Worlds apart? Challenges of multi-agency partnership in participatory watershed development in Rajasthan, India

Saurabh Gupta*

Division of Social and Institutional Change in Agricultural Development, University of Hohenheim, Germany

(Received 25 October 2013; accepted 20 June 2014)

Effective management of natural resources in ecologically fragile regions has remained a major concern for international development donors, project implementing agencies as well as for resource-dependent communities. It is suggested that multi-agency partnerships involving various stakeholders (donors, governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc.) could ensure better management of common property resources, such as water, pastures or forests. This is important in dryland regions like Rajasthan in India where the majority of agriculture is rainfed and the development of watersheds is crucial for the livelihoods of smallholders. This article presents a critical analysis of multi-agency partnership in a participatory watershed development project implemented in the late 1990s in rural Rajasthan.

Based on multi-sited ethnography and qualitative research in the post-project period (2003–2005), it demonstrates that while the theoretical argument in favor of multi-agency partnerships is very strong, there are several practical challenges that come in the way of successful realization of such partnerships. Unrealistic donor expectations, differences in cultures and incentive structures, widespread corruption in the government sector and diverse agendas of NGOs may hamper multi-agency partnerships in watershed development. Policy-makers and project functionaries need to address these issues for multi-agency partnerships to work.

Keywords: watershed management; multi-agency partnership; participation; international development; Rajasthan

Introduction

Soil and water conservation or ‘watershed development’ is crucial for sustainable rural livelihoods in arid and semi-arid regions of India, where agriculture is heavily dependent upon rainfall and the means of secured irrigation are severely limited. In Rajasthan, the driest and the largest province of India, the inhabitants have, over the centuries, devised several mechanisms to tackle the problem of water scarcity for survival (Mishra 2001). The state, both in colonial and post-colonial times, has also focused on ensuring the availability of water for irrigation in drylands (Mosse 2003). The initial thrust of the Indian state (as well as various provincial governments) in the first three decades after independence was on achieving food self-sufficiency through dissemination of ‘green revolution’ technology, and construction of big dams, canals and major irrigation projects (Gupta 2009). While farming became quite a profitable business in some parts of India (particularly in Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh – the ‘green revolution’ belt), the majority of peasants in rainfed areas (e.g. most parts of Rajasthan) continued to practice subsistence farming in order to make ends meet (Krishna 1992).

Having achieved the goal of food self-sufficiency during the 1980s, the new thrust of the agricultural and rural development machinery in India was to incorporate rainfed areas into the national mission of increasing agricultural productivity, and to find relatively long-term solutions to the problems of crop failures and droughts. A massive watershed development project, called the National Watershed Development Project for Rainfed Areas was launched by the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India to increase agricultural productivity in rainfed areas, including Rajasthan. Around the same time, international development specialists and consultants also argued for intensification of water and soil conservation activities in arid and semi-arid regions across the world (see Doolittle and Magrath 1990). The World Bank decided to fund water and soil conservation projects in Rajasthan and some other states in India in the early 1990s. Many international development and donor agencies, such as the Ford Foundation and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) also decided to sponsor similar projects in rainfed regions of India. Apart from these, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots organizations, such as the
Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) in Rajasthan, working close to village communities, started realizing the significance of common resources like rainwater, fodder and fuel-wood, particularly for the poorer people in arid regions (Gupta 2009). People’s participation and local control of natural resources were the key elements in their strategies for rural development and they began to initiate rainwater harvesting and water conservation programs (Gupta and Sinha 2008). In the process they also attracted funding from international donors for scaling up their efforts. As such, watershed development emerged as a new site and mode of the operation of multiple development agencies, often partnering together, by the 1990s.

We can observe three significant shifts in development practice and policy that have taken place since the early 1990s. First, the state has gradually lost its privileged position as the leading agent of development prompting a substantial expansion in the role of non-state actors in rural development. Second, there has been a rise in concern for ‘sustainability’, ‘participation’, ‘partnerships’, and ‘decentralized management’ of natural resources like water or pasture lands, within academic and policy circles (see Chambers 1994; Carney and Farrington 1998; Chhotray 2011). Third, and as noted above, investments of money and resources by the state and non-state actors in rainfed regions of India have increased in the wake of limits to further increase in agricultural productivity of irrigated lands, and deliberate efforts (especially on the part of the Indian state) to reduce regional disparities in the post ‘green revolution’ era (Gupta 2009). These changes have considerably shaped the politics of development in rural India, as they have in large parts of the developing world where the majority of populations are dependent on rainfed agriculture for subsistence and livelihoods. Besides bringing in large sums of money and resources from diverse sources (foreign donors, national and provincial governments, private philanthropists, firms, etc.) to the countryside, they altered (created new or modified existing) institutional forms and practices for the governance (control and management) of common property resources, such as village pastures, community forests, or watershed drainages, which are all very crucial for the daily sustenance of village residents.

All of these changes have also led to the expansion of a network of development actors or agents – the national, provincial and local governments in India; international, national and local NGOs; international development agencies and donors; research organizations; development consultants; and academics – whose common concern is securing the availability of water, fodder and wood-fuel in rainfed areas. While the intentions are similar, the strategies and goals of different elements of the watershed development regime vary. For example, the prime objective for the Ministry of Agriculture (of the Government of India) is an increase in the crop yield and productivity of rainfed areas, and for the Ministry of Rural Development, it is tackling rural poverty in dry lands by generating wage employment opportunities. For international agencies (like the World Bank), ‘sustainable development’ of ecologically fragile regions is the main motive to sponsor watershed projects, but for certain grassroots and activist organizations, people’s control over local resources is the driving force for supporting such programs. Nevertheless, the international development regime has (since the early 1990s) increasingly focused on promoting partnerships between state agencies and NGOs with the expectation that such partnerships would be able to capitalize on the relative strengths of the different partners. For example, the state agencies are likely to have technical expertise or human resources and the grassroots organizations could help with mobilizing communities for collective action. Moreover, the earlier watershed projects sponsored and implemented by the state agencies in different parts of India were criticized for lack of people’s participation (Kolavalli and Kerr 2002). The period of the 1990s was, thus, a phase of intentional transformation of state implemented technical watershed development programs into participatory watershed management, and co-opting NGOs in watershed development programs was a major strategy not only by donors but also by the Indian Government (Chhotray 2011). Arguably, in spite of diverse agendas and interests of multiple agencies in the watershed development arena, we saw the complex assembling of actors in the form of coalitions and partnerships in the 1990s.

