Cross-cutting issues: A Gandhian Approach

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I would like to invite the attention of the participants of the International Dialogue on ‘Water for food and environment’ to the basic principles propounded by Mahatma Gandhi nearly a century ago which, as an activist working for over two decades among the women and other marginalized communities in Gandhi’s own homeland, I feel, are as relevant, if not more, to finding solutions to the present-day problems faced globally.

Gandhi had suggested a way of life that would ensure sustainability as also gender equity and uplift of the underprivileged. The underlying principle of Gandhi’s philosophy was people’s participation in decision-making, finding of local solutions to basic livelihood issues and resolution of conflicts through consensus.

We, at Utthan, the non-government organization I am associated with for more than two decades, have found strong validation of Gandhi’s principles in the way women and members of the underprivileged communities of villages in the coastal and hilly regions of Gujarat have developed sustainable natural resources management systems, ensuring gender equity and justice.

Utthan’s intervention in these villages has been mainly with a vision of creating sustainable process of empowerment. Utthan thus initiates these processes through organizing the underprivileged communities in the rural areas of Gujarat, especially women, around their own major issues in the form of institution and help build their capacities. Our emphasis has always been on helping village level institutions and community based organizations to find local solutions to their basic livelihood issues based on the informed choices and on the basis of equity and sustainability. This is in sharp contrast to the centralized planning approach in which experts, technocrats, bureaucrats and political leaders plan and work out solutions without involving local communities.
The results of the centralized planning approach and the execution of these plans through existing institutions have been devastating as can be seen in the fast depleting natural resources, increasing pollution, growing inequities and even violent conflicts over such basic issues as water and food. The conflict is not about sharing of water or a resource but it is about how much and for what purpose? It is about meeting the needs of one section without consideration for others. Also, not necessarily that this is done for the basic needs. The major injustice one sees is that the certain lifestyles are being supported at the cost of the requirement of basic needs of other communities or section of the society.

The main flaw in the centralized planning approach to problem solving is that it does not involve the people whose problems are sought to be solved. Even in countries like India that has a federal form of government elected through popular votes there exists a wide gap between the elected representatives and the people who elect them. Moreover, the elitist nature of the bureaucracy and the power-equation that is at work in all the social, economic, financial and educational institutions not only ensures but reinforces as well that those in positions of power at various levels are benefited the most. Thus we find that communities living in the downstream have no control over the behavior of those living in the upstream of a river, in terms of consumption of water or creating pollution in water.

The common underlying force that dictates the agenda and working of most of the institutions – civil, corporate and social – is patriarchy. It is the patriarchal system that marginalizes not just the women but also other underprivileged sections such as the workers – both industrial and agricultural as well other members of the weaker communities low in the social hierarchy.

Since the patriarchal system has been in existence from time immemorial, it is the men and the powerful groups in the society who have near total control and access to natural resources. Because of the well-entrenched system of patriarchy that cuts across most of the institutions, the fruits of any development initiatives are more likely to benefit and be cornered by the powerful.
Therefore it is essential, while we have a dialogue for arriving at a consensus on water for food and environment that we look at the following cross-cutting issues.

1. **Gender Equity:** This is a core issue as it concerns not just the women but all such other vulnerable groups as the landless, small and marginal farmers as well. They have very little access to and control over resources. Moreover, they have very little say over the management and control of common natural resources such as water, land and forest.

All these natural resources are increasingly being cornered, encroached upon, exploited and grabbed by powerful individuals and groups. Women and the other vulnerable groups are always at the receiving end, suffering not just deprivation but hardships as well, often leading to forced migration and high mortality. This control over all resources, are controlled by the powerful in the upstream region of a river or even within a watershed area.

The most blatant example of gender inequity is seen in the tortuous treks that the women in villages have to make, often for up to 5-6 kilometres every day, for fetching drinking water and fodder, even though there exist wells and other sources of water and lush green pasture land in their own villages. Obviously, these resources of water and grassland are owned by individuals, who care two hoots for the sufferings of others.

