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Dialogue Experiences in
Bhima River Basin,
Central India

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1. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

In most countries of the world, the administrative agencies in charge of development activities are so compartmentalised, that they can rarely interact with each other for getting benefits of synergetic interdependence, or for arriving at well-negotiated optimal solutions. In fact, the corporate enterprises and civil society organisations also often fall into the same trap. The result is, that in spite of possessing the requisite technological competence, financial resources and administrative / managerial skills, the results are appallingly unsatisfactory.

This situation is particularly evident in the case of Water Resource Development, which requires the integration of agencies dealing with a) soil and water conservation b) minor, medium and major irrigation works c) urban and rural water supply and sanitation d) flood-control, g) wetlands and lake conservation h) forestry i) stream and river bund protection j) navigation k) hydropower l) ground water m) inland fisheries, etc.

Since there do not appear to be a set of formal procedures for integrating all these elements, other ways and means need to be devised and instrumentalities established, for initiating discussions, sharing of knowledge, entering into dialogue, arbitration and finally reaching the stage of conflict resolution. There is also a need for establishing fora which not only permit divergent views to come to the negotiation table, but also advocate for social and political legitimacy to the process. This alone would enable the democratic enforcement of plans/ solutions thus derived.

It is our contention in this paper that voluntary agencies and other civil society organisation are in a position to be flexible and innovative enough to operate in such complex situations requiring co-ordination and negotiation within the various government departments as well as between the government departments and local stakeholders.

The Gomukh Trust has worked in this area for a decade and the experiences accumulated indicate that it is in a position to integrate several – if not all concerns into its approach, and that the results (achievements) have been very promising. In the beginning, Gomukh has at times had to take the litigative and confrontationist path, but it has now reached the conclusion that the avenue of untiring negotiation and dialogue turns out to be the most fruitful. What follows are examples which demonstrate this position by narrating the processes which enabled us to achieve our objectives of developing water resources in an integrative and socially equitable manner.
EXAMPLE 1

NEGOTIATING FOR EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN UPSTREAM AND DOWNSTREAM POPULATION

Since the promulgation of the Irrigation Act (1976) the use of water from public dams and reservoirs in India was permitted only downstream of reservoirs by means of canals and distributaries for the purpose of irrigation and urban water supply. Till 1976, villages upstream of dams were not allowed to lift water for irrigation or for drinking purposes. In most cases, populations displaced by the dams and reservoirs were given cash compensations and left to their own resources/fate. These poor destitute dam oustees usually moved upwards along the hill slopes and eked out a living from the sub-marginal lands and decimated vegetation.

On the other hand, the villagers downstream enjoyed the benefits of intensive irrigation. The lands and villages along the left and right bank canals emanating from the reservoirs turned green and prosperous. The assumption was that the water from reservoirs should be supplied to farmers who had been given commitments and not to others. In order to correct this anomaly, voluntary agencies and social workers initiated the process of lobbying with the irrigation department and the civil administration for a more equitable distribution of water. Between 1978 and 1985, a large number of meetings were held with the Pune District Collector and Chief Executive Officer for the purpose of negotiating for drinking water for villages upstream of dams to begin with, and then for one crop protection. The dialogue process was long drawn out and sporadic. The irrigation authorities first accepted the lifting of 6% of water from the reservoirs for utilisation in the upstream villages. Drinking water supply schemes were checked out. Voluntary organisations like Gomukh Trust were working on minor irrigation schemes while the NGO ‘Jeevan’ was working relentlessly in the areas upstream of the Pawna dam from 1980 to 1995 in areas upstream of several reservoirs like Khadakwasla, Panshet and Warasgaon dams, located about 45 kms west of Pune city.

The negotiations yielded incremental results. By 1982, it was decided that the Irrigation Department would permit up to 6% of the live storage in Dams to be used by upstream farmers. And by 1990s the amount permitted was increased to 10%. Lift irrigation and farming on lands between the full reservoir (contour) level and the maximum draw-down level was allowed to some extent. The major share of such lifts was of course used by farmers who could lift the water to cultivate areas on higher contours sometimes even up to 60 meters higher than the reservoir level. The advantages of these negotiations are now being reaped by people upstream.

