



This document describes the experiences of the Indo-Swiss Participative Watershed Project, Karnataka (ISPWDK) Phase II in supporting the establishment and development of a village level institution, the Village Development Society (VDS). It provides the reader an insight into the step-by-step process of empowerment that enables all members of a community to play an active role in the development of their village.

The project works with the NGO partners PRAWARDA, MYRADA and SAMUHA in three watersheds lying in the Northern Karnataka districts of Bidar, Gulbarga and Koppal, respectively. In just under five years, 14 VDSs have been established in these marginalized, drought-prone areas, all of which are generally characterised by patterns of strong social discrimination.

Five major lessons are drawn from the early experience with VDSs. These are as follows.

- Transparent, democratic village-based organisations such as the VDS can play a complementary role to Gram Panchayats (which operate at the larger level of a cluster of villages) – promoting good governance from the grassroots upwards.
- When supported through intensive capacity building as well as a rigorous institutional set-up, villagers can organise themselves to take transparent, accountable decisions over large sums of money, and manage this money to implement development activities.
- Gender and equity aspects can become imbedded in village decision-making processes, if the socially marginalised have the opportunity to prove their capacities.
- Supporting wage labour (with a policy of no machinery, fair rates of pay, etc) is an effective pro-poor strategy.
- Sustainable development initiatives are better implemented through institutions with a sense of permanence, rather than those that are time-bound to project implementation periods.

The document is intended for field practitioners as well as policy makers working in rural development, particularly those interested in empowerment and local governance.



Indo-Swiss Participative Watershed Development Programme



EMPOWERING THE PEOPLE:

Experience with village development societies in promoting local governance

KARNATAKA



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Indo-Swiss Participative Watershed Development Programme

K A R N A T A K A

The use and sharing of information contained in this document is encouraged, with due acknowledgement of the source.

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J Jangal
Senior Programme Coordinator

As an SDC person I came on board early 2001. The new phase of the Indo-Swiss Participative Watershed Development Programme – Karnataka (ISPWD-K) had been approved and a comprehensive but ambitious Project Document was in place. Participating NGOs had started with the sensitisation and mobilisation of the communities, while gradually the first Village Development Societies (VDS) got established. All concerned eagerly wanted to start with the real programme work of watershed rehabilitation, agriculture and livelihood promotion activities. This had not happened by then because the core partner – the Government of Karnataka - had their own constraints and the ongoing negotiations could not be concluded positively. As a result the communities and NGOs had to take on the technology component on their own - while SDC by then was working on its new Country Programme, which implied a pronounced shift towards empowerment.

In fact, the withdrawal of the State government provided space to put the people even more at the centre and the catch words ‘people centred, people initiated and people controlled’ reminded all of us throughout the phase of our role - namely one of facilitating, capacity building, nurturing and coaching. Basic principles (transparency, accountability, equity, etc.) and non-negotiables (minimum of 1/3 female participants, 25% financial contribution, etc.) were crucial in putting systems in place and adopting a process-oriented way of working (allowing the programme to evolve, supporting communities to develop new strategies on the basis of their experiences, etc.).

The overall decision making body of the programme, the Programme Steering Committee (PSC), in charge of approving action plans and budgets, progress and auditing reports, etc. was also put in place. About 60% of its members are male and female representatives from VDSs, each attending two PCSs before handing over membership to the next elected member; i.e. during the 1st meeting he/she is learning while in the 2nd he/she takes the lead in presenting and contributing to decision making.

The first PSC, which I chaired, was more than a challenge to me; I literally had to “sweat and scratch my head”. Challenges such as: *‘how can we manage that all equally contribute in such a platform towards successful deliberation/discussion and at the same time reach a consensus’*; *‘how can all understand the comprehensive but still complex Programme Document’*, *‘how can the highly educated and experienced persons be motivated and interested to listen to the villagers coming with their rich and practical grass root experiences and sometimes out of place questions’* and many more such scenarios crossed my mind. The entire forenoon session of the day was spent on spelling out a set of rules which would govern our participation. The rules are as follows:

- We put the interests of the community first
- We respect each other
- We listen to each other and are open to learn
- We try to be objective and constructive, accepting that there are differences
- We try to move forward together, learning from the past

- We are conscious of time, but also of the need to ensure broad understanding by everyone.
- We strive to be joyful.

This very first meeting took two days. We were all exhausted at the end and actually the community members had not participated much, notwithstanding my efforts as a chairperson to create plenty of opportunities to motivate them to open up and raise their voice and issues which affected their livelihood. This attempt of mine did not help us maintain time. Their main feedback was ‘the meeting lasted too long’. Maybe the language was a barrier and the new environment did not help people to open up. We decided to organise the meetings in the districts instead of Bangalore city, to insist on communication in the local language, Kannada, and to provide person to person translation for a few not conversant with Kannada. It was also decided that the community members should present their own district action plans, budgets and progress reports.

Then I missed attending some PSCs and upon attending the 6th PSC I felt really excited at the end of the 1 ½ days session. The community members were confident in expressing themselves, completely conversant with all the aspects of the programme in their areas, had no hesitation in explaining how the budget was used, why an over – or under expenditure happened, etc. In the same meeting one of the NGOs wrote in their progress report that ‘male attendance was low concerning certain activities / meetings due to high workload’. Upon inquiring a male community member clarified that it is not at all the workload but much more their interest to meet other men, sit under a tree and sip tea. The female members clarified that they are much more conscious and dedicated and will never miss attending a meeting despite their workload being actually much higher in comparison to male members. Male members supported the women with nodding their heads.

In the end, we managed to arrive at such a setting where openness and transparency was present, where villagers fully participated and did not shy away from tackling complex issues such as equity aspects. Let’s not forget that in principle watershed development has the risk of enhancing inequality on the basis of caste, class and gender. Apart from the community members, all the other members, whether from NGO, the coordinating unit (PSMU), etc have definitely adjusted their form of participation by being patient, making efforts to prepare community members and themselves communicating in clear language.

The enclosed document explains step by step the process of empowerment; i.e. what the frame conditions have been, what are the systems which were put in place, how technologies got demystified to community members so that they could take the lead, how the interests and needs of landless, marginalised groups and women have been supported and above all what it means for a community to be able to take the development in their own hands. The VDS has been central to all this.

I hope that your reading will give you as much energy and enjoyment as it gave me in supporting this programme. Enjoy the reading; enjoy discovering how empowerment can be achieved and know for yourself what is the “power” of empowerment.

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This document describes the experiences of the Indo-Swiss Participative Watershed Project, Karnataka (ISPWDK) Phase II in supporting the establishment and development of a village level institution, the Village Development Society (VDS). Although established in the context of watershed development, the VDS is envisaged as playing a central role in village development overall. Registered as a society in the State of Karnataka, the VDS is a permanent, democratic, and locally accountable institution. It is made up of one adult male and one adult female from every household in the village, with full representation of all social groups in its committees. All major decisions are taken in a VDS *gram sabha* (village meeting). Being based at the social unit of a village, rather than the larger administrative unit of the Gram Panchayat (GP), the VDS can complement the GP in promoting sound local governance. Experience with VDSs – of which there are 14 in the project area – is just under five years, but already a variety of lessons are emerging.

This document outlines the project's reasons for promoting the VDS as an institution, drawing from the previous experiences of ISPWDK Phase I and other relevant interventions, particularly those in which the three project NGO partners – PRAWARDA, MYRADA and SAMUHA – had been involved. This is placed in the context of the marginalised, drought-prone areas of Northern Karnataka (Bidar, Gulbarga and Koppal districts), characterised by patterns of social discrimination, in which the three Project watersheds are situated. Early concerns and experiences in establishing the VDSs are described, followed by an outline of the way in which the VDSs have planned, organised and taken responsibility for implementing development activities in the village. Whilst activities focus on land improvement and agricultural development, various initiatives to promote sustainable livelihoods have also been funded. Over a period of three years, many VDSs have handled funds of some Rs. 3.5 million; one has handled over Rs. 5.5 million.

Intensive capacity building has been an essential part of VDS establishment and development, and has taken place at a variety of levels, in a variety of forms, and in many subject areas. Formal courses, study tours/exposure visits and field demonstrations have been combined with extensive “hands on” learning through observation and participation, especially with regard to institutional aspects. Emphasis has been placed

on equal training opportunities for women and men, and on building skills amongst those who until recently have been socially marginalised.

In terms of results in the villages so far, a number of changes are identified. Channelling development activities through the VDS, with its associated principles and values, has clearly led to an empowerment of the poor and marginalised, through enhancing their skills, increasing their self confidence, and providing a forum for them to demand greater equity. The project's policy of no use of machinery, and negotiations over wage rates for labourers (initially opposed by the wealthier landowners) were particularly important in this regard. There is also increased sensitivity to gender aspects in the villages, and a strong identity with transparent, democratic decision-making. Overall, there is a sense of ownership and pride over village development, and far greater levels of confidence with outsiders.

With regard to opportunities and challenges for the future, the relationship with the Gram Panchayat is seen as extremely important. Whilst there is variability between VDSs and across watersheds, generally good relations have been established and appear to be growing. Being less than five years old, the VDSs require further experience in fund management (especially with regard to the utilisation of money collected as local contribution). Continuing and deepening the pro-poor, gender balanced approach currently practised may also require some continued external support. Already permanent social capital has been built amongst the VDS membership, but it is likely that the institutions themselves will require further low-level support in the coming years to become fully sustainable.

Five major lessons are identified that can contribute to future rural development policy. These are:

- Transparent, democratic village-based organisations such as the VDSs can play a complementary role to Gram Panchayats. They may do this through general example – promoting expectations of democratic processes; through particular individuals elected to GP office who have experience of VDS leadership; and through serving as a pressure group if there are suspicions of mal-practice.
- Villagers can organise themselves to take transparent, accountable decisions over large sums of money, and handled the same in implementing development activities. This requires intensive capacity building as well as a rigorous institutional set-up.
- Gender and equity aspects can become embedded in village decision-making processes, if there is adequate capacity building and the marginalised have the opportunity to prove their capacities.
- Supporting wage labour (no machinery, fair rates of pay, etc) is an effective pro-poor strategy.
- Sustainable development initiatives are better implemented through institutions with a sense of permanence, rather than those that are time-bound to project implementation periods.

Experience with VDSs to date demonstrates that decentralised administration can result in greater democracy in rural India – most notably in empowering the poor and marginalised. Essentially, this is evidence in favour of decentralisation processes in general, and in particular the importance of vibrant village-level organisations in supporting transparency and accountability within Gram Panchayats.



A substantial body of experience in managing watersheds for rural development has been generated in India over the past twenty years or so¹. One result of this experience is an increasing recognition that people's participation is an essential element for effectiveness and sustainability. However, there are different opinions on the most appropriate institutional mechanism to promote such participation. Most programmes have sought to establish specific institutions for the purpose, commonly created ones being, at different levels,

- Watershed Committees
- Village Watershed Committees or Micro-Watershed Committees and
- Water Associations.

The latest national (GoI) guidelines on watershed implementation, the Hariyali Guidelines (2003)², place firm emphasis on PRIs, with Gram Panchayats (GPs) as the main implementing institution for participatory watershed development (see Box 1). Whilst the Hariyali Guidelines are not applicable to all watershed

programmes (strictly speaking, they do not apply to programmes under the Ministry of Agriculture), they do cover all watershed development projects implemented under the Integrated Wastelands Development Programme (IWDP), Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP) and Desert Development Programme (DDP).

