catchment Area Treatment	31.12.90	January 1994	NO	Not fully implemented as per conditions as it was not completed by 31.12.1995 as stipulated by the MoEF in its letter of clearance.Also though 29,000 ha have been treated till today, only directly draining areas are being treated.
Command Area Development	31.3.91 (31.12.93)*	No Yet submitted	NO	Not relevant as the plan has still not been drawn up
Flora	May 1991	July 1993	NO	Not as per conditions See the section as fauna and flora for details
Fauna	May 1991	March 1993	NO	Not as per conditions. See the section on fauna and flora for details
Water Quality Maintenance	No Date specified	November 1992	NO	Not applicable
Disaster Management	31.3.91	April 1992**	NO	Not relevant as the plan has Still not been submitted to theMoEF

Activity	Prescribed date of completion	Actual Date of completion	Whether completed by approved date
Setting up Bhagirathi Basin Management Authority on a statutory basis through legislative action	31.3.1991 (12/1993)*	Not yet set up	NO

* extended date

**According to THDC, submitted to the Ministry of Agriculture

From these and other experiences, it is clear that the monitoring of projects cannot be done by the government alone. If it was not for the intervention of the public, the real facts regarding Sardar Sarovar, Narmada Sagar and Tehri would never have emerged and no remedial action taken.

It seems clear that there is great need to assess the performance of dams, and that this must be done, in order to be a credible exercise, in collaboration with the people. For specific projects, it is essential that their need, viability, optimality and design must all be assessed in consultation with the people. The monitoring of projects must also be done primarily by the people.

The Government and the project authorities must recognise that unless they are able to establish the viability of dams and are willing to be transparent and participatory in the design and implementation of dam projects, it is going to become more and more difficult to construct new dams against the popular will of the people.