EXAMPLE 2

NEGOTIATING WITH THE FOREST DEPARTMENT

Gomukh Trust is involved in comprehensive watershed development and management at several locations in Pune District; covering an area of 120,550 ha. of land (refer to Annex 2 for Gomukh’s interventions in Bhima River Basin). Although the Drought Prone Area Programme is being implemented in several states in the country, it is seen to be more effective in states which have a more active involvement of competent voluntary organisations. The state of Maharashtra is one such example. Gomukh Trust, a planning and implementing agency for the DPAP has worked on 37,500 ha of land in over 200 villages,
constructing check dams, farm ponds, wells and storage tanks, gabion embankments, contour trenches for ground water recharge, installing lift Irrigation Schemes and creating plantations with a diversity of indigenous plant species. The village water agencies were involved in the planning, designing, execution, monitoring as well as in the evaluation process during the period 1995-96 to 2002. Since January 2001 the village committees have taken up agricultural information technology extension in these areas. (For details see table 2 and map 2.) Since the core ideology for the development process in the Kolwan mini-basin has been the adoption of the participatory approach, involving the village community, 79% of the expenditure (approximately equal to 1 million US$, calculated at Purchasing Power Parity) was controlled and distributed by the village (Finance) committees by way of wages, about 9% was spent on construction material, machinery and 12% was for the administrative and technical support provide by the staff of Gomukh Trust.

One of the interventions – namely the development / augmentation of Natural- Spring-tanks required the permission of Forest Department as most of the springs were within the boundaries of Protected (Forest) Areas like sanctuaries and national parks. Initially the Forests Department did not allow spring development because they argued that such development would divert forest lands for “non-forest-purposes”- which is patently in contravention of the Forest Conservation Act (1980) of the Government of India. To overcome this situation, Gomukh arranged several meetings between the Forest officials and the village elders to establish a dialogue for resolving the conflict. Gomukh advocated the view that the protection, augmentation and regeneration of the springs, achieved through soil and water conservation and plantation measures upstream would improve the ecological status of the forest by retaining soil moisture, increasing species diversity, providing much needed “water holes” for the faunal species, increasing ground water level flora and improving sub-soil water percolation for recharging ground water aquifers. In addition, the spring water could provide an assured drinking and domestic water supply to downstream villages, thereby acquiring much needed support for the cause of forest-conservation. After a two month long dialogue, and after agreeing to a number of preconditions and post-facto assurances the Forest Department finally accepted our contention that the development of springs would not violate any laws, but would actually support the objectives of the Act in letter and spirit. The dialogue process achieved astounding results. Not only did the Forest Department permit Gomukh to go ahead, but the Ministry of Environment and Forests also asked us to prepare a full fledged funding proposal for conserving the upper most watershed of the Bhima Riverine Eco-system. The work of augmentation of springs (6 in number and covering about 800 ha. of land) have been completed by now and a full fledged Conservation Plan has been submitted to the Ministry for financial assistance equal to about Rs. 100 million (US$ 2 million measured in terms of PPP @ 2001 prices.)

EXAMPLE 3

NEGOTIATING FOR ENSURING MINIMUM FLOWS AND RATIONALISING URBAN AND AGRICULTURAL WATER USE

With the ever-increasing population in the city of Pune and its suburbs, the demand for water in the metropolitan areas has been rising very rapidly. In the early sixties, about 200 million litres of water was abstracted each day from the Mutha River (via the Right bank canal emanating from the Khadakwasla Dam 16 kms. west of Pune city). By the end of the Century, the city was drawing about 600 million litres water each day. The same canal which provides water to the city, is also responsible for irrigating about 60,000 ha. of land southeast of the city. Thus, an increase in the withdrawal of water for Pune city
automatically has resulted in reduction in the supply of water for agriculture. In addition, about 350 million litres of sewage / liquid effluents is being released into the Mutha River each day, with a very small proportion being subjected to primary treatment. Thus in addition to the conflicting demands for water between the urban and rural areas, the river also carries the sewage released by the city during the period October to June. This is so because there is practically no fresh water released from the dam upstream during the period.