Box 1. Extract from the Hariyali Guidelines (2003) on the role of Gram Panchayats

"At the field level, the Gram Panchayats shall implement the projects under the overall supervision and guidance of Project Implementation Agencies (PIAs). An intermediate Panchayat may be the PIA for all the projects sanctioned to a particular Block/Taluka. In case, these Panchayats are not adequately empowered, then the ZP can either act as PIA itself or may appoint a suitable Line Department like Agriculture, Forestry/Social Forestry, Soil Conservation etc. or an Agency of the State Government/ University/ Institute as PIA. Failing these options, the ZP/DRDA may consider appointing a reputed Non-Government Organisation (NGO) in the district with adequate experience and expertise in the implementation of watershed projects or related area development works as the PIA after thoroughly checking its credentials. Nonetheless, the State Governments should endeavour to empower the PRIs and build their capacities so that they may ultimately be in a position to take up the responsibility of independently implementing the watershed development projects as PIAs."

Many of those involved in watershed development have expressed concern about focusing so heavily on GPs, especially when little prior capacity building has been conducted. It may also be noted that watershed boundaries and GP boundaries are rarely the same, so one watershed³ may straddle several GPs (without necessarily covering the full area of any of them). Perhaps most crucially, the fact that GPs are not single settlements, but made up of a number of villages (usually at least 4-5) means that they are slightly removed from the day-to-day lives of the villagers. Thus in practice it makes sense for the GP to delegate watershed development work to a number of smaller sub-committees.

Against this background, the experience of the ISPWDK (Indo-Swiss Participative Watershed Development Project - Karnataka) in supporting Village Development Societies (VDS) provides many insights. The concept of the VDS was developed well before the Hariyali Guidelines came into force, and at a time that GPs in Karnataka were generally functioning poorly. With the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act (1993), Karnataka was one of the earlier States to take up the challenge of implementing the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution, which vest in GPs significant powers of decision-making over local development activities. However, early experiences in the State had not been wholly positive⁴, and GPs were perceived as being poorly equipped to take up watershed development activities. Thus when designing ISPWDK Phase II, the decision was taken not to work directly with GPs, although the option of a pilot intervention working through PRIs was left open, and finally commenced in 2005⁵. Over recent years, a certain amount of progress has been made in the State in building the capacities of GPs, and in reinforcing their decision-making powers.

At the same time, ISPWDK experiences with VDSs have indicated that these institutions provide a means to implement truly participatory watershed development.

¹ Farrington, Turton and James (1999).

² The Hariyali Guidelines build on the earlier National Guidelines for Watershed Development, first issued in 1995.

³ As per government norms, "watersheds" are defined in terms of "micro-watersheds" covering an area of 500-1,000 ha, "mini-watersheds" of some 5,000 ha, and macro-watersheds equivalent to a river basin, which may cover many thousands of ha.

⁴ Baumann (1998).

⁵ Under ISPWDK Phase II, a pilot intervention in natural resource development through PRIs is being implemented in Bonthi GP, Bidar District. This required a special Government Order from the State government. As activities only commenced in mid 2005, it is too early to report on them.



2.1. Project design

The concept of the VDS originated not only out of the general State-level experiences indicated above, but more concretely, out of the experience generated in ISPWDK Phase I (see Box 2). During Phase I, people's participation was envisaged through Watershed Management Committees (WMCs), which were established in each sub-watershed (usually of 200 – 500 ha) when work began¹. The function of the WMC was to represent the

Box 2: Background to the ISPWDK Programme

With an average rainfall of between 400 and 700 mm, the northern semi-arid region of Karnataka experiences repeated droughts. In the face of water shortages and limited income generating opportunities, seasonal migration is one of the main coping mechanisms, especially amongst the poor. Karnataka was one of the first States in the country in which watershed-based initiatives for developing rain-fed areas were introduced. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has been supporting innovations in watershed development since the mid-1980s, initially through the project Participative Integrated Development of Watersheds (PIDOW), involving the Government of Karnataka and MYRADA. Concepts that featured in the PIDOW design, such as community participation, indigenous technologies, self-help groups, and multi-partner collaboration, have now come to be accepted as standard components of watershed development under national policy guidelines.

The Indo Swiss Participative Watershed Development Project, Karnataka (ISPWDK) was initiated in 1995 as a "watershed plus" project, building on the experiences of PIDOW. In its first phase, ISPWDK was a bilateral project with the Government of Karnataka, implementation being largely through government line agencies under the umbrella of the Dryland Development Board (DLDB) - with NGO partners providing capacity building. The project operated in five watersheds in five separate districts. In its second phase (April 2000 – March 2006), ISPWDK is working in three watersheds (in areas contiguous to those of Phase 1), under a different mode of operation – without a bilateral agreement. The primary implementing bodies in this phase are local level Village Development Societies (VDSs), of which a total 14 have been established in the three watersheds. They are managing activities across a total of some 10,000 ha; the combined local population involved is about 30,000 (4,700 households). In each watershed, a different NGO is responsible for facilitation: PRAWARDA in Upper Mullamari watershed, Bidar district; MYRADA in Maramuri watershed, Gulbarga district and SAMUHA in Kankanala watershed, Koppal district. Project management is coordinated by Intercooperation through the Programme Support and Management Unit (PSMU) based in Bangalore.

interests of local people in interactions with the main implementing agency, the (State Government) Dryland Development Board (DLDB). Around 10 peoples' representatives came together in one WMC; all were land owners (since they were considered to be the main stakeholders), but with representation from different parts of the watershed – upper, middle and lower catchment. Each WMC was represented on a District Watershed Management Committee (DWMC). Although women's participation in the WMCs was sought, in practice it was often the men who attended meetings (this varied according to the activities of the facilitating NGO in a given watershed, some being more successful than others in supporting women to take an active role).

Salient features of a WMC under Phase I were thus as follows:

- **Terrain-based:** Represented an area (a micro-watershed), not a specific village.
- **Limited representation:** Tendency to be dominated by men from the wealthier, land-owning and higher caste groups; no representation of the landless.
- **Selective:** Small number of elected representatives; no mass membership.
- **Transient:** established when watershed works commenced but with no envisaged future beyond watershed completion (although some have in fact continued to exist).
- **Focus on watershed works:** Only concerned with implementing watershed works, providing a link between some representatives of the local community and the DLDB.
- **No financial management responsibility:** financial management was through the DLDB and the project; the WMC was consulted but financial information was only partially shared with them.

Nevertheless, ISPWDK Phase I did clearly address community participation

through local level capacity building (both for WMC members and others), facilitated by the NGO partners. Recognising the particular needs of women and the poor/landless, the Project supported the establishment and development of Self-Help Groups (SHGs). These SHGs were seen to have an important role in women's empowerment through confidence building and access to micro-credit; a review of SHGs² commissioned at the end of Phase I confirmed this, and recommended that support for SHGs should continue in Phase II. In a number of the watersheds, the SHGs were the most respected and trusted institutions in the village, and were more empowered than the WMCs. However, the review also noted that as institutions drawn from only one segment of the local population (women), and with no skills in watershed works *per se* (at least at that time), SHGs or future federations of SHGs (none had at that time been established) could not be envisaged as suitable institutions for implementing watershed works directly.

There are experiences of SHGs and their federations serving as PIAs in watershed projects. For example, under Outreach³ supported watershed projects, SHGs grouped into Cluster Level Associations (CLAs) are responsible for watershed implementation.

A self-evaluation exercise of ISPWDK Phase I experiences provided many pertinent indications for the design of Phase II, as outlined in Box 3. The positive experiences of SHGs and community-level capacity building that had been facilitated by NGOs were considered, along with the question of how best to support broad-based community participation, and true empowerment, in the implementation of watershed development. Although (as mentioned earlier) the possibility of working directly with PRIs was considered, it was felt that village-based institutions were a better point of departure.

Box 3: Important aspects regarding local institutions identified in the self-evaluation of ISPWDK Phase I

- Local people's institutions can be effective only when proper representation is given to all interest groups in the community, if they are apolitical and function democratically - with decision-making based on consensus and participative leadership.
- Effective and relevant information flow to the people's institutions is essential in order to bring transparency and accountability to the communities.
- Vibrant informal groups are important in enabling the Gram Panchayat institutions to function effectively and responsibly in a sustained manner.
- SHGs have enabled the disadvantaged sections to have better access to credit through their own savings, matching grants from projects and, in some cases, with bank linkages. However, it was recognised that they had to further diversify into sustainable income generating activities and linkages with the watershed development.
- When communities are directly responsible for implementation, activities can be carried out effectively and efficiently, both in terms of quality and quantity.
- Genuine people's contribution is a very potent weapon to address the issues of community ownership, appropriateness, quality, transparency and effectiveness of project interventions.
- Linking local people's institutions with banks, government departments and agencies (Primary Health Centre, Animal Husbandry, Taluk Panchayats, Women and Child Development Centres etc.) can enable the community to utilise the respective services and schemes effectively.

Source: N R Jagannath (pers.comm.)

The idea thus evolved of a registered village-based society, or VDS. Salient features of a VDS are as follows:

- **Village-based:** Represents one village (usually a revenue village, which may include associated hamlets) within the watershed – a relatively cohesive social unit, to which people feel a sense of belonging⁴.
- **Full representation:** One male and one female head of each household in the village form the VDS, which is thus fully representational of the village in terms of caste, class and gender. Decisions can only be taken when the members meet in a *gram sabha* (village meeting) (The precise structure of the VDS in fact varies by watershed, as detailed later).
- **Elected committee:** of 8-15 persons (the Governing Council) represents the VDS in other project fora.
- **Focus beyond watershed,** on all development activities – thus a body through which all village development is channelled.
- **Permanent:** Envisaged as a body that will continue functioning after project completion.
- **Legally established,** registered under the Societies Registration Act (1960).
- **Financially empowered:** The VDS is a decision-making body that plans, implements and controls the funds for local watershed activities; the finances are in their hands. The VDS furthermore collects a community contribution that is deposited in the

VDS bank account as a fund for future village development and the maintenance of the assets created.

The characteristics of a VDS have been summarised as follows:

Transparent: All efforts are made to provide proper information to all members to ensure transparency in all policy and management decisions

Democratic: All the powers and responsibilities are decentralised. The general body, consisting of a male and female member of every household, is empowered.

Gender sensitive: Joint and separate spaces and platforms are created for both men and women.

Source: ISPWDK (2001)

The term 'beneficiary' is against the very spirit of development philosophy, as internalised in ISPWDK. The local people are stakeholders and partners, and they also contribute to the project both in terms of money, time and kind. – Reflection project by partners at the end of Phase I.

When the concept of the VDS was first developed, the aspects on which there was greatest discussion amongst the NGO partner staff were the:

- sustainability of (relatively small) village institutions;
- differences in watershed boundaries from village revenue boundaries; and
- practical feasibility of requiring all households to become members.

Although we cannot fully conclude on the first of these issues until some time after project withdrawal, indications to date are encouraging. The latter two concerns have not proved to be highly problematic.

The reasons for the partners' concerns should be placed in the context of their previous experiences. In the case of MYRADA, this spanned a history of working with cooperatives (farmers' service/credit cooperative societies) in the 1970s; VDA Village Development Associations (informal, unregistered bodies) in the 1980s; Village Forest Committees in the 1990s; and SHGs from the 1980s onwards. The concept of the VFC (Village Forest Committee, under the Joint Forest Management programme of the Forest Department) served as a useful reference for the VDS. MYRADA, in particular, had experience with the functioning of VFCs (through its association with the Western Ghats Project, supported through DFID) and this experience was brought out in discussions. PRAWARDA also felt comfortable with working with SHGs, this having been its main focus before the concept of a VDS was introduced. In the case of SAMUHA, the main concern was that the watershed community might be divided; thus initially the NGO thought that it would be better to work with one institution, the (registered) KAS, *Kanakanala Abhivrudhi Samsthe* for the whole watershed. It was also important that the NGO's experience of working with *woni gumpu* or street groups was incorporated into the VDS concept (as explained below). Discussions about the feasibility of working through VDSs were very open, and resulted in all concerned becoming convinced about the concept.