The theoretical argument in favor of multi-agency partnerships in watershed development is very strong but what we know about such partnerships is mainly in the form of project evaluation reports prepared by foreign donors, consultants and project implementing agencies (e.g. Baumgartner and Jagannath 2002; Honore, Das, and Basu 2002; Turton 2000). The focus of these studies is on designing appropriate institutional forms (e.g. watershed users’ committees) for efficient resource use but not so much on a sociological understanding of institutional practices which essentially shape the outcome of watershed interventions. Moreover, these evaluative studies are ‘managerial’ in nature and their purpose is mainly to determine whether partnerships work or not. There remains, however, a dearth of ethnographic studies or in-depth case studies of participatory watershed interventions, which can explain the ‘how’ of multi-agency partnerships rather than simply indicating whether they work or not. What are the prospects and challenges involved in such partnerships? What can be learned from the failure (or success) of such interventions? These questions require a deeper sociological understanding of particular interventions, especially institutional practices therein, and that is the main subject of this article. The intention is not just to demonstrate whether multi-agency partnerships work or not but to illustrate how they work in specific localities.
The article critically analyzes an ‘innovative’ watershed development project in Rajasthan which was based on the notion of ‘synergy’, using the comparative advantages of governmental organizations (GOs) and NGOs. The case-study project was titled ‘People’s Action for Watershed Development Initiative’ (PAWDI), implemented in the late 1990s. The main partners in this case were Rajasthan’s Department of Watershed Development and Soil Conservation (DWD&S), two local NGOs and the SDC. The project was deemed a failure for it was abandoned halfway but it offers, in retrospect, important lessons for both policy-makers and implementing agencies interested in participatory natural resources management. Although analyzing the changes occurring in the arena of watershed development in the 1990s, the case-study, when analyzed in hindsight, remains relevant because there were no follow-up studies by scholars of rural development for understanding the challenges of multi-agency partnerships as seen in PAWDI. In the current context, a new legal environment (to ensure transparency and accountability) and rights-based laws (such as the ‘right to information’) have certainly created greater space for non-state actors to hold the state actors accountable. Indeed, the new terrain of rural development marked by rights-based legislations and direct transfer of benefits to the poor does not require agencies to be active collaborators to hold each other accountable. While the issues of accountability and corruption can now be dealt with in the framework of these enabling legislations, some fundamental issues pertinent to the functioning of GO–NGO partnerships, such as differences in work culture, ideology, value stance, priorities and agendas of the project partners have not been thought through enough by the policy-makers in India. These issues are crucial for the operational purposes and effective delivery of development projects involving multi-agency partnerships. In fact, the discourse of state–NGO partnerships in the Indian context has solidified since the 1990s and policy-makers have preferred to turn a blind eye to on-the-ground realities.

An ethnographic account of the transformations taking place in the watershed development regime in the 1990s and the lessons learnt from the analysis of this case study are also important as such multi-agency partnerships have now become the norm rather than an exception in big development projects, both national and international. Moreover, as Nair (2011) argues, state–NGO collaborations of various kinds have now come to be accepted as an institutional mechanism for sustainable development. International donors are increasingly seeking alignment between governmental and NGO interventions, and are continuing to channel their funding through governments to NGOs (Sansom 2011). Thus, in spite of failures, projects like PAWDI continue to be welcomed (especially by the state agencies but also by NGOs), for they bring in more money and have more resources at their disposal. This makes it pertinent to unravel what actually happens when theoretically sound and well-meaning projects hit the ground. The next section presents an overview of debates on multi-agency partnerships in relation to participatory watershed development. This is followed by a brief outline of the techniques of data collection. The case-study is introduced and analyzed in the subsequent section. The main findings in the form of important lessons learnt from the story of PAWDI are summarized at the end.

Multi-agency partnerships and participatory watershed development: issues and challenges

The period covering the 1980s and 1990s witnessed heavy criticism of state-centered ‘top-down’ approaches to rural development (Chambers 1994). It also saw an explosion in the number of NGOs in the global North as well as the South. Following the neoliberal orthodoxy of ‘rolling back the state’, a large amount of money was made available to NGOs of different sorts in the 1990s by the World Bank, international donors and other development agencies. Indeed, the mainstream international development policy in the early 1990s was (and still remains) in favor of multi-agency partnerships (Batley 2006). International development thinking was to a large extent influenced by the trend (starting in the 1980s) of ‘contracting out’ public services to nonprofit or private actors in developed countries. In response a new approach to governing networks of public agencies, nonprofit organizations and private firms that deliver taxpayer funded services was developed by scholars of public management (see Milward 1996; Milward and Provan 2000). ‘Networks’ as the term is used in public management literature, typically refers to ‘multiorganizational arrangements for solving problems that cannot be achieved by single organizations’ (Agranoff and McGuire 2001, 296). It is argued that a culture of joint problem solving needs to be developed to overcome bureaucratic tendencies, such as hierarchy, stability and procedures (Bardach 1998). In the context of developing countries, the basic rationale for promotion of multi-agency partnerships was that both state and non-state agencies have their own strengths and weaknesses and attempts should be made to encourage ‘synergy’ across the public–private divide (following Evans 1996; Ostrom 1996). Charting out the strengths and weaknesses of NGOs and government implementing agencies in the context of watershed development, Farrington, Turton, and James (1999) suggest that NGOs are strong in social mobilization and participatory approaches, and they can establish closer and more equal relationships with people. However, they are weak in technical competence vis-à-vis watershed interventions. Government agencies, it is argued, have strong technical competence and clear lines of accountability but they are conceptually oriented to
top-down approach, lack flexibility and are overloaded with numerous programs, and this, in turn, necessitates the desirability of building coalitions of NGOs and government agencies for watershed development activities (Farrington, Turton, and James 1999). Likewise, Krishna (2003, 369) maintains that by working together, both local governments and community-based organizations, can achieve what neither agency can achieve on its own.

