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Putting Research Knowledge into Action

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Translating watershed guidelines on the ground

Watershed management programs have been touted as a promising policy instrument for livelihood improvement and natural resource conservation in the rainfed regions of India. However, the outcomes of national government-led initiatives have been relatively mixed across India, despite decades of institutional refinement through the revision of watershed guidelines. Whereas most policy attention has focused on local institutions and technologies, this study examined how central-state level relationships can be enhanced to improve program outcomes.

Key messages

- How national watershed guidelines are translated on the ground is ultimately affected by the social, economic, political and bureaucratic context of the states in which they are enforced. Adapting technical, institutional and financial support from the central government to different typologies of contexts would allow each state to implement watershed programs more effectively.
- The current monitoring and evaluation system for watershed programs puts extra emphasis on measuring financial and physical targets at the expense of assessing processes. This emphasis might be detrimental to learning, and to the overall impact and sustainability of the benefits brought by the program.
- Refining institutions is not sufficient to address the policy implementation gap. Institutional change needs to be coupled with changes in how watershed programs and guidelines are described, discussed and talked about, i.e., by 'discourses'.

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Context

According to many experts, the latest set of watershed guidelines, the Common Guidelines of the Government of India (GoI 2008, 2011), represent a robust and sound institutional framework to guide the implementation of the Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP) in the country. They were drafted through a wide consultative and inclusive process, and are considered by most stakeholders as a marked improvement to the Guidelines for Hariyali (2003). However, are these guidelines sufficient to reduce the policy implementation gap? This study looked at the critical nexus of central-state level interactions in IWMP. This is where implementation gaps start to arise and cascade into multiple actions/decisions that affect lower level implementation.

There are two critical challenges that central-state level interactions have to address: first, there is an inherent tension between supporting innovation and flexibility and adhering to administrative requirements and rigorous project management. Program-based approaches have the tendency to stop at financial expenditure and geographical coverage, with the risk of overlooking actual impacts and benefits (Soussan and Reddy 2003). Central-state level interactions are characterized by a principal-agent relationship, whereby state governments have to implement a central government program, with centrally-managed funding and according to centrally-defined rules. Such a relationship often leads to a loss of information between state and central governments, and the possibility that some individuals convince policymakers to create rules that are advantageous for themselves (Gibson et al. 2005). For instance, monitoring and evaluation can quickly turn into a policing exercise with asymmetric information on the effectiveness of the program.

Second, program implementation has to adapt to a diversity of institutional, biophysical, socioeconomic

A social audit in Andhra Pradesh under IWMP; local farmers measuring a structure, September 2014 (*photo*: Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh, India).

Presentation of the research findings to national and state-level stakeholders, New Delhi, India, November 2014 (*photo:* Nirmal Sigtia, IWMI, New Delhi, India).

and political contexts among states under a common institutional framework. For instance, IWMP has to fit into each state's institutional system, where state-level agencies face diverse bureaucratic constraints in terms of capacity to recruit, train and retain staff. The level of political commitment in each state also significantly shapes the incentives for civil servants to meaningfully engage in the program. In addition, a variable less considered in watershed management studies is the set of discourses that support or undermine the legitimacy of IWMP: (i) Is watershed management set as a priority on the political agenda? and (ii) Is water scarcity identified in public debates as an important factor affecting rural livelihoods? Discourses also shape how civil servants perceive IWMP and understand it, e.g., as an infrastructure development program, as a package of soil and water conservation activities, as an integrated rural development program based on land and water management, etc.

This study builds on earlier research conducted on watershed management in Andhra Pradesh (AP) and in India, but it also departs from most studies which focused on local institutions and outcomes by examining the institutions and discourses governing central-state level relationships. To explore these issues, the research focused on the case study of AP[1], drawing information from in-depth interviews with around 40 stakeholders from central-, state- and district-level government agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and experts, and also from secondary data. It also capitalized on stakeholders' accounts of experience in other states[2].

[1]At the time of the study, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana were still forming a single state. Therefore, whenever we mention 'AP' in this brief, we refer to both these states.