2.2. Flexibility in organisational structure

One aspect that was important in establishing the VDSs was the flexibility under ISPWDK to try different organisational structures, according to partner preferences. Thus in two watersheds, the NGO partners facilitated the establishment of a two-tier VDS

structure. This comprises a general body or *gram sabha*, representing one male and one female member of each 'permanent' household in the village. The VDS *gram sabha* nominates the members of the governing council (GC) who are representative of the different sections of the communities / institutions in the village. The total number ranges from 9 to 15 (depending on the number of households in the village and the variation amongst them). According to the VDS rules, a minimum of one third of the GC members should be women; in practice it is usually more, around 50%.

In the third watershed (in Koppal district), the facilitating NGO, SAMUHA, favoured a different strategy of focusing on *woni gumpu* or street groups, as the primary association of the village society. A *woni gumpu* comprises one male and one female member of 5 - 15 households living on the same street or in geographical proximity. Each *woni gumpu* selects one male and one female member to form the Management Committee (MC) of the VDS. Four office bearers and four general members from the MC form an Executive Committee (EC). The GC / MC members are nominated / re-nominated each year at the VDS *gram sabha*.

In the project area, people refer to the *gram sabha* when talking of the general body meeting of the VDS. To avoid any confusion with the larger *gram sabha* of the Gram Panchayat, the term "VDS *gram sabha*" is used, as far as possible, in this document.

Whilst the VDS has overall decision-making power on ISPWDK-supported village development activities, the specific operational aspects of watershed works such as field verification, payments, etc are overseen by a WMC of 15 elected members, representative of the social

grouping in the village. A variety of Community Resource Persons, organised in groups, also support development activities. Farmer groups – established to support interventions in sustainable agriculture (seed banks, dryland horticultural development, floriculture, etc) also operate under the VDS. Close links are maintained with SHGs, which continue to be supported by the project, and have now multiplied and evolved to the point of establishing their own umbrella organisations – in two watersheds (facilitated by PRAWARDA and SAMUHA), federations, and in the case of MYRADA, Community Managed Resource Centres.

2.3. Full integration into project steering and decision-making

An important aspect of the VDS concept is the way that these village level institutions are designed to be fully integrated into all project decision-making, as indicated in Figure 1, which compares the institutional structure under ISPWDK Phase I and Phase II.

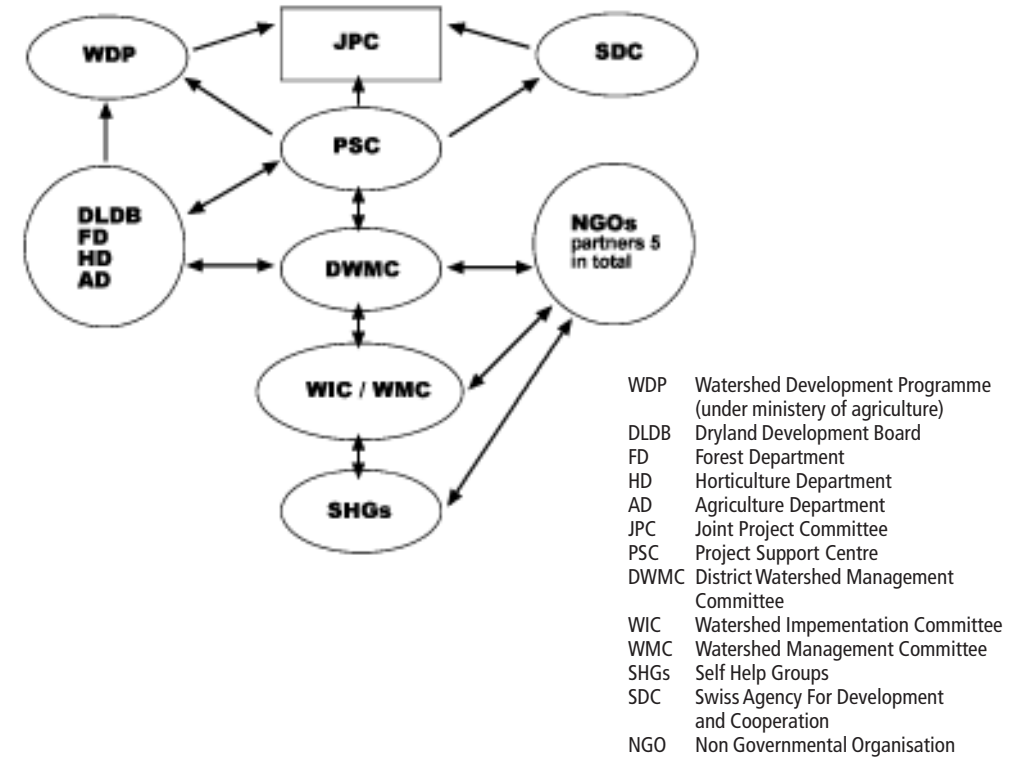
¹ Defined according to the particular hydrological characteristics in each case, the total area of the three ISPWDK watersheds ranges from just over 13,500 ha (Kanakanala watershed, Koppal) to just over 17,500 ha (Upper Mullamari watershed, Bidar). The area treated under Phase I ranged from just under 4,900 ha (Kanakanala) to some 7,180 ha (Upper Mullamari).

² Alpha Consultants (1998).

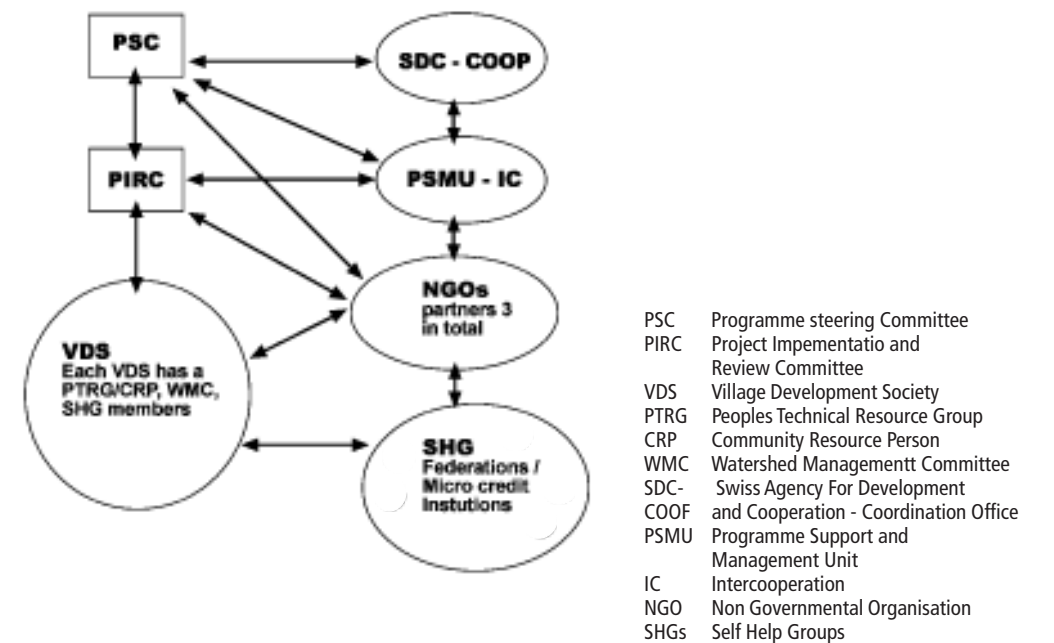
³ Outreach is an NGO supporting sustainable livelihoods of the rural poor in drought prone areas of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Community Based Development organisations are the main channel to carry out all its programmes (Outreach, 2004).

⁴ The total number of households within one VDS in fact varies considerably, from just over 100 to over 1,500.

Organisational Structure under Phase I



Organisational Structure under Phase II





VDS members taking part in a joint progress review (JPR) in Maramuri watershed

Box 4: Institutionalised community participation in programme decision-making

Decision-making under ISPWDK Phase II is structured in such a way as to maximise subsidiarity and transparency.

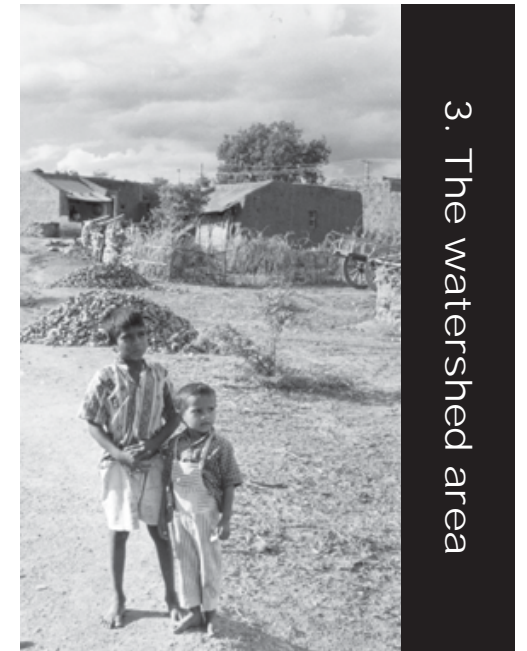
- Important decisions are taken at a *gram sabha* of the entire VDS (in one watershed more strongly than others); the VDS Governing Council takes village-level decisions related to project implementation.
- Representatives of all the VDSs in one watershed meet to reflect on progress and take appropriate decisions at monthly meetings of the PIRC, Project Implementation and Review Committee.
- In turn there is a twice-yearly JPR, Joint Progress Review at the watershed level to consider wider progress issues, and take necessary decisions. The JPR is a tool for learning and action, and over time has become increasingly “owned” by the stakeholders. JPR participants comprise VDS representatives, the partner NGO, PSMU staff and external specialists.
- At programme level, a Programme Steering Committee, PSC, meets twice yearly to take programme level decisions; participants in this are VDS representatives, the partner NGOs, PSMU staff and a representative from the funding Organisation, SDC.

Thus VDS representatives have the opportunity to take part in all levels of programme decision-making, an opportunity that is rotated at the higher levels to allow for wider participation.

3.1. Watershed and village characteristics

The characteristics of the three ISPWDK watersheds are quite varied, reflecting their different physical and socio-economic contexts. All fall within areas of sporadic, unreliable rainfall and a depleted ground water table, vulnerable to drought. The average annual rainfall is nevertheless different – Maramuri watershed in Gulbarga District having the highest (880 mm/annum), and Kanakanala (Koppal District) the lowest (571 mm/annum); the Upper Mullamari watershed (Bidar District) falls in-between with 675 mm/annum. These figures are official averages (see Virupakshi, 2000a, b and c); the fluctuation between years is high. Whilst in all the watersheds the soils are prone to erosion and leaching due to erratic rainfall¹, their type and fertility varies.

Maramuri watershed spans an escarpment, the upper reaches of which – largely settled by marginalised groups such as the Lambani (SC) – have heavily eroded, poor quality soils. This is the area in which many physical watershed activities (water percolation trenches, etc) have been implemented. Down the escarpment the soil depth and quality improves; the black cotton soils in the lower reaches can produce good yields in years of adequate rainfall, although their water retention capacity is low (so total crop failure may occur in drought years). The farmers in these areas have traditionally been Lingayats (upper caste landholders), although the caste pattern is changing slowly and becoming more mixed. Overall, the average settlement size in this watershed is the highest, and the population particularly dependent on agriculture – as there is little local opportunity for off-farm work. The largest settlement, Kodli, is the largest VDS under ISPWDK – having a membership of over 1,500 households. Clearly there are particular challenges in facilitating full community participation and transparent



3. The watershed area

fund management in large VDSs, but the partner NGO, MYRADA, is well experienced and has succeeded in generating strong community involvement.