Multi-agency partnerships, however, have proved to be quite challenging to implement in the natural resource management sector because state agencies have a long history of working as the sole agencies in this area (Carney and Farrington 1998; Forsyth 2010). Therefore it is suggested that the government procedures for co-funding activities with NGOs must be made more flexible, and forums must be established to facilitate communication and collaborative activities between partners (Carney and Farrington 1998, 91). Nevertheless, this framework of ‘productive synergies’ underplays the conflicting and competing agendas of different partners. Also, historically, state agencies have been reluctant to hand power to NGOs and resent the fact that they are given credit for ‘success’ while the state is equated with ‘failure’.7 There remains a lack of in-depth case studies which can explain the how of multi-agency partnerships in the context of watershed management. How do varying interests and competing agendas of different partners influence the outcomes of a project, and why do such cooperative efforts fail? This paper tackles this analytical question and examines an experiment of multi-agency partnership in the context of participatory watershed development in Rajasthan.

‘Participatory’ watershed development

‘Participation’ has become a very influential rhetoric and a mode of practice in developmental interventions for natural resource management in recent times. Community participation in project management is the central theme of the mainstream approaches to natural resource development, especially since the beginning of the 1990s. We have witnessed the rise of ‘participatory’ approaches to the management of irrigation systems, forests and watersheds, which are now quite popular not only within international development agencies and NGOs, but even the various governmental agencies (most of the programs for natural resource management start with the prefix participatory or joint).8 Participation in development projects is also an important measure of success and a key condition for donor approvals. Tools and techniques adopted to ensure people’s participation in the various stages of a project include ‘participatory rural appraisal’ (PRA) and formation of users’ committees or self-help groups for efficient management of water resources, pasture lands and forests.

‘Participatory’ approaches for natural resource use have been severely criticized by several scholars (for example, Cleaver 1999; Mosse 2001; Chhotray 2004) because of the restricted or partial understanding of the notions of ‘community’ and ‘participation’.9 Undoubtedly, people’s participation is crucial for effective implementation of watershed development projects and their sustenance in the long run. However, there is ambiguity in defining the concept of ‘participation’, and it is also very difficult to measure ‘participation’ in quantitative terms (which is a pressing issue for project implementing agencies that are required to quantify participation in their project reports). Considerable intellectual energies have been invested in defining what participation is, why it is necessary for effective development, and how watershed programs can be made more participatory (see Hinchcliffe et al. 1998; Samra 1999; Shah 2000; Thakur and Pattnaik 2002). Shah (2001), assessing the watershed projects of state agencies in Gujarat, notes that participatory tools like the PRA, group formation, and collection of token contributions from the watershed communities remain superficial. People generally tend to agree even to inequitable ideas of the project implementing agencies because nobody stands to lose out and a section of society is likely to derive substantial benefits in connivance with the officials (Shah 2001). Shah (1999) suggests that governmental watershed projects designed on the principles of ‘participation’ are based on the experience of NGOs who have the commitment and capacity for participatory development. However, it is too ambitious an attempt to translate the experiences of NGOs into a public program managed by a bureaucracy that is not yet willing to share or devolve its power (Shah 1999).

A comprehensive assessment of participatory watershed programs in India implemented in the 1990s, points to a trend which suggests that on average government-funded and executed projects are least able to institutionalize participation, government funded and NGO executed programs are marginal, and NGO funded and executed programs perform well (see Vania and Taneja 2004). Supporters of GO–NGO partnership suggest that in order to make watershed projects effective, people’s participation is crucial, and NGOs have a comparative advantage over state agencies in ensuring people’s participation – NGOs work more closely with people and NGO workers are better trained as community organizers (see Farrington, Turton, and James 1999). In the initial years of experiments with participatory watershed management, several donor agencies uncritically accepted this (theoretically sound) proposition. The approach of the SDC, for instance, was characterized by efforts to share responsibilities between NGOs and the public sector according to their comparative advantage, in ways which are mutually reinforcing. They also sought to achieve collaboration among government departments and searched for coherence and complementarity between participatory appraisal methods used by NGOs and ‘scientific’ measurement and planning.
techniques used by government (Turon 2000). However, different NGOs have different ideologies and priorities; it needs to be tested empirically what their notion of ‘participation’ is, and what strategies they adopt to make their programs effective. More recently, scholars have tried to differentiate ‘organic participation’ (endogenous efforts by civil society agents to bring about positive change) with ‘induced participation’ (large-scale efforts to engineer participation at the local level via projects), and focus on challenges of inducing participation (Mansuri and Rao 2013). Yet, there is significant scope for more nuanced analysis of ‘failed’ participatory projects so as to enable policy-makers and project functionaries to achieve the goals of sustainability and poverty reduction in the rainfed areas.

Given the issues highlighted above we can safely assume that participatory watershed development is a good example for problematizing multi-agency partnerships. In the Indian context, watershed development initiatives have been used by several scholars to analyze different dimensions of the development debates. For example, Krishna (2002) and D’Silva and Pai (2003) have used the case of watershed development to analyze the concept of ‘social capital’; Baumann and Sinha (2000) to advance the concept of ‘political capital’; Chhotray (2004) to study the practice of ‘decentralization’; Mosse (2005) to enhance our knowledge of international aid policy and practice; and Baviskar (2007) to study the process of ‘depoliticization’, in the contexts of different provinces of India. Barring a few exceptions (e.g. Gupta 2011; Krishna 1997) watershed initiatives of state and non-state agents in Rajasthan, the largest state in India with a very strong presence of NGOs, have largely remained unaddressed in development literature. Below I present the case study of PAWDI to unravel the complexities of multi-agency partnerships, and then discuss the main lessons learnt from an innovative, theoretically strong but practically failed project.