[2]Example: Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.

This brief presents the key findings and policy recommendations, which are relevant to central-level government agencies in India.

Key findings

Context matters for institutional performance

The right institutions do not necessarily lead to the right outcomes. The main institutional framework for IWMP is the Common Guidelines (GoI 2008, 2011). Although these do play an important role in defining the way IWMP is implemented, our research shows how the decisions taken by state-level agencies are shaped by other factors: biophysical factors (e.g., rainfall patterns, topography); political, social and economic factors (e.g., importance of the agriculture sector to the gross domestic product [GDP] of the state, political vision and agenda, influence of civil society); various types of discourses (e.g., on the solutions needed to address water scarcity); state-level institutions; and organizational structures and cultures (Vania and Taneja 2004). Yet, these factors have been ignored in central-state level interactions.

AP was one of the states that spent more funds and covered larger areas for watershed management programs in India. In the mid-1990s, AP had the largest share of watershed development programs in India and attracted 50% of national funds. Furthermore, AP has often been described as proactive and innovative in the field of watershed management. Notably, the state has been at the forefront of linking watershed management with livelihoods and developing strong capacity building programs, which influenced the drafting of the 2011 Common Guidelines. These achievements have not necessarily translated into equitable and sustainable outcomes on the ground

A farmer ploughing his field in an IWMP target area in Andhra Pradesh, India (*photo:* Paul Pavelic, IWMI, Lao PDR).

(Soussan and Reddy 2003), yet they indicate a willingness, capacity and commitment from state governments to learn and perform.

Our interviews suggest that this willingness, capacity and commitment are linked to several factors. First, the biophysical and political-economic context pushed watershed management up the political agenda from early on. Around 70% of the cultivable area is rainfed and, in the 1980s and 1990s, water scarcity was identified as a major cause of low agricultural productivity and growth in the state. Second, in terms of discourses, watershed development was framed as the single best rural development intervention to address water scarcity issues. Lastly, findings indicate the importance of having a combination of strong political leadership pushing for efficient administration and innovation, a high capacity of civil servants, a strong civil society and support from foreign aid to further experiment with watershed management approaches.

A few other states, such as Karnataka, Gujarat and Maharashtra, have had similar experiences of innovation and have internal incentives to perform today. However, most states are lagging behind and still require (i) considerable handholding to understand the rationale and livelihood-centered approach of IWMP, and (ii) external incentives to implement IWMP beyond the mere achievement of physical and financial targets.

The right institutions also require the right discourses and communication

Communication is part of creating discourses (Box 1), and building knowledge and capacity.

This study evidenced two major weaknesses in the current mode of communication between central-level and state-level nodal agencies (SLNAs) and among SLNAs, which are given below:

- Communication is primarily based on quantitative information under a pre-defined format. Monitoring, evaluation and learning tools that seek to capture qualitative changes independently are either limited or absent (*source:* secondary data and interviews).

Box 1. Institutions and discourses.

'Institutions' are the rules-in-use. For instance, the rules defined in the Common Guidelines on roles, responsibilities and funding arrangements.

'Discourses' frame issues in specific ways, giving legitimacy to institutions and influencing beliefs.

- Communication between the Department of Land Resources and SLNAs is geared towards showing progress, and not towards sharing and learning (*source:* interviews). There is very limited inter-state sharing of experiences, and no space and opportunity for the states to discuss the intricacies of implementing IWMP, e.g., on whether to involve NGOs and how, how to use information technologies to curb the misuse of funds, how to consider potential downstream externalities of watershed projects at the macro-scale basin level, how to address local political dynamics, etc.