The Upper Mullamari watershed has an underlying geology of basalts, and the soils are broadly clayey laterites, typically reddish in colour. These soils have a better water retention capacity than those in the other watersheds, and thus the area has good production potential. A high proportion of the watershed area being treated is private land, with relatively little being CPRs. The settlement pattern is characterised by small and medium sized settlements; the smallest VDS under ISPWDK, Bandenazwadi (having a membership of less than 100 households), falls in this watershed. Off-farm employment opportunities – and commercial awareness – are relatively high due to the nearby location of the taluk headquarters of Basavakalyan, and the national highway, NH9, running close by. As a result, many of the watershed inhabitants are engaged in income-generating activities



Villagers from the Upper Mullamari watershed area

such as auto-rickshaw driving, small vehicle repair shops, etc. The market potential for farm produce such as milk and vegetables is also good. The population of the settlements is quite mixed, but includes substantial numbers of Dalits, Muslims and Marathas (the State border with Maharashtra is not far away). Basavakalyan is the centre from which the 12th Century social reformer, Lord Basava, promoted the concept of social equity, and an abolition of discrimination based on caste and gender. Whilst his vision is yet to become reality, there is nevertheless a deep cultural tradition and awareness in the area.

Lying in a rain shadow area, the watershed of Kankanala is the driest of the three watersheds. It has undulating terrain – including quite substantial areas of CPRs - with red and black cotton soils. The overall land capability in this area is particularly poor. Settlements are small to medium in size, and typically of Lingayats, with some Dalits, Lambanis, and other

marginalised groups. In recent times (at least prior to project intervention), survival for many households depended on seasonal migration for agricultural labour on lands covered by large irrigation projects not far away (for example, the Upper Krishna Project). Overall, local livelihoods are based on agriculture and small livestock rearing; the area is relatively remote, and thus opportunities for off-farm employment without migrating are very limited. As noted in the previous section, the NGO partner in this watershed, SAMUHA, had already established a system of social organisation based on *woni gumpus* (street groups) when the project began activities in the villages; this was thus incorporated into the VDS structure.

3.2. Social norms prior to project commencement

The social norms prevailing in the three watershed areas prior to project commencement were similar to that still found in many parts of rural India with



Drinking water shortages - a fact of life during the dry season

discrimination based on class, caste and gender being a fact of life. A few quotes made by villagers in a recent review (ISPWDK, 2005) illustrate this point.

“Women were scared of everything, [even] to say that we were sick. Even when we were sick we never went to hospital, but suffered, if men did not take us. We did not send our daughters to school. If a girl spoke to any man we would suspect that her character was not good. When Samuha girls [female field staff] came we would laugh, saying, “Why can’t you stay at home and get married?!” We would shout at them and let dogs chase them. We suspected them. Then Samuha staff became [like] our family members, and it took six months for them to form one group. Then slowly the number of groups increased; we learned from each other.”

Women members of MMVSSN, Kankanala.

“If anybody with trousers came to our village we used to be scared. Even in 2000 we did not have a school.

Samuha [staff members] would not only come wearing trousers but also on two wheelers.”

Villagers in Umlu Rampur, Kankanala

In a self-reflection comparing the pre-project situation to that in 2005 in the village of Kanchanal, the villagers stated that previously, the *gowdas* and *kulkarnis* (upper caste land-owners) ruled over the villagers. People were drinking water from open ponds, families as units would migrate to Mumbai in search of labour and they would borrow money at heavy interest rates from money-lenders, pledging land and valuables. This situation was true in most villages in the project area (ISPWDK, 2005).

¹ The number of rainy days/annum shows the erratic nature of this rainfall: on average it is 46 days in Maramuri, 43 in Upper Mullamari, and 38 in Kankanala.



4.1. The process of VDS establishment

The process of VDS formation occurred over 2000-2002, and took the following steps:

- individual contact with village opinion leaders by NGO staff members (in each watershed, the NGO carefully assessed which persons were important for spreading information and motivating others);
- information sharing about the project in public spaces – with SHGs, temple committees and other CBOs; MYRADA and PRAWARDA noted that SHGs played an important role in the spread of information, whilst in the case of SAMUHA, the street groups were important;
- holding of VDS *gram sabhas* in the respective villages (in the case of MYRADA and PRAWARDA, the Gram Panchayat representatives were also invited); a similar process in SAMUHA is called *bahiranga sabha*;
- collection of membership fees – at the beginning, this took place through the SHGs. In PRAWARDA and MYRADA, this was done on a one-time basis; in SAMUHA, it is done annually

- discussion of VDS rules and drafting of the VDS bye-laws (a draft having been prepared by the project);
- selection of VDS Governing Council members (MYRADA specifically encouraged SHG members);
- registration as a legal entity under the Societies Registration Act (1960).

When the concept of a VDS was agreed, a study was commissioned by the project on the legal aspects. At the same time, consultant input was obtained for drafting the VDS bye-laws. Whilst allowing for village-specific differences, these follow a standard format, with details such as the name, area of operation, etc being followed by a list of aims and objectives, and then the names of the office bearers. Key features, as set out in the rules and regulations, include:

- household base² – membership of one male and one female adult (over the age of 18) of each household;
- membership through payment of a fee;
- recognition of the VDS *gram sabha* (general body) as the decision-making body, with a meeting required twice a year, or more often if necessary;
- for the VDS Governing Council:
 - rotational membership (three years);
 - representation of different interest groups;
 - gender balance; minimum 33% women (in practice it is now 50% in many cases).
- quorum for both the Governing Council and the VDS *gram sabha* is defined as 3/5 (for the *gram sabha*, it is further required that there is 3/5 representation of each of the groups of the community).

Box 5: The process of VDS establishment - Observations in 2001

Reflecting on the first one and a half years' experience in VDS establishment, the project identified the following factors as important in getting started:

- Experiences in neighbouring areas (Phase I villages) had raised awareness in Phase II villages, and meant that they took the participatory process seriously
- Rapport of the NGO staff – the existing presence of the NGOs in the area meant that they had already established credibility and good working relations
- Organisational skills at village level already existed amongst a few people who were members of established affinity groups
- Support by local leaders contributed to VDS establishment in those villages in which it was forthcoming
- Identification of village level “social workers” [those with a particular interest and experience in development, particularly pertaining to natural resource management], where possible, helped initiate discussions on institutional development.

Source: ISPWDK (2001)

4.2. Registration as a legal entity

Registration is important in order for a VDS to establish full credibility both amongst its members and with outside authorities. It also brings a greater sense of permanence and legitimacy (although this cannot be assumed). In fact, the need for registration arose when there was still the assumption of working directly with the Watershed Development Department³, WWD – as this would have been essential for routing the money through the Government. The only possibility for registration at the time was under the Societies Registration Act.

A detailed study was commissioned through the project in 2002 to study the legal compliances required for the smooth functioning of the VDS. The study considered the following:

- *VDS Memorandum of Understanding and bye-laws compared against the Societies Registration Act, 1960;*

- *Structure for Memorandum of Association and Bye-laws under Karnataka Societies Registration Act, 1960;*
- *Procedures to be followed to register a Society, to apply for exemptions under Income Tax Act, 1961; and*
- *General discussions and other issues under VDS.*

Registration entails adherence to a number of procedures, which were not only unfamiliar to the villagers, but also to the NGO partners. Thus the NGO staff first underwent training. After this, the staff organised a series of training programmes for the VDS members and village animators on legal aspects, also attended by resource persons. Despite this, the villagers initially lacked confidence to undertake the registration procedure independently, and in practice the NGO partners – with their better contacts and understanding of the system at district level - provided

considerable assistance. For many of the NGO staff, this was also a learning process.

The legal requirement to renew membership requires that all necessary papers - the general body meeting minutes, annual report, and audit report - are in order, typed and presented. Sometimes there have been official queries over the regular change in membership, even though this is given in the bye-laws. As a registered society in the State of Karnataka, VDSs are subject to the payment of income tax. They can gain exemption, however, by registering under various sections (the most appropriate of which is Section 12A).

Now, a number of years on, VDS members have gained considerable understanding of the process, and are in a position to advise others on certain issues. All 14 VDSs are now registered, and have become familiar with the annual registration renewal procedure.

“Registration is like getting a permanent job! With proper book-keeping and a constitutionally recognised VDS, we have the power to approach the taluk panchayat and other government schemes.”

Mr. Rajanna, Hanumanthwadi VDS President, Upper Mullamari

4.3. First field-based activities

Although Phase II of ISPWDK was delayed in field implementation for over 2 years (due to prolonged discussions with the Government of Karnataka on the mode of its operation), it was possible to make use of this time for social mobilisation and capacity building amongst the stakeholders. Two particular sets of (project-funded) field activities during this period contributed significantly to the

building of experience in the VDS, the:

- drought relief programme (2001); and the
- pilot watersheds (2002).

Drought relief: In 2001, there was severe drought in the project area, with many animals dying of starvation and thirst, and many families being forced to migrate. Field visits were organised, during which the villagers, partners and project staff collectively identified specific problems. With partner facilitation, the VDS Governing Council members themselves prioritised the need, prepared a budget, identified the beneficiaries and forwarded a proposal to PSMU. The fact that they were able to take this initiative, act on it quickly, and that they got an equally quick response, fostered credibility and confidence. It also provided an opportunity to stress project principles, including that of equity – giving emphasis to the needs of poorer members of the community.

In Upper Mullamari, the main drought relief measures identified by the community were:

- ***support to CBOs to open “fodder booths”;***
- ***employment generation through the digging of farm ponds.***

A report at the time notes (with regard to fodder) that, “The VDS members of Hanumanthwadi and elsewhere succeeded in convincing the big farmers to wait since such farmers had sugarcane crop to feed their livestock. Selection of needy farmers, collection of their contribution and even searching for fodder and negotiations were all done by VDS representatives.”

(PRAWARDA, 2001)

Pilot watersheds: The idea of starting on a pilot scale was conceived by the project staff and partners as an opportunity to put into practice the skills learned during the capacity building, as a learning platform for all the stakeholders to understand the micro-planning process



A VDS committee meeting in progress in Kanchanal

better, emphasising the involvement of the poor, landless and women, as well as the (generally male) land-owners. Aspects particularly brought in were the household-based approach – with both women and men participating in planning, implementing and monitoring. The problems identified during this practical experience could be rectified when it came to full-scale implementation. One particular lesson learned was the area of land that could be treated by villagers in one season; first estimates were too optimistic, and had to be revised downwards on implementation. A further lesson learned was the demystification of technology. The pilot watersheds also served to prove that NGOs could facilitate technical watershed implementation, and not just social mobilisation. The issue of local contribution (LC) on CPRs and PPRs was also discussed, although matters such as how LC would be made for CPRs only became fully resolved during full implementation.

As a result of the combined capacity building and practical experience, when Phase II finally began field activities in

mid 2002, the VDSs (of which there are four to five in each watershed) were already established, functioning units.

² A household being defined as a single kitchen
³ The Dry Lands Development Board, DLDB became the Watershed Development Department.



5.1. Regularity of meetings

Regularity in holding meetings, and discipline in adhering to the rules set by the community members for themselves, is an important aspect in VDS functioning. The GC/EC (henceforward, "Governing Council") of the VDS normally meets monthly, but more often during periods of intensive labour on watershed treatment works, when payments are to be made. The VDS *gram sabha* is held half-yearly, when an action plan and progress reports are prepared and shared for approval. Ultimate decision-making and approval powers are vested in the VDS *gram sabha*, and additional meetings may be called whenever the need arises. Any new programmes such as vaccination camps, *shramdaan* (voluntary labour) initiatives etc. need to have approval from the VDS *gram sabha*. Operational decision-making, however, lies with the VDS Governing Council.