**Methodology**

The author primarily relied on two sets of data for this paper: first, a review of primary and secondary material, which comprises government publications; documents; policy guidelines on watershed development; watershed project reports prepared by the staff of DWD&SC and NGOs; and external evaluation reports on PAWDI prepared for the donor agency (SDC). Second, primary data were generated through ‘informal conversations’ or semi-structured interviews with NGO workers and the key government officials and engineers of the DWD&SC in Rajasthan. The author learnt about the PAWDI project during the course of doctoral research work on the politics of watershed development in Rajasthan, the fieldwork for which was done in 2003–2005.10 The PAWDI project was abandoned in 1999 but it was referred to repeatedly during the author’s interactions with the DWD&SC engineers as well as with the NGO TBS. The author stayed with the TBS (partner NGO) for about three months (in 2003–2004) in its ashram located in Thanagazi tehsil of Alwar district and used participant and direct observation techniques. Interviews with the engineers and officials of DWD&SC were conducted in Udaipur, Jaipur and Chittorgarh, and those with the workers of Sahyog Sansthan (partner NGO) were conducted in Udaipur, where the organization is based. The author was not able to conduct interviews with the staff members of the donor agency (SDC) as none of the staff members based in the New Delhi office (in the Embassy of Switzerland) at the time of fieldwork were associated with the PAWDI project. The author has, thus, relied on the project evaluation reports produced by the agency on the PAWDI project.

The author avoided the use of a formal interview schedule because the author’s very brief experience of working in the Rajasthan bureaucracy suggests that officials are either afraid of putting anything on record or tend to give set (ready-made) answers to questions posed to them in a formal manner. It can be argued that ‘informal conversations’ are the best way of interviewing government officials in India, and in situations where one is interested in knowing the ‘inside story’. The author did not start the conversations with a fixed set of questions. New questions emerged from within ongoing conversations; previous conversations with the same officials; conversations with other officials, and from information gathered through other sources (reports, publications, visits to villages, etc.). The author did not record the conversations but informed the respondents beforehand (at the very onset of the first meetings) that the information that might be generated from these ‘informal conversations’ would be used for research without revealing their names. The author was able to take notes on paper on a few occasions, though at most times, conversations were recorded from memory immediately after the interviews. All conversations were in Hindi, and have been translated to English before quoting them in this paper.

**People’s Action for Watershed Development Initiative**

PAWDI was a collaborative project initiated by the Government of Rajasthan (GoR) and the SDC. DWD&SC and two NGOs, namely TBS and Sahyog Sansthan, were the implementing agencies for this project in two districts of Rajasthan: Alwar and Chittorgarh. The NGOs were chosen by the SDC as they had already been funding the water conservation and watershed development activities of these two organizations. In fact, the selection of NGOs played an instrumental role in the choice of sites (Alwar and Chittorgarh). TBS, a Gandhian activist organization,
is renowned for promoting traditional rainwater harvesting in northern Rajasthan. Starting from the mid-1980s, the TBS has constructed hundreds of small water harvesting structures in Alwar villages without the prior permission of the irrigation department, which considers these structures ‘illegal’ (Gupta 2011). The TBS has also opposed aggressively the state control of local natural resources in Rajasthan and across India (Gupta and Sinha 2008). Yet, and as the leader of the TBS informed the author, the then Chief Minister of Rajasthan (Bhairon Singh Shekhawat) was impressed with the rainwater harvesting work of the TBS, and agreed to work jointly with them when the SDC suggested to him the name of the TBS. Sahyog Sansthan is a grassroots organization dedicated to the cause of participatory rural development and community-based natural resource management. The project was operational in two watershed areas; Retam in Chittorgarh district, where Sahyog Sansthan was the partner NGO, and Ajabgarh in Thanagazi sub-district of Alwar, where TBS was the partner NGO. The project was conceived in 1995 with the following main features outlined by the Swiss donor agency: (i) design, test and implement appropriate, cost-effective, and sustainable approaches in watershed development, (ii) create autonomous and self-sustaining community organizations for implementation and for management of assets created, (iii) generate a close collaboration between government agencies and NGOs, in order to tap their complementary skills, (iv) promote equity, involvement of women, and people’s participation in the sustainable management of natural resources and (v) prioritize ‘process development’ over the achievements of targets (SDC 1998).

The project was to be implemented over seven years in two phases. In the first phase of three years (1996–1999), the target was to treat 15,000 hectares of land with the expenditure of Rupees 15.3 crores (2.5 million Euros approx.), to be borne by the GoR (26%), SDC (64%) and the local communities (10%). The idea of cost sharing by villagers was based on the logic of economic rationality on the part of SDC (and supported by the two NGOs), i.e. people would consider the watershed treatment as their own work if they contribute toward the cost (in the form of labor contributions). The NGOs, which have already been working in this area, were involved in PAWDI using their experience and skills to organize the village communities through mass interactions, exposure tours, street plays, training programs for watershed activities, assistance in the formation of self-help groups, and the formation of people’s committees or Lok Samitis (LS) in every village of the watershed area, with due representation of women (about 30%), and of members belonging to former ‘untouchable’ castes and tribes in multi-caste villages. The DWD&SC provided the technical inputs and took care of all the physical activities related to watershed, like constructing contour-bunds, pasture development, and water-harvesting structures. The LS, which comprised 7–11 members depending on the size of the villages, were the key decision-making body on behalf of the entire village. All these features made PAWDI theoretically a very sound project for it entailed people’s participation, GO–NGO partnership, gender equity, and representation of traditionally deprived castes.