**Solution:** There is an urgent need to mainstream gender equity. Among the proactive measures required are empowering women and other vulnerable sections by involving them in decision-making processes and helping them build institutions and capabilities. This would help in identifying priorities and needs of the local populations that need to be addressed by the community. The entire village community needs to be sensitized on gender equity issue so that a process of consensus building begins. This has happened in several villages of Gujarat where Utthan has been working for over a decade where an attitudinal change is being seen.
in the people in seeing certain resources such as water for drinking, fodder, fuel etc. as the common resource rather than private. Men have been seen to helping women in their household work thereby enabling women to participate and make effective contribution in decision making processes. Not necessarily this process stops conflicts but it surely helps in resolving them based on the principles of justice.

2. **Sector Equity**: Market forces driven by profit motives have led to inter-sector inequities. While industries have come up at the cost of agriculture, within the industrial sector, capital intensive and highly polluting industries have come up at the cost of eco-friendly, low-cost, labour-intensive cottage industries. Within the agriculture sector, commercial crops are proliferating at the cost of agriculture for sustenance.

Natural resources such as water, land and forest are being used up rapidly by industries, critically impacting the bio-diversity and the fragile ecosystems. Shortage of fuel, fodder and herbs is negatively impacting the life of people, adding to their hardships. Agro-based employment opportunities such as dairying, horticulture, carpentry, pottery, blacksmithy, are declining.

Market-driven profit motive, exemplified in excessive withdrawal of groundwater resources for irrigating land to produce such cash crops as cotton, sugarcane, has led to depletion of water resources, salinity ingress and spread of fluorosis among the people who are compelled to drink the contaminated water.

**Solution**: Village level institutions, community based organizations and local self-government bodies need to be sensitized and encouraged to evolve village-level development plans based on their priorities. The village community needs to be empowered to take decisions on the types of industry and agriculture that are to come up in their areas.
3. **Empowerment of Community:** The centralized planning approach and the institutional mechanisms for the execution and implementation of the various development schemes are primarily responsible for the gender and sectoral inequities and for non-sustainable resource management systems. Lack of transparency and accountability of various civil institutions has further accentuated the problem. As a result, injustice rather than equity and justice has increased in resource building and distribution systems. The main issue here is of power struggle. It is the vulnerable section of the community who are at the mercy of those who have power to decide as they have the control of resources. Today the most localized institutions such as Panchayats (village level elected body) hardly has any power to decide and most have become prey to political parties rather than working as communities’ representatives.

**Solution:** The solution lies in the devolution of power through appropriate institutional reforms and mechanisms. Communities need to be empowered by building village level institutions with adequate representation of women and other underprivileged communities which would be demanding for information as their rights. Women and the representatives of other underprivileged communities need to be given positions at all levels of decision-making as well.

An enabling environment is a must and therefore a mass movement needs to be built to influence policy decisions at the state and national level. A sensitization drive needs to be launched to bring about the necessary political will and attitudinal changes in the existing power structures.

A major effort is required for a paradigm shift.

4. **Technology:** The main thrust of use of technology has been for increasing the profits of commercial ventures rather than for facilitating improvement in the living conditions of the people. This has encouraged
a wrong set of values whereby unsustainable lifestyle marked by wasteful consumption of energy and natural resources has gained popularity.

In their quest for cash crops, which require intensive use of water, fertilizer and pesticides, the farmers are using submersible pumps to draw water from deeply dug bore-wells without giving a thought to recharging of groundwater resources. The government policy of providing highly subsidized electricity to the farmers has encouraged the farmers to indulge in such indiscriminate withdrawal of groundwater.

**Solution:** There is a need to focus on development of appropriate technology that is not only eco-friendly and sustainable but is also manageable by local communities. Cottage and village industries and agro-based industries using local manpower and natural resources need to be encouraged.

There is a need to sensitize people about the need to develop multiple sources of water – rainwater harvesting, check-dams, ponds etc. With regard to the usage of water from large river basin project as the one on the Narmada river, the government must discourage supply of irrigation directly to the fields and instead encourage the people to use the water for recharging of groundwater resources by constructing check-dams and ponds.

5. **Policies:** The policies of the government, business and commercial establishments have by and large encouraged industrialization and non-sustainable development programmes. The government’s policies with regard to providing incentives and subsidies, pricing and regulating the use of natural resources have encouraged excessive use of water, electricity, land, fertilizer, pesticides, minerals, forest produce and other natural resources resulting in degradation of water and land resources, pollution and non-sustainable systems. The present policies lack a common vision of the society and a long term perspective. What we find are ‘schemes’ without any underlying principles. Thus the conflicts arises
when large dams or huge watershed projects are implemented without consideration of what would be the impact on the communities living in downstream or what will happen to the villages when all their water is being taken away to cities.