The quorum for conducting a VDS Governing Council meeting is two-thirds of the total membership, out of which one-third should be women. At the

beginning, reaching the quorum was a regular problem, and meetings were often postponed for this reason. This has gradually become less of a problem, with meetings taking place regularly - quite often (although this varies by VDS) without the NGO staff being present to facilitate. This may be partly attributed to a strong sense of purpose due to the many activities currently undertaken by the VDS, and the significant amounts of money that are being managed. Contributing factors to regular, functioning meetings include clear systems and procedures being in place (and members having become familiar with them); repeated training programmes for the members (see section on capacity building); and a sense of belonging

The project has sought to promote a sense of local ownership in the VDS through membership, with every household in the village being requested to join. The (one time) amount and mode of collection of the membership fees were not kept rigid, and were essentially voluntary. In two watersheds, the membership fees were collected in the form of cash (Rs. 10 from each household), whilst in Kanakanala watershed, it was in kind (two sers, approx. 2kg of bajra – pearl millet - from each household). As with any new initiative, some villagers have been quicker than others to see the benefits of a VDS and to pay their membership contribution, but the more people joined, the more others became convinced that they should also do so. Reasons given for this include a gain in status and prestige; a wish to play a part in the development of the village; and recognition of the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills through the VDS.

5.2. Early tests of democracy and leadership

The VDSs are still on the path of evolving into democratic, fully functioning institutions, but considerable progress has been made in this lengthy and sometimes

turbulent process. In the beginning the partner NGOs faced cynicism and a lack of faith on the part of some villagers, as well as fears that the project would impose many restrictions on their way of life. Disruption by influential persons with vested interests in the village was significant in some villages. Another hurdle that had to be overcome was the limited skills and lack of experience of Governing Council members in planning and implementing development initiatives, and in managing funds. In the case of two villages (in two separate watersheds), the entire Governing Council of the VDS had to be dissolved and re-constituted due to vested interests and financial mismanagement (Seri B Tanda and Illal villages). In a third case, it was not possible to continue activities in one village (Hagaldal) due to the heavy influence of political parties.

Initially, the leaders in the VDSs tended to be the more influential persons – but gradually they became interested due to the large amount of time that was required for attending meetings, etc. A high commitment was needed, without there being opportunities for financial gain. Furthermore, leaders had to be prepared to be fully accountable to the villagers in open meetings. As this became apparent, others who were genuinely interested in contributing to village development came forward.

As illustrated in the quote by a staff member of one of the partners, the establishment of VDSs as democratic bodies responsible for the management of significant levels of funds was not obvious. However, the capacity building of VDS members has gradually built confidence and skills.

"We did not have any experience or confidence in handing over huge funds to community institutions. I personally was not convinced and suggested for including

BOX 6: CHANGING LEADERSHIP IN ILLAL VDS

The VDS in Illal village was established in 2000. Most people in the village are SC or ST, and the 15 members of the VDS Governing Council represented this composition. Problems started when the VDS Governing Council took up construction of a sunken pond under ISPWDK drought relief measures. The pond was poorly constructed, and conflicts arose as a result. Allegations of financial mis-management were made against the Chairperson and the Secretary, who then failed to attend the next Governing Council meeting or the VDS *gram sabha*. As a result of social pressure, the defaulters attended the second VDS *gram sabha*, and they agreed to repay. Responsibility for ensuring this was given to the village head, thus demonstrating overall village trust in traditional leadership. All activities came to a standstill for six months and a re-election of the Governing Council members (before they had completed their term) took place, in line with the decision of the VDS *gram sabha*, and the recommendation of the PIRC. Thus the VDS Governing Council was completely changed, with the new members having full credibility and the trust of the village members overall.

an NGO representative as joint signatory to avoid any pilferage. But due to the extensive efforts on building capacities and transparent systems, VDS are efficiently managing the project funds and activities. Now we can concentrate on other aspects of the project."

K.H. Basavaraj, Coordinator, PRAWARDA

When the VDSs were first established, their discussions revolved less around watershed activities (which only began on a pilot basis in 2002), and more around village problems such as sanitation, drinking water, road repair, vaccination camps, and agricultural services. The fact that the project had the necessary flexibility to be able to address these issues was important in establishing credibility. There was also a considerable amount of *shramdaan* (voluntary labour – see Box 7)

organised in these early days, which served to foster social cohesion. Once watershed activities started, however, the discussions became focused on the planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting of project interventions.

continued Box 7: Some of the cases of shramdaan mobilised by VDS

lands around the *paandhari* benefited. Around 250 cattle, 400 sheep and goats drink at the pool every day. The VDS has entered into an agreement with the nearby users for the maintenance of the structure.

Sugur K VDS in Maramuri watershed, Gulbarga district has a dispersed geographical location and heterogeneous community. It comprises Sugur K village, Sugur K tanda, and Harijan wada. Together, these number 434 households with a population of around 2,000. The VDS was registered in February 2001. The VDS organised a *shramdaan* for cleaning the temple ground and cricket playground for the children. When participating in meetings and training at the MYRADA project office, the VDS members learned about the importance of computers. They wanted to buy one for their VDS to maintain VDS books and accounts, and enhance the knowledge and skills of village children. The VDS Governing Council members discussed the matter, and in one *gram sabha*, held on 22 July 2002, asked the Taluk Panchayat members for support. This was agreed, although it was only after regular follow-up and persuasion over a period of one year that the Panchayat sanctioned Rs. 20,000. They approached MYRADA for additional support; MYRADA agreed to provide training, guidance and a sum of Rs. 6,000. The rest the VDS mobilised through community contribution and a donation from a visiting consultant. A computer was purchased on 8 October 2003 for Rs. 33,000. The VDS Convenor and Field Supporter were sponsored by the project for a 3-month computer course. Now the entire project MIS and accounts are maintained in the computer. Those trained are also providing computer coaching to school students and drop-outs. After seeing all this, the other three VDS in the project area were motivated, and have mobilised funds to buy a computer for their village too.

Box 7: Some of the cases of *shramdaan* mobilised by VDS

Adivihavi is one of the Phase II villages of Kankanala watershed project, Koppal District. Public transport services to this village were very poor, with a maximum of one bus per day. The VDS Management Committee decided to take up the issue of arranging a more regular and reliable bus service, and approached the Transport Corporation officials. They were assured that a bus service would be provided, if a motorable road existed. With considerable difficulty, the VDS Management Committee convinced the villagers to repair a 2.5 km stretch of road through *shramdaan*, with every household in the village participating. They also gained the support of the project and Gram Panchayat. The *shramdaan* for making the road motorable took place over an 8-day period, and comprised 623 person days of free labour. In monetary terms, the cost totalled Rs. 35,400, which includes free labour worth Rs. 28,568, Rs. 2,260 mobilised from the project for diesel for the tractor and Rs. 3,900 from members of the Taluk Panchayat towards tractor hire charges. After the repair, the villagers created pressure on the Bus Depot Manager to react, by approaching local politicians. They managed to also mobilise Rs.10,000 from the District Minister towards asphaltting the road. Following inspection and certification by officials, the Road Transport Corporation issued orders for buses to operate six trips a day to Adivihavi village.

Nirgudi is a multi-caste village in Upper Mullamari watershed, Bidar district. It has 414 households, 28% of whom are landless agriculture labourers. In October 2000 the VDS was officially registered. Selected VDS members were given training to plan, implement, and monitor developmental activities. They organised village-level voluntary work for village development, and mobilised resources worth Rs. 20 lakhs for village sanitation, the repair of roads and drinking water facilities under the government Jal Nirmal (drinking water and sanitation) scheme. They established a linkage with the Forest Department and procured 1,500 saplings so that 2 to 3 trees could be planted in the backyard of each household. The VDS mobilised labour to construct a small low-cost check dam to conserve soil and water around *Paandhari* (perennial water spring). The NGO provided the technical expertise for the design and cost estimate. The work was done by the SHGs, with supervision by the VDS. The funds for the material and wages were provided by the project as part of drought relief support. Due to this initiative, 70 Kabbaliga families (scheduled tribe) having

5.3. Planning and implementation of project-supported activities

Steps in the process

Planning of Project-supported activities entails the preparation of an annual action plan, based on the micro-planning document (for the watershed). The steps entailed are, briefly, as follows.

Plans and ideas for the activities in the coming year begin in the field, amongst community members. Formal discussion then takes place at the VDS *gram sabha*, giving everyone the opportunity to express his or her views. The rigour of practice of VDS *gram sabhas* varies from place to place, but in all cases it meets and approves the plan. The approved plan is then presented

to the PIRC; once discussed and approved, the partner NGO consolidates the annual plan for the watershed. This is in turn submitted for discussion at the PSC, where final approval is given. (To date, there has been no instance of this approval being refused, although some changes or clarifications may be required). Once PSC approval has been given, funds are released in advance to the NGO partner. This in turn transfers an advance to the VDS, which commences activities.

Activities are organised through various committees under the VDS. These are organised in a slightly different manner in the different watersheds, but in all cases there is a WMC and a group of technical resource persons.

- The **Watershed Management Committee (WMC)** monitors watershed works, and comprises representatives of different castes and classes with assured representation of landless and women. In the case of Maramuri and Upper Mullamari, there are separate sub-committees for payment and measurement.
- Groups of **Technical Resource Persons**, called People's Technical Resource Groups (PTRG) in Kanakanala, a technical team in Maramuri, and a Grama Gyana Kendra (GGK) in Upper Mullamari, provide technical support.

The system of different sub committees for measurement and payment has been found to be an effective mechanism for promoting transparency. The community members in the former are responsible for taking measurements, ensuring the quality and for certifying that the payments can be made as per the claims. The payment committee draws the money from the bank on payment day and makes the payments to the labourers, as recommended by the measurement committee. Depending on the size of the VDS and the volume of works being conducted, there are generally 2 to 9 technical resource persons. Unlike the VDS governing council members and the WMC members, who serve on a voluntary basis, the technical resource persons receive a small monthly remuneration (around Rs. 600) through the project, in payment for their services.

There is a deliberate rotation in the different committees, thus ensuring that there is no accumulation of power. One-third of the VDS Governing Council members are replaced every year. The WMC members undergo changes every year, while the members of the payment committee are rotated after every payment.



Technical resource persons measure out completed works in Maramuri watershed

Funds handled

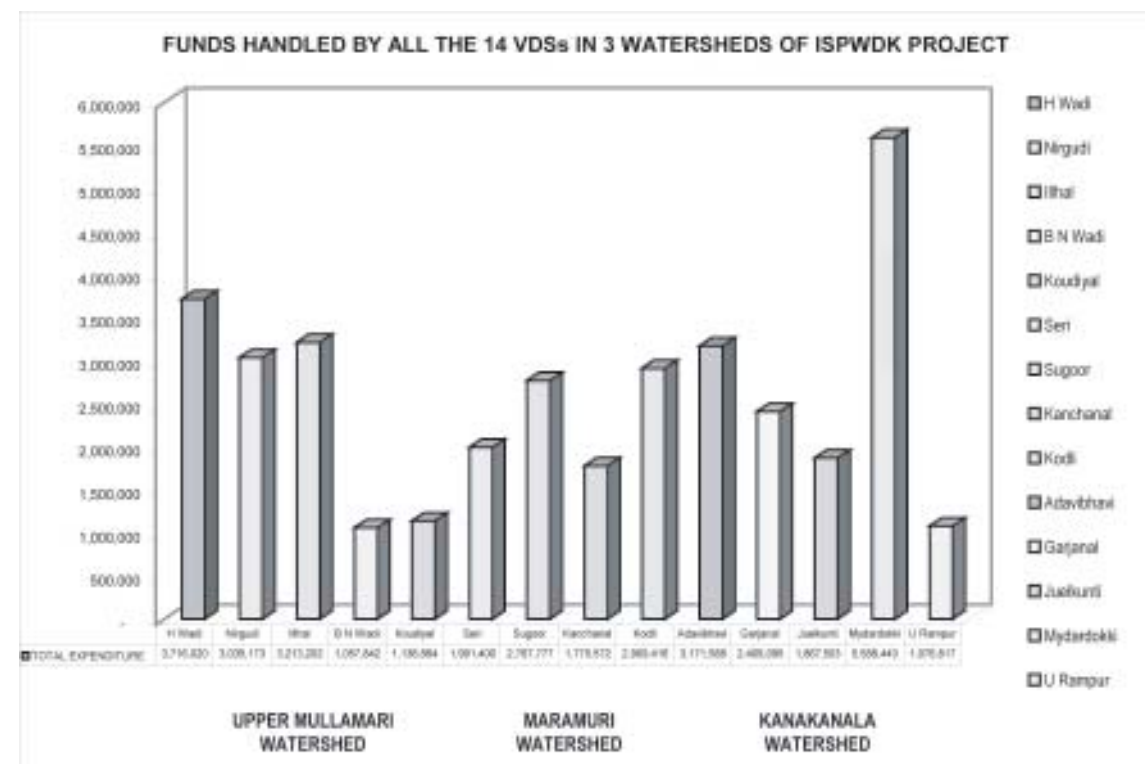
Direct release of funds to the VDS (through the NGOs) only commenced in July 2002, following the approval of the Mid Course Corrections document. From July 2002 to the current time, the amount of money handled by the VDSs has risen sharply. Figure 2 shows the total project funds handled by the 14 VDSs over the three-year period July 2002 – June 2005. This comprises the funds for watershed and livelihood activities; funds collected by the VDS for local contribution are separate. As may be seen, many VDS have handled well over Rs. 3.5 million, with the highest expenditure (Mydardokki VDS, Kanakanala) being Rs. 5,588,443. It may also be seen from the figure that the amount of money handled varies quite considerably – the lowest (Bandenzwadi VDS, Upper Mullamari) being Rs. 1,057,842. This is no reflection on the individual capacities of the VDSs. Expenditure is strongly related