There were, however, several competing agendas at work in this project. For SDC, the agenda was to promote GO–NGO partnership and address the concerns of ‘gender equity’ and people’s participation in watershed projects. For TBS, the main agenda was to promote local control of natural resources (as opposed to state control) through promotion of low-cost rainwater harvesting methods. For Sahyog Sansthan, the main agenda was to ‘improve the livelihoods condition of the rural poor’ through ‘self-help’ groups and expand its hold in the project area by bringing more money and resources for development.11 For the government, the main agenda was to improve its tally of land treated through watershed activities by incorporating another 15,000 hectares, and for some of the engineers of the DWD&SC, to make money out of it.12 A very senior official of the DWD&SC who was involved in the planning process of PAWDI, informed me that:

The three partner agencies were not even ready to reach out to each other. This was reflected in the ‘team building’ exercise in 1995 that took place at TBS ashram in Bhikampura village. Our officials did not stay in the TBS ashram in a remote village for the lack of basic amenities over there. We decided to stay in the government ‘tourist bungalow’ near the Sariska Tiger Reserve. The engineers were more interested in visiting the Tiger Reserve than participating in the ‘team building’ exercise in a remote village with dearth of proper accommodation, toilets or drinking water. The team of consultants from the SDC stayed in the Sariska Palace hotel [a five-star heritage hotel]. So, you can imagine how that ‘team building’ exercise might have gone!13

This narration points to the differences between the work culture of foreign donors and consultants, government officials, and grassroots NGOs. They are used to different levels of comforts, perks and privileges. It is important that the different partners are able to reach out to each other and create a ‘culture of joint problem solving’ (Bardach 1998, 232). The creation of such a working environment requires efforts beyond crafting good institutional forms. It requires deliberate efforts on the part of alliance partners to alter their usual ways of doing business. In the case of PAWDI, the partners were reluctant to do so and this will become clearer as the story unfolds in the rest of the paper. It took two years to decide the mechanism for planning and implementation, and that too was possible after facilitation by a consultancy firm from Delhi (SDC 1999). The DWD&SC outsourced the topographical and soil survey to private consultants. Based on these
surveys, a technical plan was prepared by the DWD&SC. The NGOs and the DWD&SC field staff jointly prepared (at least on paper) ‘Participatory Village Treatment Plans’ to decide on the watershed treatment works to be taken and the contribution by the villagers. After the approval of plans and technical sanctions by the higher authorities, the DWD&SC issued work orders to the LSs, which then implemented the work (under the supervision of DWD&SC). In order to maintain transparency in accounts and to check the leakage of project funds, it was decided in the Joint Project Committee14 that all construction work would be measured by the LS and DWD&SC field staff; and after checks were made, money would be withdrawn from the LS bank account by the LS chairperson and the Junior Engineer of the DWD&SC. It was decided that payments to wage-laborers involved in construction activities would be made by the LS chairperson in the presence of LS members and NGO functionaries to prevent corruption. However, this rule was not followed in practice. The engineers of the DWD&SC retained full control of finances and misappropriated project funds. A complaint was made by the TBS activists to the Joint Project Committee, which led to investigations followed by suspension of service of six engineers. This increased the animosity between the DWD&SC and TBS.

By the end of phase I of the project in 1999, only 13% (1980 hectares of the targeted 15,000 hectares) of the area could be treated. The project planners took it for granted that there is a natural ‘synergy’ between the state agencies and the NGOs in the case of PAWDI. In reality, the DWD&SC and partner NGOs were quite uncomfortable with each other. An official of the DWD&SC, who was responsible for the PAWDI project in Chittorgarh district informed the author that the department wanted to select the project areas/villages on the basis of a ‘watershed atlas’ prepared by them using remote sensing technology in order to treat the area on the basis of natural drainage flow. However, the partner NGOs wanted to select the villages where they had been working for a while to consolidate their respective position as ‘development agents’ or new patrons in those villages. Furthermore, he informed me that: PAWDI project brought an additional workload for junior engineers and many of them moved out, and got their postings done in different areas. None of the engineers remained in Chittorgarh for more than six months. There is no governmental housing facility for engineers in the town. We wanted to spend a part of project funds on constructing accommodation for engineers and field staff in Chittorgarh town but the involvement of NGOs in the project (which immediately opposed this plan) rendered this possibility out. [...] In my view PAWDI would have been very good project if the NGOs were left out of it.15

The DWD&SC engineers were never interested in involving NGOs but agreed to it on the insistence of the donor agency as well as the decision of the political head and topmost officials of the department. This is significant for our understanding of how complex assembling takes place in multi-agency partnerships. Apart from the issue of corruption as mentioned above, there were ideological differences between the NGOs, the SDC and the government agencies. The SDC wanted to make provisions for special programs for women (by creating self-help groups for savings) in order to realize the ideals of gender empowerment, which had come to prominence in international development thinking by that time. Sahyog Sansthan helped in the formation of 30 female self-help groups in 28 villages, where women lend to each other for consumption purposes, health needs, and sometimes provide loans for their husbands (SDC 1999). The TBS refused to create self-help groups as it lacked any experience or expertise in the formation of such groups, unlike Sahyog Sansthan, which had been doing this job longer. Rather than promoting self-help groups, the TBS functionaries wanted to focus on natural resources generation through building a large number of water harvesting structures and tree plantations.