To overcome these two serious issues, the city Municipal Council and the Irrigation Department entered into an agreement whereby

a) 11 TMC of water will be supplied to Pune city by the Maharashtra Krishna Valley Development Corporation (MKVDC), and

b) The Pune City Municipal Authorities would adequately treat the raw sewage so as to make it suitable for irrigation, and then pump the nutrient-rich water back into the irrigation canal for distribution to rural areas

Unfortunately, the city failed to treat the raw sewage adequately and consequently to pump it back into the irrigation canal, even though it continued to draw its full share of water from the river. When civil society organisations publicised these issues widely, the Municipal Corporation appointed an expert committee for preparing a Mutha River Improvement Plan (MRIP). The committee had the mandate to recommend solutions to solve this impasse. The author of this paper, representing the Gomukh Trust was appointed on the committee along with other members. After a protracted dialogue lasting over 18 months, the city Commissioner agreed to install a series of six effluent treatment plants in 2001.

The dialogue process therefore yielded an important result, which would benefit the Mutha River Eco-system and enable the continuation of irrigation in the farms downstream of the city. The dialogue continues and it is hoped that it would achieve two more important results, which are being negotiated at present. The civil society organisations are demanding the release of at least 50 cusecs of water from the dam for maintaining the minimum water flows and simultaneously improving the quality of water. In addition they are asking for the construction of a pumping station just near the eastern city limits for transferring a part of the treated water (about 300 MLD) to the irrigation canal. While the dialogue continues, a writ petition has also been filed in the Mumbai High Court for demanding these policy changes.

EXAMPLE 4

DIALOGUE THROUGH NETWORKING WITH VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS WORKING IN WATER RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

The activities of the Gomukh Trust during the past decade have been largely focussed on surface water harnessing and management. Through participatory decision-making and Watershed planning, it was realised that the success of the optimal utilisation of water resources is possible only when ground water aquifers, the surface flows and the soil moisture are treated as one integrated entity.

In reality however the scientists and researchers working on ground water management (Ground Water Survey and Development Authority of the Government of India and its state level agencies) have often been at loggerheads with the State Irrigation Department, each trying to claim its superiority and importance in being able to solve the problems of water
scarcity. The citizens at large have been playing the role of silent onlookers while the two state agencies continued to quibble.

Realising the futility of such quarrels, the Gomukh Trust along with other voluntary agencies decided to initiate and establish a periodic dialogue between the agencies and all other stakeholders. We also realised that taking up issues and resolving conflicts was important and that it was equally important to broaden the dialogue process and establish a forum for discussing matters of policy which had not yet reached the status of a conflict. To initiate the dialogue, the issue chosen for discussion was the National Water Policy, the importance of ‘Dialogue’ and the alternative approaches to water management. All concerned stakeholders and representatives were invited for the first round of the dialogue in the second week of February 2002 in Pune. As organisers, we felt encouraged that all State Agencies dealing with water and a large number of civil society representatives attended this dialogue and discussed several issues without inhibitions.

Being encouraged by the intensity and richness of the first dialogue in February 2002, we announced a second round in August 2002 where we discussed the Draft Maharashtra Water Policy released in the previous month, and the drafts of two proposed acts, namely the Maharashtra Farmers Participatory Irrigation Management Act 2002 (MFPIM Act) and the Draft Maharashtra Water Resources Planning and Regulation Authority, 2002. This two-day workshop also attracted an equally good response and it was widely reported by the press and the media. The event kicked off public discussions regarding “Privatisation of Water” v/s “Social Ownership of Water”, Equitable Distribution of water, Citizens’ Participation in Decision Making, Pricing of Water and so on.

The upshot of the initiative was that even on intangible issues of policy, apparently conflicting parties and even citizens in general are willing to join a dialogue if the process is sufficiently participatory, and if it continues to acquire social credibility through the media and press publicity. What we often heard from the participants was that they had all wanted such a dialogue but were waiting for others to initiate it. An important lesson we learnt was “Somebody Has to Bell the Cat”.