**Solution:** Necessary mechanisms need to be put in place with the village communities given the regulatory powers to control the use of natural resources. Laws have to be framed and implemented to regulate the use of natural resources to ensure sustainability and preservation of environment.

The government needs to reframe the existing laws and enact fresh ones, based on scientific data on groundwater table, salinity ingress and spread of wasteland, to control indiscriminate use of groundwater, encourage farmers to adopt sustainable farming techniques and promote biodiversity. Power theft by industries from the supply grid for the rural areas need to be curbed strictly.

6. **Health & Sanitation:** Excessive use of water, fertilizer and pesticides for production of commercial crops, of minerals, fuel and other raw material for industries have adversely impacted the environment, leading to pollution of water, air and land, destruction of bio-diversity and the fragile eco-systems. This has had direct impact on the health of the people whose food habits have changed for the worse, with less in-take of nutritious elements. Poor sanitary and hygiene conditions have been the major factors contributing to high incidence of water borne and skin diseases especially among women and children.

**Solution:** A concerted drive needs to be launched to create awareness among the people regarding the ill-effects of excessive use of fertilizer, pesticides, irrigation water and mono-culture. Also, the improved management system for secured resource accessibility would greatly influence the physical and mental health of women and poor. There is
good eco friendly organic manure which could be prepared by the local communities which could also yield good income.

Utthan’s experiences show that an investment in creating greater awareness about health and sanitation has greatly impacted in improving the health of women and children.

7. **Sustainability:** Commercialization of agriculture, increasing pressure from market forces leading to over exploitation of resources, the fire-fighting approach of the government in offering short-term solutions to various livelihood issues in times of crises like drought, cyclone and earthquake, have all contributed to depletion of natural resources and encouraged non-sustainable development model.

**Solution:** There is a need to create awareness among the people at the grass-root level as also among the decision-makers in government about the need to develop long-term sustainable solutions to the livelihood issues. There needs to be a genuine interaction between communities and the policy makers which helps understand both the constraints and the solutions.

For sustainability of resources mind set of those in the society have to be changed who have a life style which wastes resources. The importance of adopting a way of life which would ensure resource sustainability can be understood by the people only when they are made more aware about it as well as create opportunities for them to be exposed to the plight of those who suffer. Institution building and partnership at various levels in the society could foster this change. Without this change it is not possible to attain the objective of sustainable resources.

8. **Capacity Building:** A strong realization all over the world has been that well intended policies and good programs have failed miserably due to lack of capacities of people at different levels to genuinely understand and implement the program. The simple reason is either there is lack of
investment or very little investment in appropriate capacity building at different levels. People who are today given the responsibility of resolving the conflicts are not fully equipped to do so as they may not necessarily have had opportunity to understand various social – political, ecological and economic aspects.

**Solution:** There is an urgent need to invest in capacity building among various sections of the society especially amongst women and members of the other vulnerable groups regarding the various aspects of management of natural resources in a sustainable way. On the other hand it is also important to invest in ‘de learning’ and learn better strategies, better way of planning, better management systems etc. in sections of the society, including Government, keeping the perspective of vulnerable communities and gender justice. Thus more and newer capacities need to be created to be able to address various types of issues one has mentioned above. Capacity building does not mean only ‘teaching’ rather it should create a collective knowledge building. Thus it should be seen as an opportunity to create energy which would enable vulnerable communities to rightfully put forth their demand and be responsible for managing the resources that their levels. Interventions and investments need to be made for capacity building among women and other underprivileged sections with a view to helping a new leadership to emerge from amongst them.

9. **Coordination and Cooperation:** A network of village level institutions, community based organizations, non-government organizations need to be formed at various levels to foster coordination and cooperation amongst them for the common cause of achieving sustainable development. Utthan’s experience of building networks of village-level institutions, community organizations within villages and at state-level and sharing the experience at national and international levels is replete with examples of how advocacy efforts have resulted in policy changes to achieve the objectives of related to the above mentioned cross-cutting issues.