A mismatch between the priorities of the donors and the actual needs of the local population is quite common in international development (e.g. Mosse 2005), and PAWDI was no exception. In an external evaluation report of PAWDI (SDC 1998), prepared by Indian and Swiss development consultants, it is mentioned that women were more interested in smokeless-chullahs (hearth), better access to fuel-wood, sanitation and hygiene facilities and access to clean drinking water, for which no funds were allocated in the project. SDC was keen on addressing issues of ‘gender’ through participation of women in project activities (SDC 1998, i) but failed to realize that for the majority of women in Rajasthani villages, it is more important to have access to clean drinking water, fuel-wood and better sanitation facilities than soil and water conservation activities. A female village resident from Alwar district narrated the following:

I remember participating in a meeting organised by TBS in our village some years back. Two angrez [white] women were also present. They told us that they want to help us and asked us what we need in our village. We explained to them the shortage of fuel-wood in the village and the lack of drainage facility. But later on, we got to know that they can only help in making small water reservoirs.16

This narrative is quite telling – it shows that people’s participation was incorporated in the project design and an attempt was indeed made to realize it in the form of village meetings or PRA. Yet, the way development agencies operate makes it difficult to actually address the issues that emerge from participatory exercises. The DWD&SC functionaries continued into PAWDI with the packages of activities and practices of other governmental...
watershed projects. They were reluctant to try out anything new or innovative, such as low-cost water harvesting structures that the TBS had been promoting in Alwar villages. The leader of the TBS, Rajendra Singh informed me that:

The engineers of the DWD&SC were least interested in learning about low cost earthen bunds built on the basis of traditional knowledge. They were more interested in constructing fairly high cost concrete reservoirs and misappropriating project funds.17

In fact, the DWD&SC retained full control of all construction works, leaving only community mobilization tasks for NGOs. Through this, they wanted to exercise their power of ‘technical expertise’ (on natural resource management) but such packages were not accepted by the partner NGOs. GOs and NGOs in PAWDI had a different outlook with regard to development activities. The chief executive of Sahyog Sansthan informed me of the following:

The main objective of PAWDI was to learn from villagers or from the experiences of NGOs who have been working in this field for some time. The DWD&SC engineers, on the contrary were not even ready to listen to us on the issue of soil and water conservation activities to be undertaken. They just wanted to replicate their standard watershed development activities (contour-bunds, drainage line treatment, check-dams etc.) without listening to the NGO partners. They even constructed bunds in water-logged areas!18

From the discussion presented so far, we can infer that PAWDI comprised a good institutional design in the form of platforms for both people’s participation and deliberation between the partner agencies. Yet, the institutional practices followed by the partners, especially the governmental agency, hampered the realization of the overall objective of the project.

The PAWDI external evaluation team notes that the preparatory phase of the project was quite long but no serious attention was paid to the actual needs of the people, clear role of various project functionaries, and joint responsibilities (SDC 1998). The interests of the project partners did not match with each other, and they felt that they could have done a better job individually rather than in collaboration (SDC 1998). Also, the control of power (financial sanctions, measurements, payments, monitoring, etc.) mainly remained with the government and that was another reason for conflict between the partners. The demand made by partner NGOs to cross-check measurement log-books for construction activities was rejected by the DWD&SC for fear of being caught for misappropriation of project funds. On the other hand, the NGO functionaries were required to spend long hours among villagers, talking to them, conducting socioeconomic surveys, and helping them to elect members of the LS. The budgetary provisions for community organization activities were too little, and one of the partner NGOs (Sahyog Sansthan) did not have sufficient ‘trained’ staff to carry out community organization activities.19 Not even 40% of the funds made available under different heads were used in the first phase (SDC 1998). The only component in which expenditures exceeded budgetary provision was consultancies and project co-ordination (SDC 1998, 9).

We see internal tensions within the development regime in the case of PAWDI, which ended in blame games. The ultimate objective of the project planners was to transform this project into a ‘process’ (SDC, 1998, i). This means that the project planners wanted to empower rural communities through the benefits of this project in such a way that they can take care of their natural resources once the project period is over. However, the project failed to achieve any of its stated goals. In fact, the best intentions of the policies (gender equity, participation and ‘synergy’) proved difficult to translate into action in the field. PAWDI was abandoned after the first phase and it left many questions unanswered, especially on the prospects of multi-agency partnership in the management and development of natural resources. The case of PAWDI suggests that the assumption of inter-agency ‘synergetic’ relationship between foreign donors, the state agencies and NGOs in Rajasthan turned into inter-agency ‘conflicts’ primarily due to the competing interests and agendas of the different project implementing agencies.

**Discussion: some lessons learnt from PAWDI**

While it is too common for international development and donor agencies to manufacture ‘success’ out of failed projects (cf. Ferguson, 1994), there is also a tendency to avoid discussing publicly or learning lessons from utterly ‘failed’ projects such as PAWDI. Presented below are some of the main lessons learnt from the way a participatory watershed project based on the theoretical benefits of multi-agency partnership unfolded in reality.

**GO–NGO partnerships are not given but need to be nurtured**

The proponents of multi-agency partnerships and ‘synergy’ (Ostrom 1996) are right in advocating such partnerships given the long history of failures of top-down state-led rural development projects. But synergetic relationships cannot be taken for granted – there remain practical challenges in their realization. Successful multi-organizational partnerships necessitate significant efforts to find creative responses to differences and a new mindset and value stance for managers who work within such systems (Innes and Booher 1999). The donor agency in this case presumed a synergetic relationship between the state and partner NGOs. The state functionaries were not interested in NGO involvement nor did the partner NGOs see any
benefits in working with the state watershed department. The SDC had been sponsoring the water conservation interventions of the TBS before the project was conceived, and in line with the dominant development thinking of the time in favor of GO–NGO partnerships, it wanted to involve the state watershed department. In fact, the TBS has had an antagonistic relationship with the state watershed and irrigation departments in the past. The then Chief Minister was personally impressed with their work but the engineers were not interested in involving NGOs. It was the prospect of donor funding, especially for the DWD&SC that brought the unlikely partners into the project. The partner agencies had their own agendas as well as expectations from the project. Before a project goes live, the donors need to invest considerable time and effort in nurturing partnerships by holding joint deliberations so that contentious issues are clarified at the outset. Multi-agency partnerships require, as Sansom (2006) suggests, a shared understanding between government agencies and NGOs about the working environment and incentives of both parties. In the case of PAWDI, the donors decided beforehand to sponsor a project based on a formulaic solution (GO–NGO synergy) and then picked up the NGOs they had funded in the past without exploring their working relationship with the state or assessing the viability of joint implementation for achieving the project goals. That is why it took two years after the start of the project to decide the mechanism for implementation, and in the absence of nurturing the partnership the project ended in multi-agency dissonance.