to the size of the villages and the amount of land area treated; the type of land (and hence treatment required) is also important. Thus the high expenditure in Mydardokki is accounted for by the fact that it is a relatively large village with an extensive area of Common Property Resources (CPRs), that have been treated with an intensive system of large earthen check dams (the construction of which required a huge input of labour). The VDSs with a smaller fund flow are generally the smaller ones (Bandenzwadi has the lowest number of households), where mainly private farm

land has been treated. These are generalisations, but a detailed analysis of VDS spending is beyond the scope of this document.

The VDS is also responsible for collecting a local contribution from each farmer whose land has been treated, as well as on CPRs (see Box 8). As this matter is elaborated in a separate document (ISPWDK, in preparation), it will not be further detailed here.

VDS Funds Utilisation graph



Box 8: Local contribution under ISPWDK

An important feature of the ISPWDK project design is that the cost of implementing the watershed treatment is fully paid by the project. The people then contribute an amount that is calculated as a proportion (in the case of private land, 25%; for common property resources, CPRs, 10%) towards a village fund – the LC fund, managed by the VDS. This means that there is clear provision for future watershed maintenance, as well as, potentially, other development activities. This arrangement is intended to promote equity, sustainability and ownership. Given the ISPWDK policy of using no machinery, most of the cost of land treatment is wage labour (with a relatively small amount for materials, when structures are involved). When work is undertaken, the wages are calculated, and paid to the labourers in full (they may include the farmer and his family; they may be others). This means that the farmer cannot deduct anything from the labourers' wages – he or she has to pay in cash. The arrangement for collecting contribution on CPRs varies in the different watersheds, but again the mechanism is such that it is not deducted from the wages of labourers. Covering the entire cost of treatment helps ensure that the work is done to a high standard (reinforced by other aspects of project design, such as community supervision). Furthermore, sustainability and ownership are promoted through the separate provision for future maintenance.

No use of machinery

The deliberate project strategy of banning the use of machinery for watershed works means that the VDSs are managing a very large number of days of wage labour opportunities. This has fostered a sense of ownership of the activities in that it is almost entirely local people who have contributed their labour, with no large outside contractors becoming involved. More importantly, the strategy has provided the poor and marginalised in the community with the opportunity to earn a good wage locally. Furthermore, project experience was that it was mainly the small and marginalised farmers who immediately responded to the opportunity for developing their land; the wealthier landowners have generally taken up watershed activities only more recently.

A potential disadvantage of employing only manual labour is that it is time consuming and complex to organise; thus the speed of treating areas may be slower than if machines are used. This said, as local peoples' experience in the watershed

has grown, organisational aspects have become more efficient.

Challenging decisions

The VDS members have been faced with a variety of challenging decisions, but one of the most significant debates early on concerned determining the wage rate for labour. Fixing a rate higher than that normally paid in the village (which at project commencement, was significantly lower than that which labourers could obtain outside on government [DSR] rates) confronted the power structures in the village – wealthy farmers arguing to keep the rate low, and the landless labourers arguing for increases. The same was true for women's wages, which are generally much lower than men's (on average, Rs. 10 – 20 for women and Rs. 20 - 30 for men per day). Even women from landed households argued that women could not be paid the same as men.

The practice that was eventually decided (being ratified through the PIRC in each watershed) was of payment for work on a volumetric basis. This favours the



Manual labour provides the poor and the marginalised the opportunity to earn a good wage locally - here in Kananala watershed

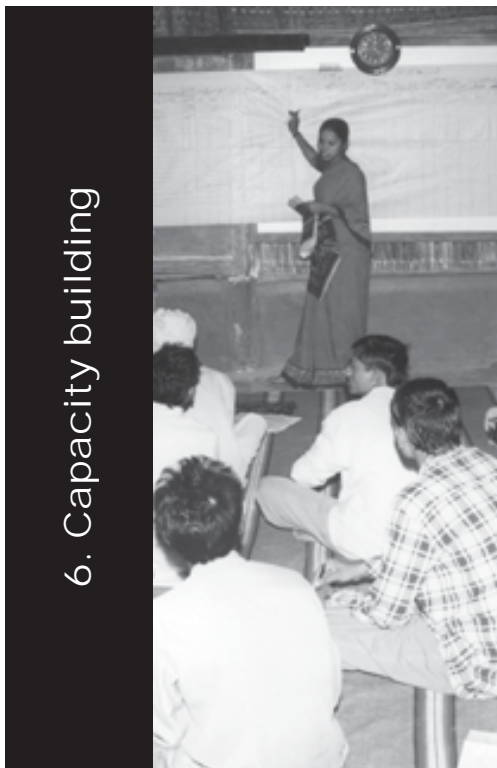
labourers, as it provides an opportunity to earn far more than the local daily wage. Rates followed are as per DSR; the harder the labourer works, the more s/he is paid as payment is by volume, and not by day. This is further refined to bring in equal wages for women and men by requiring the labourers to work as far as possible in pairs. Usually this means that husband and wife work and earn together, but in other instances a man and a woman from different households may work together – and share the wages paid equally.

“Early on in the formation of the VDS, there was a conflict when setting the price to be paid for land works through the project. The large landowners said that the price should be Rs. 45 per brass (ie. 2.83 m³), whereas the poor, landless and small farmers said that it should be Rs. 65, and Rs. 85 in the case of hard soil. Eventually the meeting decided on the higher rates [differentiated by soil type]. I was very happy at this, as one brass requires the work of one man and one woman, for whom the normal daily wage is Rs. 50 and Rs. 20, respectively. On soft soil, one brass

takes a couple less than one day to dig – sometimes two can be done in a day – and the money is paid to the couple jointly. Since the watershed project came, labourers have been able to demand better wages. I do not think that this will have a detrimental effect on agriculture [with richer farmers being unable to obtain labour].”

V A Umesh, Extension Officer and CBO Coordinator, MYRADA

Another aspect which the VDS members have had to decide is how a project budget for livelihood opportunities should be allocated. This budget is intended for support to persons belonging to marginalised groups to improve their income-generating possibilities - for example, by purchasing a milch cow, some poultry, or equipment to conduct an artisan trade. Such matters are discussed openly at the VDS *gram sabhas*, with the community collectively agreeing on who the beneficiaries should be, and the SHGs taking on a support role.



Capacity building has been an integral part of support to the VDSs. It is a continuous process, and occurs just as much through practical experience and observation (“learning through doing”) as from formal training sessions. Although the capacity building described here directly relates to VDS members, it is important to note that it was accompanied by training of partner staff, as they served to a considerable extent as trainers and role models. The degree to which concepts were internalised by the respective staff is, in fact, reflected in the practices followed in the different VDSs – some giving more importance to certain aspects than others.

6.1. Subject areas

The subject areas addressed in capacity building may be grouped according to four broad categories: social/attitudinal; technical NRM; vocational aspects and institutional building (although some are overlapping).

Social/attitudinal capacity building has covered matters such as leadership; conflict resolution; understanding poverty and discrimination; and gender sensitisation. Technical aspects related to watershed management include

preparing a micro-plan, monitoring structures (eg. marking and measuring). In promotion of sustainable agriculture, villagers have learnt about vermi-composting, bio-composting, floriculture, and dryland horticulture; there was also some training on medicinal plants. Vocational skills training has covered skills such as book binding, tailoring, neem processing, computer basics, the use of customised software for maintaining watershed records and accounts, and animal health (para-veterinarians). Institutional development training includes book-keeping, norms of institutions (framing bye-laws and then acting according to them), tax considerations, linkages, roles and responsibilities, managing computerised records, accountability and transparency (preparing office bearers on how to present the progress and books of accounts to the VDS *gram sabha*, to answer questions without the support of the NGO, etc).

“We were trained on watershed treatment at Kodli and Kamlapur. Previously we did not know about the metric system of measurement and technical design of the watershed structures. Now we are confident on implementing the watershed activities without the NGO support.”

Mr Shankar, Community Resource Person (Watershed), Seri B Tanda, Maramuri

“After working in the VDS, I gained confidence in community organisation, working / managing labourers, communicating information to men and women and interacting with SAMUHA and outsiders. Although, I am PUC [Pre University Certificate] pass I didn’t know bank operations, or book keeping skills.

Now I feel happy and proud to maintain all these. In future also, I will use these skills and knowledge for VDS development or elsewhere.”

Mr Chandrashekar, Village Executive, Adivihavi VDS, Kanakanala

6.2. Persons trained

A deliberate attempt has been made to spread opportunities for capacity building widely within the community – whilst ensuring that women and marginalised groups, in particular, are fully represented. More than 500 persons in the project area are now specifically trained resource persons. A variety of different target groups were identified, as follows:

- general community: All VDS members were sensitised on their roles and responsibilities in attending and participating actively in VDS *gram sabhas*;
- VDS Governing Council members: Apart from being inducted on the project principles, they received training on leadership, governance, legal issues, management aspects, monitoring and review, financial aspects, presentation aspects, communication, and building linkages with the local government departments;
- community resource persons received training on technical works in watershed rehabilitation, aspects of agriculture production, use of computers (see Box 10), animal health (para-vet training), etc.;
- members of SHGs and their federated structures: training on governance and finance management issues, including cost coverage.

Criteria for selecting community resource persons in MYRADA

- **Equal opportunity to be provided for men and women**
- **Person need not necessarily be literate- Person should have skills derived from local knowledge**
- **People working with farmers, particularly women farmers, will be particularly considered**

This, however, should not give the impression that capacity building events are always addressed exclusively to a particular stakeholder group. Many training events deliberately bring together partner staff and selected VDS members, encouraging joint learning with other stakeholders.

Box 9: Training in computers – an example from Sugur VDS

In Maramuri watershed, there has been a particular emphasis on the computerisation of all accounts and MIS data at village level. Thus each VDS procured a computer – either from the GP or project funds – and people have been trained in their use.

Bhim Rao of Sugur village is a VDS convenor with a PUC (12 level) education. Through the project, Bhim Rao received training at a computer centre in Gulbarga, regularly attending this every weekend for some six months. Additionally he had regular training in the use of the accounts package Tally and the ISPWDK MIS. After regular practice, today he manages both the accounts and the watershed MIS for Sugur VDS. However, as the workload of this and his other VDS functions have increased, he has taken on support from a young woman and is training her in managing the watershed MIS.