Policymakers need to move beyond outcomes to monitor the processes

Earlier experience with the Andhra Pradesh Rural Livelihoods Project (APRLP) (Seeley 2007) and other studies show that "it is the process of implementation rather than the technology per se that determines the sustainability of the program" (Springate-Baginski et al. 2001, 17). Currently, there is no organization at the central level that has the capacity to assess the performance of the states in terms of processes. The main focus of the central government is on physical and financial targets. As a result, the states that have not identified watershed management as a development priority only strive to demonstrate physical and financial progress without seeking to

Brainstorming session on IWMI's research findings with national and state-level stakeholders, New Delhi, India, November 2014 (*photo*: Nirmal Sigtia, IWMI, New Delhi, India).

understand how watershed management programs can effectively contribute to enhancing livelihoods and conserving natural resources, and how funds may be availed. Only a few states with their own incentives to perform beyond those targets, such as AP, manage to innovate (*source*: interviews).

What can central-level government agencies do to reduce the policy implementation gap?

The central government needs to tailor support to state governments across India to implement IWMP depending on the states' political-economic context, bureaucratic system/capacity, biophysical context and policy discourses. This support covers two areas: developing the right incentives and enhancing communication. The objective is to encourage the states that already innovate to continue to do so, and to help the states that have the capacity to do so to move away from a purely technocratic and top-down approach to a more flexible and innovative implementation of policy.

Creating incentives to improve processes and outcomes

The research showed that the focus on physical and financial targets in monitoring, evaluation and day-to-day communication discourages well-performing states to innovate and experiment, and hinders the understanding of potential benefits and livelihood-centered approaches of IWMP by other states. We recommend adopting a more balanced approach

through institutional reforms that will enhance the attention given to processes.

- **A special provision for institution building for IWMP has been made in the Twelfth Five Year Plan 2012-2017. The plan also recommends setting up a professionally managed Central Level Nodal Agency [CLNA]. We also recommend creating an organization at the central level with a group of interdisciplinary scientists (e.g., from social science, hydrology, soil science, etc.) that check the quality of processes and mechanisms in place** (e.g., the selection of watersheds, Detailed Project Report [DPR], capacity building plan), **gives advice and prepares tools to support the states** who lag behind. Such an organization would be an autonomous watershed authority, recognized as such by all the ministries implementing watershed management programs. The actions that could be taken include the following:
  - **Develop a DPR format that requests information about the processes of the interaction with communities and the quality of these processes,** e.g., how different social groups from the community were involved in decision making and at which level, issues raised during the interaction and how these were addressed, etc.
  - **Develop a training curriculum** for project implementing agencies (PIAs) **on how to better engage with communities**.
  - **Collect information on the factors affecting institutional performance** according to the framework developed in this research (e.g., capacity of SLNAs, Watershed Cell cum Data Centers [WCDCs] and PIAs; level of flexibility and transparency in these organizations; biophysical context [e.g., extent of rainfed areas]; and the level of political commitment to watershed management programs, etc.), which provides more context-sensitive support to the states.
  - **Include more qualitative assessments of IWMP, such as case-based and participatory evaluations,** e.g., the factors which shape the distribution of benefits among social groups across different contexts, and the constraints for marginalized groups to transform created assets into improved livelihoods, etc.
  - Include criteria on the quality of processes as additional requirements for **fund release**. This could fit in within an overall balanced scorecard, as a framework and management system to include strategic, non-financial performance measures.
  - **Create a favorable environment for the recognition and reward of experimentation and the quality of processes, e.g., through rewards, communication on best practices, political appreciation, etc.**

Enhancing communication

The research highlighted how the principal-agent relationship between the central and state governments hinders learning, which is one of the eight guiding principles of the 2011 Common Guidelines. We recommend creation of **an appropriate platform and conducive atmosphere for states to share each other's experiences and challenges, for example, by:**

- **creating small working groups within SLNAs** on specific topics with one leading/model state to share its experiences;
- **initiating a forum only for SLNAs**, where they can share their experiences and learn from other states; and
- **developing electronic platforms** (such as 'solution exchange') to share ideas among states.

Such platforms could also be an opportunity to build trust between government agencies, NGOs and communities by offering a forum for the latter to share their views and experiences.

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Front cover photo: A water harvesting structure in Mahabubnagar District, Telangana, India (*photo*: Floriane Clement, IWMI, May 2009).

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