Good institutional forms may not lead to good institutional practices

Taking their cue from some of the evident challenges in the operationalization of GO–NGO partnerships in agricultural development, proponents of such partnerships argue that channels of communication between the various partners need to be effective (e.g. Farrington, Turton, and James 1999). This should involve the creation of institutions for joint deliberation. The Joint Project Committee (JPC) in the case of PAWDI, indeed, was thought to be instrumental for the success of the partnership, and it also proved to be effective in addressing the issue of corruption (by DWD&SC engineers) flagged by the partner NGO. While there was nothing wrong in the institutional form of the JPC, the donors and project planners did not pay much heed to institutional practices. As the narrative presented in the previous section suggests, donors, government officials and NGO workers belong to different social worlds and class groups, and thus found it difficult even to (literally) stay together at a common place (remote village) for ‘team building’ exercises. Unless the different partners involved are willing to transcend their own social worlds and ‘reach out’ to others, partnerships in international development projects are unlikely to materialize. Furthermore, within the framework of JPC only top-level officials of the DWD&SC interacted with the partner agencies but middle- and lower-level officials remained wary of the collaborative NGOs. This suggests that efforts are needed for building a relationship of trust at all levels with the concerned government officers, rather than just at the top (political head or senior most bureaucrats), as was the case in PAWDI (cf. Sansom 2011).20 The findings from this case study motivate us to complement the analysis of ‘institutional forms’ with a sociological understanding of ‘institutional practices’ if we are to fully address the challenges involved in the operationalization of multi-agency partnerships.

Projects may fail but they can foster good governance practices

The issue of corruption in the governmental sector in India is a well recognized fact in the debates on rural development. Reducing corruption in project implementation was not the explicit objective of the project and while the project failed to achieve any of its stated objectives, the failure of the project did contribute toward reforming bureaucratic functioning in Rajasthan. In the case of PAWDI we saw misappropriation of project funds by the DWD&SC officials. But this did not go unchecked: some engineers were suspended at the behest of the JPC. However, this created animosity between the DWD&SC and the TBS, leading to a permanently strained relationship, and ultimately to the abandonment of the project. The TBS had other channels of funding available and therefore, it did not hesitate in raising the issue of corruption even at the cost of losing the project. The analysis of PAWDI suggests that NGO intervention in flagging the issue of corruption proved crucial in making the higher level state functionaries act against their subordinates. This disciplinary action and course correction measure may, in turn, prevent corrupt practices in future projects implemented by the DWD&SC.

Unrealistic donor expectations may lead to project failures

The fate of PAWDI is not unique as many well-meaning international development projects turn out to be failures. They are bound to be so if the parameters for success are based on unrealistic donor expectations (Kumar and Corbridge 2002). International donors need to be wary of the fact that true participation and community mobilization may sometimes require more time than the life period of development projects. In the case of PAWDI, we saw that while the DWD&SC is to be blamed for corruption, the NGOs were also not innocent. They selected the villages for project implementation in order to consolidate their
own position as agents of development. Furthermore, they also undertook tasks (such as community organization activities) without sufficiently trained staff. The allocation of money for such tasks was very low when compared to funds made available for physical (soil and water conservation) activities. The experience of PAWDI suggests that for making projects truly sustainable and people-driven (as was the intent in PAWDI), sufficient funds for community mobilization activities need to be provided. Unfortunately, this issue was not addressed effectively even in the later projects that the DWD&SC implemented on its own (or through other NGOs) in Rajasthan, resulting in very poor cooperation of village communities in the post-project phase (see Gupta 2009).

Finally, the most important lesson to be learnt from the case of PAWDI is that international donors should limit their expectations of what could be really achieved from a time-bound and resource limited project of agricultural and rural development. Advocates of participatory rural development (e.g. Chambers 1994) have done remarkable work in opening up the arena of rural development for resource dependent communities as well as in motivating the project implementing agencies to learn from the intended ‘beneficiaries’. It is unfortunate that while most implementing agencies have adopted participatory tools and exercises in their project design, the actual needs of the resource dependent communities are not incorporated in the projects (cf. Mansuri and Rao 2013). It seems pointless to conduct participatory exercises if there is a mismatch between the actual needs of the ‘beneficiaries’ and what the project can actually offer.

Conclusion

The story of PAWDI demonstrates that good policies are not easy to implement. PAWDI is a classic example of an ideal rural development project (involving participation, GO–NGO partnership, gender equity, etc.). Yet, in spite of the best intentions on the part of policy-makers and donors, the project failed to achieve any of its stated objectives. Rather than restricting the analytical gaze to ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of particular projects, as has been done in most project evaluation reports, perhaps a more meaningful exercise is the diagnosis of the problem. So far, most policy-makers and donors in the arena of watershed management have remained interested in prescription (better ‘synergy’, more partnerships) instead of elaborate diagnosis. This paper has presented a diagnosis of the problems of ‘synergy’ and ‘partnership’ in watershed management using the case study of PAWDI.

An important contribution of the paper is to demonstrate how complex assembling takes place in multi-agency partnerships. We see that the governmental agency was pushed into the partnership because of a political decision and not the willingness of the state officials to work closely with the NGOs. The NGOs agreed to join the partnership on the insistence of international donors from whom they had been getting financial support earlier. The donor agency on its part was instrumental in forging the alliance on the basis of theoretical benefits ‘GO–NGO partnerships’. The paper suggests that GO–NGO partnerships cannot be taken for granted by the donor agencies just because there are strong theoretical benefits of such partnerships. Instead, GO–NGO partnerships need to be nurtured before rolling out projects, by way of discussions wherein the different agencies ‘reach out’ to each other and come to a shared understanding about the working environment and their individual contribution toward achieving project objectives. This paper also argues that it is crucial to build relationships of trust at all levels and not just at the top level because the outcome of the projects depends heavily on the perceptions and interests of the field-level staff. Just building new institutional forms (such as the LS or the JPC) without considering actual institutional practices is not sufficient for effective multi-agency development projects. This is important and relevant not just in the context of watershed management in Rajasthan but also in other areas of rural development (e.g. health, education, sanitation, and nutrition or food security) in different country contexts because international development policy is now in favor of creating new institutions for ‘participatory’ development.