Bhim Rao at the Sugur VDS computer, Maramuri Watershed

6.3. Variety in capacity building events

Capacity building has been addressed in numerous ways and at different levels – exposure and exchange visits, learning events, inputs from support agencies, field based inputs as well as classroom training. This has also taken into consideration the fact that sometimes it is necessary for people to attend several different events, structured in different ways, to become fully at ease with new concepts, etc.

Training has been conducted both internally, and calling on external expertise where necessary. Thus partnerships were developed with, for example, Agriculture Man Ecology (AME) Foundation for support in the sustainable agriculture interventions, WoTR with regard to technical aspects and in support of MIS development; BASIX to support livelihood (income-generating) activities; whilst HID Forum was engaged to support gender-balanced development. Furthermore, emphasis has been placed on maximising synergies between local knowledge and external expertise; for example, community suggestions concerning their indigenous knowledge on watershed works and agriculture practices, as well as institutional norms and practices, were said to have been particularly useful in defining some training programmes (ISPWDK, 2005).

6.4. Capacity building through participation in reviews and meetings

Apart from the regular training events, a very important aspect of capacity building for VDS members has been participation in regular project meetings – not only the VDS itself, but also the PIRC, SHG meetings, etc. For those who have participated in higher-level meetings such as the JPRs, Exchange Fora, and the PSC, the opportunity (which is rotated) has provided fertile ground for personal learning.

In the six-monthly JPRs, community representatives participate in a team with other stakeholders as well as a number of external facilitators, reviewing the physical, financial and process related progress in the watershed. Conducted almost entirely in Kannada, these intensive five-day events have helped community members appreciate – and evaluate – the work of others. They have also developed strong presentation skills, as was demonstrated when the project was recently reviewed.

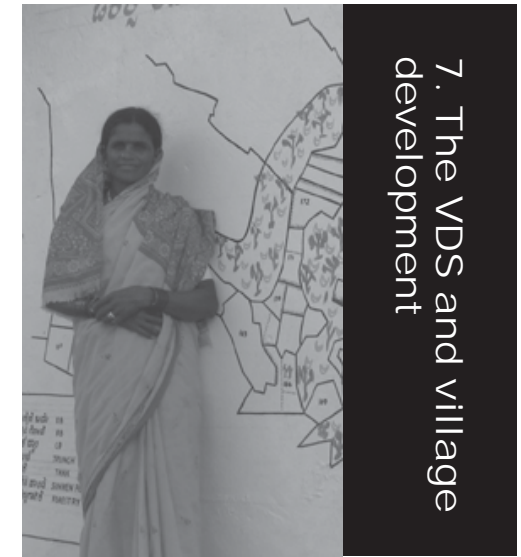
The Exchange Forum Meetings, held six-monthly around a specific theme, bring together representatives of all stakeholders for a sharing of views and practical experience. Subject-matter specialists invited generally include government officials, representatives of SDC, staff of other NGOs working on similar matters, technical support agencies, scientists, etc. The meetings are held in a mixture of Kannada and English, with simultaneous translation. There is considerable opportunity for interaction in small group discussions, as well as in the plenary. At the PSC, which is a more formal event, representatives of all the programme stakeholders – but no outsiders – come together for programme decision-making. These six-monthly meetings (also in Kannada and English, with translation) are intense, and include specific sessions for community representatives to present their work and air their opinions. For most VDS members participating for the first time in the Exchange Forum or PSC, it has been a completely new experience – one that has greatly increased their confidence to interact and discuss on equal terms with persons with whom they would otherwise have had no contact.

A recent review of ISPWDK Phase II (ISPWDK, 2005) found that many changes had occurred in project villages. It was particularly remarked that men and women came together to eat and talk on an equal basis, something that was unimaginable five years ago. It is possible, of course, that not all changes are directly related to the project, but many clearly are. As the pivotal institution in village development, the VDS is heavily implicated in the changes that have taken place. It is argued that this is particularly the case with regard to the following:

- empowering the poor and marginalised;
- increased sensitivity to gender;
- transparent, democratic decision-making;
- community cohesion;
- skills and confidence towards the outside world.

7.1. Empowering the poor and marginalised

It has already been noted that considerable capacity building took place in sensitising VDS members – particularly office bearers – to issues of poverty and discrimination. As a result of this awareness, the VDS could implement a variety of mechanisms that cut across class and caste divides. One of the most obvious of these is equal representation on all committees, but in itself, this is not enough to ensure that the voice of the marginalised is heard. More important has been the equal opportunities provided for capacity building – resulting in many persons from marginalised groups becoming skilled, and recognised as community resource persons (see Box 10). Such social recognition and the self confidence that it brings is far more empowering than being asked to participate just because one is of a certain class or caste.



7. The VDS and village development

As noted by one NGO member of staff, government schemes are often caste based – if you are ST or SC, you are eligible for particular programmes. There are sound reasons for this at a policy level. By contrast, under the VDS, everyone contributes regardless of caste/group, and everyone has an equal voice in decision-making. Decisions on who should benefit from any given development initiative are made by all the village members in an open meeting – not on the basis of caste or quota, but on the basis of recognised and agreed need.

“One good impact of VDS is that I got good image, respect and importance in the village which earlier on was not there as I am from lower caste, and was sitting idle and creating problems in the village.”

Tukaram, ex-VDS president, Bandenazwadi, Upper Mullamari

Other practices implemented through the VDS that have empowered the previously poor and marginalised are fair wage rates for labourers (in terms of rate, volumetric measurement, and full payment without any deduction for local contribution); and the livelihood opportunities specifically targeted towards poor and marginalised persons.

“Altogether there are one hundred families in this village, and each family has representation either on the VDS or in an SHG... Thirteen families are represented on the VDS [committee]. There are eight SHGs.... When the VDS started, some 60 families in the village opposed it – only 40 families were in favour of it. The others thought that the VDS was getting money from outside, and misusing it, just for themselves Now there are only 10 families who still oppose the VDS. They are the largest landowners, each owning some 4 to 50 acres of land. Even if some individuals within these households are interested in the VDS activities, they are dissuaded by the others in their household. They do not like the VDS because they think that the poorer people will no longer come to work for them in their fields. However they cannot do anything because now the majority of the village is a member of the VDS. Thus in the Gram Panchayat, though they (the richer farmers) are members there, they cannot oppose the VDS”

Gangamma, VDS Resource Person, Kanchanal

7.2. Increased sensitivity towards gender

The VDS rules requiring a minimum one-third representation by women in all committees, institutions and meetings, and the support provided to (mainly women’s) SHGs and their federations, are both steps supporting women to take a greater role in village development. More importantly and innovatively, greater gender awareness has arisen through the way in which women and men are assuming new, non-traditional roles as community resource persons. Wages are shared equally; women share equally in planning and decision-making, and are taking up leadership positions on an equal basis with men. Indeed, there are increasing numbers of women elected to higher office; persons are rotated, of course, but in late 2005, 7 out of the 14 VDS presidents were women. Recognition of the capacities of women is important amongst themselves, as well as amongst men. Through participation in

the VDS, women’s horizons have broadened from just savings and credit (in SHGs) to active participation in (mixed gender) meetings, measurement of works, payment for work conducted, supervision etc. In all the watersheds, women have been trained in all aspects of watershed activities, the same as men, and are equally involved in activities. All the NGO partners observe that women’s participation has improved in Phase II. In Phase I, the WMC and SHGs¹ were completely separate institutions, but now SHGs are often viewed as part of the VDS (the extent that this is true varies between VDSs and watersheds). The members often identify themselves less with their particular SHG, and more with their VDS (and in turn PIRC, PSC etc). The VDS members also support and guide women SHGs to take up need-based, community support activities such as abolishing liquor shops, road repair, bus facilities etc. This has given them courage, confidence and determination, and has also helped them to tap external resources. A focused effort on gender mainstreaming in the project, facilitated by the resource organisation HID Forum, has increased awareness within the partner NGOs, and helped staff provide more appropriate, conscious support on gender issues to the VDS. A separate publication (ISPWDK, in preparation) will detail this process.

“In MTG [SHG] meeting, we only discuss about loans, savings and other family problems, but in VDS meeting, we get to know and participate in village problems, issues and activities. It feels good to be part of VDS. Based on the VDS support, all MTG groups in the village decided to abolish the arrack shop. People rarely go out to drink and harassment to women and children has also been reduced. In the nearby villages also people got aware and stopped arrack shop.”

Barmamma, VDS member, Juelkunti , Kanchanal watershed

There are constant challenges in integrating gender awareness into project activities. These include difficulties caused by illiteracy; a tendency for middle-aged women to participate, leaving out their daughters-in-law; and resentment by men if activities focus only on women. Whilst such attitudes take time to change, it is observed that many village women have reached a stage of self-confidence that is having an empowering effect on others.

In Kanchanal, there was resistance to the women being trained as para-vets as this role was seen (by both men and women) as the domain of men. However, women are often the main persons taking care of domestic animals, so the NGO partner (SAMUHA) felt the concept to be justified. After two years, not only have these women become accepted by the villagers as resource persons, but the concept of women para-vets is recognised by the local Animal Husbandry Department as good practice. The problem of illiteracy amongst women was overcome by colour coding the medicines. These women are also charging for their services – at least to cover costs.

7.3. Transparent, democratic decision-making

As has been noted in section 2.1, there was concern early in the project that it would be difficult to gain full representation of households in the VDS. Although membership is not 100%, it is generally over 90% in all villages. The exact figures for Upper Mullamari watershed are given in the following page.

Membership can of course be active or passive – and certainly there is variation between VDSs. In all, however, the VDS *gram sabha* is indeed the focal point for decision making, which is conducted in an open and transparent manner. Villagers expect to be able to question facts and figures, and to get satisfactory answers from the office

Box 10: Sharadabai – WMC member, Seri B Tanda

Becoming active in the VDS has not always been easy for individual villagers – particularly women, who have often had to overcome suspicions and prejudice. Sharadabai, wife of Basu of SC, is a case in point. She and her husband own some 2 acres of land; he is a mason, working in Mumbai. She runs a petty shop in the village, and has one milch animal. In recognition of her energy and willingness to play an active part in decision-making, she was selected through the VDS *gram sabha* as a WMC member, and became very experienced in taking measurements and giving alignments to farmers, even though she is unable to read and write.

Since the watershed work involved going to the field with male farmers, some of the villagers started rumours about her. When her husband came to know, he prevented her from attending meetings and monitoring watershed activities, and quarrelled with her on the subject many times.

Sharadabai was able to convince her husband by taking him with her to a WMC meeting where he observed that equal numbers of men and women attended, and discussed issues together. From talking with other members, he learned that his wife’s work was highly appreciated; thus he was reassured and was happy for her to continue. He even expressed the opinion that the work was very good, and socially motivated. According to MYRADA staff, the whole incident has in fact served to strengthen Sharadabai’s standing in the village.

Sl. No	Village name	Total Households	Membership Household	Percentage
1	Hanumanthwadi	245	235	95.92
2	Bandenawazwadi	87	78	89.66
3	Niragudi	424	412	97.17
4	Kowdiyial	180	161	89.44
5	Illal	323	312	96.59
Total Percentage				93.76

bearers. Beyond this, the planned watershed treatments for the village are displayed on a cadastral level plot map on the wall in a public/central place in the village. The plan and expenditure in different focus areas are also on display. This information is updated every three to six months.

7.4. Community cohesion

It was argued early in this document that a VDS represents a cohesive social unit, within which people know each other and often have kinship ties. All the capacity building, meetings and discussions, visits to external places and work in the field that the VDS members have undergone together have made this sense of community far stronger. With it comes a sense of accountability and responsibility. This is true just as much in the largest VDS, where there are some 1,500 households, as in the VDSs in which membership is below 500 – as illustrated by the comment here.