EXAMPLE 5

EXPANDING THE DIALOGUE AND BUILDING AN UPPER BHIMA WATER PARTNERSHIP

The experiences mentioned above led to a situation by the end of 2001 where it became necessary to establish a multi-stakeholder partnership in the Upper Bhima Basin. At the same time, the India Water Partnership under the auspices of Global Water Partnership was trying to identify a basin suitable for establishing an Area Water Partnership. The idea was mooted by some of the retired-bureaucrats of the State Irrigation Department, and it was immediately supported by civil society organisations, representatives of urban and industrial interests, ecologists, advocates representing people displaced by dams, and many others.

This is probably the first time that a dialogue has been initiated between practically all stakeholders interested in either developing or using the water of the Bhima system, who have come together and formed a water partnership. A vision document for the period 2001-2025 was negotiated through a dialogue and was presented at the South Asia Water Forum held at Kathmandu in the last week of February 2002.
THE WAY AHEAD

The examples given above indicate that even small attitudinal changes require a great deal of patience and perseverance, and that a combination of favourable factors can and does yield positive results. The task ahead is formidable, but not insurmountable. For example, 76% of the Bhima River Basin still lies outside the benefit zone of the large-scale, centralised dams and canals system, which still takes up over 80% of financial allocation in the water sector. This leaves about 3,100 villages (out of total 5,600 villages) in the Bhima Basin without assured drinking water supply and without any protective irrigation. Further, large sections of the river course are still severely polluted and the ecological subsystems suffer from deterioration and species depletion. Large sections of the slum-dwelling population and the urban poor lie outside the decision-making process, and the female population still has to bear an unacceptably large physical and social burden. The government agencies, research organisations and the civil society are in disarray and are not acting with common purposes in mind. Even voluntary agencies which are working in the areas neglected by the establishment are not working in unison.

But there is a silver lining. The broader dialogue on the Bhima River Basin has begun, lines of communication established and some elements of the requisite institutional / legal framework have been put into place. A large number of women’s Self-Help Groups has been established and they have started working towards economic empowerment and reclaiming their social status. (And even now, in exceptional situations, recourse to ‘resistance’ and litigation may be necessary.) However, if major policy changes and reforms are to be achieved, allocation and expenditure of public funds to be made equitable, and the riverine eco-system to be restored to a state of self-regeneration, then a continuous multi-stakeholder engagement through a participatory dialogue will have to be the desirable way forward.
Annex 1

Salient features of Bhima river basin (Central India)
(Major Upstream Tributary of Krishna River)

1. Total Geographical Area: 48,631 sq. km.
2. Length of the Basin along main course: 324 km.
3. Average Width of the Basin: 145 km.
4. Net Cultivable Area: 40,850 sq. km.
   (About 84% of Total Geographic Area)
5. Net Area under Cultivation: 30,950 sq. km.
   (About 75% of Total cultivable Area)
6. Irrigation Potential Created: 3,901 sq. km.
   (About 10% of Net Cultivable Area)
7. Estimated Actual Irrigated Area: 1,600 sq. km.
   (About 4% of Net Cultivable Area **)
8. Average Rainfall in Upper Reaches: 2500 mm
    Average Rainfall in Middle Reaches: 1000 mm
    Average Rainfall in Lower Reaches: 600 mm
9. Available yield in the Basin (Surface): 12,491 MCM
10. Groundwater Recharge: 4,829 MCM
11. Total Available Yield: 17,320 MCM
    Number: 14.95 30.90

** Assumed that about 40% of area is brought under actual irrigation. This is a Maharashtra State’s average irrigation efficiency.

Note: All above figures are referred from State Irrigation Commission Report, 2000.
Annex 2

Gomukh Trust’s Interventions in Bhima River Basin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Area (Hectare)</th>
<th>Project Cost (US$ million*)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Kolvan Valley</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Shivaganga Valley</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Bhimashankar Project</td>
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<td>1.6</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Drought Prone Area Prg.</td>
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<td>2.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Pune_Pimpri Corporations</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Ralegan – Ideal Village</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>102,550</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.8</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Cost of Project is based on Purchasing Power Parity between US $ and Indian Re.: 1 US $ = 18 Indian Rs. Approximately.
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