The case-study of PAWDI points to the fact that civil society actors, although not always innocent, may play a crucial role in curbing corruption in development projects. Projects may ‘fail’ in terms of achieving their stated objectives but, in the long run, they can foster better governance practices (for example, intolerance for misappropriation of project funds). In this sense, even failed projects like PAWDI contributed to the slow process of governance reform in Rajasthan. Above all, this paper suggests that donor agencies need to refrain from adopting fancy (and rhetorical) slogans (such as, ‘people’s action’) while devising their projects. Instead, they should concentrate on what could realistically be delivered in the course of the project cycle if they are to ever realize the goals of both ‘participation’ and ‘partnership’ in sustainable rural livelihoods.

Acknowledgements

The author is thankful to Regina Birner, Tim Forsyth and Saloni Gupta for their valuable comments on the earlier drafts of this article. The data on which the article is based were collected as part of a doctoral research project (University of London, 2009) sponsored by the Felix Scholarship Trust, UK, to whom the author owes deep gratitude. The author also acknowledges the contributions of all the villagers in Rajasthan who shared their time and experiences freely, as well as of the workers of the DWD&SC, TBS and Sahyog Sansthan, for their cooperation and inputs. The author is thankful to Emma Gilberthorpe and the two anonymous reviewers of Development Studies Research.
for their useful comments and suggestions. Any shortcomings are the author’s own.

Notes

1. ‘Watershed Development’ is a term used by rural development experts to describe technical approaches to check water and soil erosion in rainfed areas in order to increase the productivity of land, and to meet the local requirements of food, fodder and fuel-wood. This includes treatment of both arable and non-arable lands in a given watershed area through a wide range of physical activities, such as drainage line treatment by building a series of loose stone check-dams and other structures to prevent water and soil erosion, farm bunding, construction of small water harvesting structures, development of pasture lands, etc. (see Farrington, Turton, and James 1999).

2. The state, however, remains the most powerful actor in terms of (financial and material) resources in the arena of rural development.

3. See Hinchcliffe et al. (1999) for case studies on participatory watershed development projects in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Australia. Also note that while rainwater harvesting practices and governance of village commons for collective sustenance have been going on for centuries in several parts of rainfed regions of India, ‘watershed development’ as a ‘scientific’ approach for a comprehensive treatment of a given watershed area through a mix of soil and water conservation techniques is a fairly recent phenomenon.

4. Most NGOs that are involved in improving the productivity of private and common lands (for crop, fodder and fuel wood) and increasing the availability of water by preventing run-off, use the term ‘watershed development’ to denote their project activities. However, some grassroots and activist organizations engaged in building small water harvesting structures, consciously refrain from employing the term ‘watershed development’ to describe their activities, because they claim that their approach is not based on ‘technical’ or ‘expert’ knowledge and that they promote ‘traditional knowledge’ in their rainwater harvesting activities (Gupta 2009).

5. Mosse (2005) raises and convincingly addresses a similar question in his ethnographic study of the Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project implemented in the 1990s.

6. The 176 ‘international’ NGOs of 1909 blossomed into 28,900 by 1993, and between 1980 and 1993 the total spending of these NGOs rose from US$ 2.8 billion to US $ 5.7 billion’ (Edwards and Hulme 1995, 3).

7. For an overview of literature (and refined analysis) on factors affecting state-NGO relations in service provision, see Mcloughlin (2011).

8. There is an underlying similarity between the mainstream participatory approaches, and alternative approaches with regard to people’s participation in the use and management of natural resources (communitarians/neo-Gandhian). However, there is an important point of departure between the two. While new-institutionalists propose ‘community-based natural resource management’ as the most efficient system of resource management, for communitarians, efficiency is not the primary concern but people’s right over the use of their local natural resources. To put it succinctly, the difference between the two is their focus on ‘efficient management’ and ‘local control’, respectively.

9. For a comprehensive critique of participatory approaches, see various contributions to Cooke and Kothari (2001).

For a critical appreciation of the notion of ‘tyranny’, see Williams (2004).

10. The data on which this paper is based is part of a larger doctoral research project. The case of PAWDI is one of the examples that the author studied apart from several other watershed projects implemented by the DWD&SC and two different kinds of NGOs in rural Rajasthan – Tarun Bharat Sangh and Seva Mandir.

11. The external evaluation report of PAWDI suggests that technically speaking, the Retam area does not even require watershed treatment activities. Sahyog Sansthan has been active in this area for some time and just wanted to consolidate its base (SDC 1998, 14).

12. As informed by an engineer of the DWD&SC at the state capital, Jaipur (14 August 2004) on condition of anonymity.

13. Excerpts from the author’s notes on the interview at Jaipur (12 August 2004).

14. The Joint Project Committee was the main decision-making body which involved representatives of the government and the SDC. The NGOs were in direct contact with the SDC. There was a project Coordination Center at district level that comprised the watershed development and soil conservation teams of the department and the NGO functionaries.

15. Telephone interview (20 July 2004).

16. Excerpt from author’s notes on fieldwork in Alwar villages (2003–2004).  
17. Excerpt from the author’s notes during the stay in TBS ashram (2003–2004).

18. Excerpts from the author’s notes on the interview at Udaipur (21 August 2004).

19. As informed by an assistant engineer (name withheld) of the DWD&SC who served in the PAWDI project team (21 June 2004).

20. Sansom (2011) makes a similar proposition regarding the effectiveness of NGO-GO partnerships in the context of community-based sanitation in South Asia.

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