In a meeting of the Kodli Gram Panchayat Executive with visiting SDC representatives (September 2005), the Sarpanch, Mr Khatal Sab, compared the spirit of the work under the VDS with that under the GP in the following way. He remarked that when he was working for the VDS, he had the sense of social commitment; he was using someone else's money [SDC's] to do someone else's work [land improvement on a poor farmers field], but he felt so good about it that even his knee that had been giving him pain became better. He felt that his knee was a sign of the blessings he had earned from the poor

"Now we live like a community as a whole, like a big joint family, without any discrimination of high and low caste and men and women, bad or good we are all together."

Male VDS member, Kanchanal village, Maramuri

7.5. Confidence towards the outside world

Not only have VDS members had the opportunity to visit places outside their village in the context of exchange visits and learning fora, they are also becoming experienced in receiving visitors and explaining to them what developments have taken place in their village. This is an important step towards creating further linkages with outside organisations, on the path to sustainability.

"We have become more knowledgeable... We are better at thinking things through, about knowing our work. The women are speaking out more, and taking a greater role..."

Male VDS member, Garjanal, Kanakanala

"I gained the courage to talk with people in the village, and even to go to the bank to deposit money. These days I understand banking transactions. At first two people used to go together to the bank, but now I even go on my own to deposit money [a distance of some 4 km]. Either I get a tempo, or I walk..... On the negative side, whenever outsiders come to the village, I have to give up a days wage labour to attend the meeting."

Devamma, VDS member, Kanchanal, Maramuri watershed

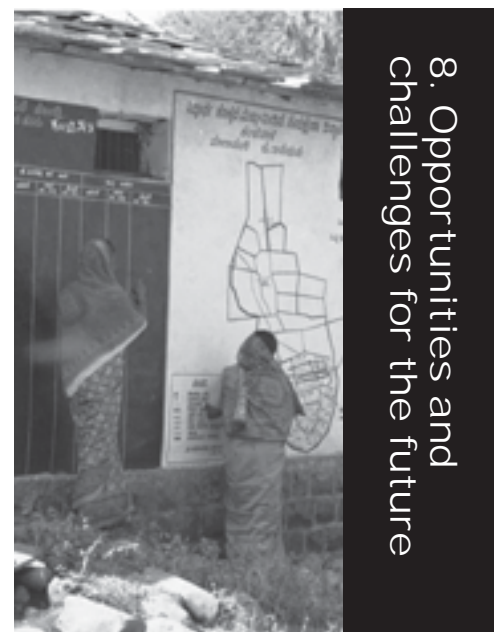
8.1. Relationship of VDS with Gram Panchayat

Project experience so far supports the argument that as a village-based institution at a lower level than the Gram Panchayat (GP), the VDS can be an important institution for strengthening grass-roots democracy, promoting values of accountability and transparency. The relationship between the VDS and the GP varies in the different watersheds, and is arguably strongest in Maramuri, where GP members are invited to VDS *gram sabhas* as a matter of course. In Sugur, the VDS has the use of the GP building for all its meetings, whilst funds have also been mobilised from the GP for certain purposes (notably a computer). In all watersheds, there is mutual acceptance and recognition between the VDS and GP – not competition.

In the recently held GP elections (2004), a high number of current and past VDS Governing Council members, or others who have been very active within the VDS, were elected to the GP. If spouses of those holding office are included, the total number is 23 persons (7 in Upper Mullamari, 10 in Kanakanala, and 6 in Maramuri). This provides a good indication of the trust that these individuals have gained.

8.2. Fund management and mobilisation

The VDS Governing Councils have already demonstrated an ability to manage large volumes of project funds, as well as collecting an impressive volume of funds as community (local) contribution, LC. Whilst the amount of LC varies according to the VDS (being linked to number of households as well as amount and type of area treated), many VDS will have a fund of at least Rs. 6-7 lakh by March 2006. This represents a significant opportunity to sustain village development activities



8. Opportunities and challenges for the future

and ensure the maintenance of assets created. It also represents a significant challenge, both in ensuring that decisions over the allocation of this money continue to be transparent and democratic; and in investing the funds so that they grow. This type of experience is still lacking. As the project review found (ISPWDK, 2005), many VDS members feel that the time has not yet arrived for them to be able to function fully on their own. A continued, if less intensive, level of facilitation appears to be required.

8.3. Institutional sustainability and linkages

It is not only in financial management that VDS members feel a need for further capacity building. Some VDS have already progressed further than others in developing linkages with outside agencies. Thus for example, the Sugur K VDS has been able to obtain Rs. 60,000 from the Taluk Panchayat (under the World Bank funded SJSY scheme) to give to six SHGs for income generating activities. Similarly, Kodli VDS has been recognised by the Department of Education to run locally the

Saksarata (literacy) programme. Linkages such as these will probably be vital for long-term sustainability. VDS members also mentioned a need for further capacity constitutional and human rights (ISPWDK, 2005). The importance of linkages was clearly at the forefront of the minds of VDS members in a visioning exercise conducted in Maramuri watershed in August 2005 (see Box 11).

Box 11: Future plan of action for VDS in Maramuri watershed

1. To strengthen the bond and relationship with the Gram Panchayat *gram sabha*.
2. [To provide] capacity building, [which] is essential for the sustainability of the VDS.
3. To establish linkages with other departments and organisations with the existing VDS.
4. To provide capacity building and strengthen the skills of the community resource persons.
5. To popularise the concept of the VDS, CMRC and Loan Based Watershed Programmes at Taluk and District level, and also to create the opportunities for popularising them.
6. To form the advisory committee for the implementation of the watershed programme.
7. To mediate for the effective functioning of the VDS and CMRC.

8.4. Creating further opportunities for the poor and marginalised

Whilst many poor and marginalised people have benefited from being members of the VDS and participating in project activities, there are still people in the villages who have not. Often these people are the poorest – particularly landless households who seasonally migrate. They may have regular, long-term patron-client relationships, for example, that they fear to break if they choose to stay back in the village for relatively temporary project opportunities. As the project review noted, (ISPWDK, 2005), community members are very conscious that watershed projects, being land-based, are biased in favour of people with land. Despite the many pro-poor provisions, this bias remains (if to a lesser extent than in other projects). It will be a major challenge in the future for the VDS to try to facilitate opportunities for the very poor and marginalised. Similarly, whilst women have been significantly empowered through VDS membership, it cannot be claimed that gender equity is fully integrated into the fabric of village society.

Based on experience to date, the following main policy-related conclusions may be drawn now in specific regard to the VDS as an institution.

9.1. Complementing, not competing with, Gram Panchayats

Village level institutions with a membership drawn from all the village households are ideally placed to handle village development. Indeed, this was the original concept behind the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, decentralising decision-making to the level of Gram Panchayat. The fact is, however, that most Gram Panchayats do not represent one village, but a number – and are generally too large to generate a sense of community cohesiveness in the same way as an institution such as a VDS. Rather than competing with the larger Gram Panchayat, village level institutions such as the VDS can serve a complementary role. This can be through the effect of demonstration, raising general expectations of democracy and accountability; through individuals who have strong VDS experience being elected to GP office and promoting VDS values; or through the VDS serving as pressure group if there is any suspicion of mal-practice. A VDS can also serve to ensure that the interests of that particular village are fully represented in the GP. Fully attended VDS *gram sabhas* in which all members have the opportunity to participate actively – as is already being demonstrated amongst the more mature VDSs - is grassroots democracy in action.

9.2. Financial management at village level can be highly effective

Critics of the decentralisation policy often argue that it is merely “decentralising corruption”, and that s



9. Policy implications

placing large sums of money in the hands of Gram Panchayat will simply strengthen existing local power structures. The example of the VDS, however, proves that villagers can organise themselves to handle large sums of money in an effective and democratic manner - provided due facilitation, training, orientation, and appropriate mechanisms (rules and regulations) are ensured. This takes time and substantial investment in capacity building. In any village, vested interests are likely to try to take advantage of opportunities for financial and political gain, but if it is clear that the majority will not tolerate such behaviour, democratic processes can prevail.

9.3. Gender and equity issues can become accepted village norms

An awareness of gender and equity can be built within village communities to the point that these values become accepted as the norm, and promoted by village institutions. Entrenched attitudes may take many years to change, but the fact that they are openly discussed gives all who

experience discrimination the opportunity to speak out, and challenge such attitudes. Specific practices that demonstrate gender equity, such as equal wages for equal work, and equal opportunities for capacity building, are important in reinforcing the principle of gender equity.

9.4. Supporting wage labour as a pro-poor strategy

Whilst banning the use of machinery for watershed activities may result in more time being needed to achieve a given amount of work, it is a clear pro-poor strategy. The whole organisation of labour through the VDS – from deciding on a system of payment (volumetric basis) to measurements and payment being made and approved by rotated, trained community members - is an effective means of ensuring transparency and accountability.

9.5. A sense of permanence

An essential feature of the VDS is that it was foreseen from the beginning as a permanent institution, and has been built up in this belief. Registration has been important in this regard, giving the VDS a sound legal standing, as has the collection of local contribution, forming a financial base for the future. Thus for the villagers, there is a strong sense of ownership and commitment – this is not just a project institution.

These conclusions are drawn on the basis of limited experience; at the time of writing, the oldest of the VDSs are less than five years old. Already permanent social capital has been built amongst the VDS membership, but it is likely that the institutions themselves will require further low-level support in the coming years to become fully sustainable. Nevertheless,



Payment for labour is organised through the VDS here in a fair and transparent manner - here a labourer in Kankanala watershed receives her wages

what experience has shown is the potential of VDSs for supporting grass-roots democracy, and the empowerment of the socially marginalised. VDSs are a demonstration that decentralisation does not have to mean decentralising corruption and strengthening existing power structures. This in fact provides grounds for optimism that, supported through vibrant linkages with village level organisations, Gram Panchayats can become meaningful institutions of local self-governance, given sufficient capacity building, awareness and demand for accountability amongst the communities concerned.

Acronyms

AME	Agriculture Man Ecology
CMRC	Community Managed Resource Centre (supported by MYRADA)
GGK	Grama Gyana Kendra
GMASS	Grameena Mahila Arthik Seva Samithi (supported by PRAWARDA)
ISPWDK	Indo-Swiss Participative Watershed Development-Karnataka
PIDOW	Participatory Integrated Development of Watershed
PSC	Programme Steering Committee
PTRG	People's Technical Resource Group
JPR	Joint Progress Review
NABARD	National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
NGO	Non Government Organisation
MIS	Management Information System
MMVSSN	Munjavu Mahila Vividhodesha Sahakari Sangha Niyamita (supported by SAMUHA)
PIRC	Project Implementation and Review Committee
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
WoTR	Watershed Organisation Trust
WMC	Watershed Management Committee
VDS	Village Development Society

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Intercooperation is a leading Swiss non-profit organisation engaged in development and international cooperation. We are registered as a foundation and are governed by 21 organisations representing the development community, civil society and the private sector. Intercooperation is a resource and knowledge organisation, combining a professional approach with social commitment.

Intercooperation supports partner organisations in more than twenty developing and transition countries on mandates from the Swiss government and other donors. In South Asia, Intercooperation is present in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal.

Intercooperation has been working in India since 1982, as a project management and implementation partner of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC. Our early experience focused on the livestock and dairy sector, providing technical expertise through a series of bilateral projects with state governments in Kerala, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Sikkim. Intercooperation now works with governments, technical and research organisations, NGOs and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) on initiatives in natural resource management for sustainable livelihoods. Our working domains in India comprise:

- **Livestock and livelihoods – particularly small ruminants in semi-arid India**
- **Participatory watershed development with a focus on equity**
- **Participatory agricultural extension**
- **Farming systems approach to sustainable agriculture**
- **Human and institutional development**
- **Policy formulation and development of decision support systems**
- **Decentralisation and local governance.**

In all our work we seek to support gender balanced, equitable development, focusing on the empowerment of the poor and marginalised.