

AID Conference 2004

Minutes for Session Named Water Cell

Date: May 29, 2004

Time From: 3.45pm

To: 4.45pm

Minutes Taken By: K J Balakrishnan

Number of attendees: 30

Audio/Visual Component?

Presentations by Chandrika, Samyukta

Speaker/Panelist Names:

1. Chandrika Ramanujam
2. Samyukta Gorrepati
3. Rajendra Singh
4. Kiran Vissa
- 5.

What they are speaking about:

The session started with the speakers introducing themselves and talking about their motivations for working on the water issue. Briefly, the presentation was as follows:

Chandrika - Introduction to the water cell

Samyukta – Inter Linking of River experience in College Park

Rajendra Singh – His thoughts on what the water cell in AID can do

Kiran Vissa– Final moderation and constitution of the cell

Main Presentation:

Chandrika's presentation

Goals – understand the national water policy and the translation of this policy into programs like Swajaldara (initiated by the govt.), rainwater harvesting, interlinking of rivers. We need to look into all these programs and see if they have met their goals.

Documenting the privatization of water and understanding the effects of such unsustainable water management practices

Samyukta's presentation

She talked about the interlinking of rivers – not about the issue itself but about the presentation of issue and their experiences in College Park

The talk had five parts:

First part - History & background of the proposed interlinking of rivers and latest update on the status of the ILR

Second part - Understanding Rivers: What is a water shed, what are river basins?

Interspersed the presentation with clippings/videos form different groups

Third part – Questioning the core assumptions and claimed benefits. There have been lots of data collected about the proposed benefits form past experiences

Fourth part – Civil Society Questions such as how the ILR issue is being pushed by the executive and judiciary; transparency and public debate (none of the reports are available); finances required and financial implications of the proposed project and; social and economic implications of the project

Fifth part – Alternatives: a sensible approach to managing water use

Try to make the point that ILR is not the main approach and that the traditional water management systems are the main approaches and ILR is an alternative

Talk about traditional water management approaches

This talk was given as a general presentation in College Park – not just AID but other organizations and interest groups (esp. from Tamilnadu) were present.

Talk by Rajendra Singh

(This is in first person)

The real strength of AID is to make policy level changes in India. But I did not see this in today's presentation about strengths of AID.

After independence, the first planning commission report indicated that only 232 villages in India have been no-source villages. Since then there has not been even a single year when the ministry of water resources had a budget of less than 5000 crores. So by now we should not have a single village as a no-source village. One more interesting fact is that about 7% were under flood and 3% were extremely drought prone just after independence. In 2002, the planning commission's own report says that there are 90,000 no-source villages. Now 17% of the area is drought prone (water comes from > 9 km). 19% of the area is susceptible to flooding (most of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa).

When the government, after investing so much money in the last 50 years, has not been able to solve the water problem, then it would be impractical to expect that AID by undertaking projects in India can bring about a complete change in the water situation. On the positive side, there are innumerable examples in different parts of India where communities have been mobilized for water conservation and regeneration. Such examples are visible in Neemi and many other villages in Rajasthan.

On April 1, 2002, PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced the new national water policy. However, the new policy completely contradicts what he stated in his speech at the National Water Resource Council meeting. In his speech, the PM highlighted and supported the community conservation and management of water resources and also emphasized on social auditing of large water projects. These issues are missing in the announced policy document. The policy

separates poor people from water resources and item 13 states that water can be sold by private companies.

I met the PM 5-6 days after he made his speech and asked him about the contradiction. He replied that he did not know that the policy was different from his speech! He immediately formed a committee to look into this and I was also a part of that committee. After a few meetings I was unable to make any change in the policy. All I wanted to say was that water is never a private asset/property but it is a universal resource. The state is the trustee of all natural resources and is thus under a legal and moral duty to protect these resources. These resources are meant for public use and cannot be converted into private ownership.

Ancient Indian knowledge treats water as one of the five mahabhoots – life giving force. And even modern science says life first started in water. But the current policy has made water a commodity. While examining the water policy closely, it is clear that it is highly influenced by the policies of World Bank, the IMF, and multinationals.

I think AID can help in two things – *nirman* and *sangarsh*. Right now there is a big *sangharsh* against the issues in national water policy like privatization and inter linking of rivers. Because of the recent elections, this is a good time to make changes in the policy. We have a good chance in the next few years.

Kiran:

I think the message to our group is that we should focus on the national water policy especially the commoditization of water. We should make a decision on how we should proceed in this cell. Maybe we can have an informal discussion tomorrow since we will have a talk in the evening by Rajendra Singh.

Comment: If any of you have some relatives who know or are close to MP then this is a good time to talk to them about this issue.

Question/Answer Session:

Q. Is the Congress Govt. also going to follow this policy?

A. There will some face changes in the ILR but we don't know much about it.

Q. What do you want this cell to do – what is the whole purpose of this cell?

C. We should be doing all of it – making policy level changes, focusing on ILR or national water policy.

A. (Kiran) We should have different tracks:

- (1) Study and Research – Understanding water policy, earlier projects, ILR, etc.
- (2) Working with people's movements
- (3) Engage and influence the NRI community
- (4) Support efforts on alternative/sensible approach

There was a show of hands on how many people would be interested in working in this cell going forward – about 80% - approx. 25 people.

Additional Notes/ Observations:

We will meet again today at 8.30pm.

Meeting and Discussion during dinner

Discussion on what each of us can do at the chapter level.

Lakshmi Priya, Austin (part of the media cell): We will be monitoring all these issues (water, narmada). The media cell will help us in reaching out to the NRI community/media about our events.

Pranav, Houston: We will write letters to editors from the booklet on ILR. We will have other discussions in chapter on water like the Utthan project, ILR.

Ananth, San Diego: Lot of people are interested in San Diego but currently they are focusing on other things. We will take the presentation material to San Diego CSH and get feedback on it. We can also work on Balaji's idea to discuss this with people in India by making pamphlets.

Mohit, Albuquerque: Folks at AID-Albuquerque are very interested but we need to inform ourselves first. We will take ILR presentation to the CSH and also help in making pamphlets back in India. There are a lot of connections with the problems in New Mexico. We are looking to work with a lot of local groups especially after hearing the talk by Rajendra Singh.

Kiran: We are already working with International Rivers Network (IRN) and International Accountability Project (IAP). We should work with some more groups like that. We can do two things: (i) understand implications from experiences here, because one component of the propaganda of all these projects is that it has been done in the US, and (ii) get experts in US who have worked in this area to make statements/opinions against ILR.

Anand, Boston: We will have Rajendra Singh's public talk on ILR. Also, present Maryland's presentation to CSH. Long term: Build a 'water' focus group in Boston. Look at the 'GAP' project in Turkey – another large scale effort.

Karthik, Cincinnati: Would like to involve other volunteers from chapter. Not clear whether the focus is only on ILR?

(discussion on what the cell should do)

riversforlife has focused on ILR but other chapters (e.g. Austin) have worked on water privatization. We would like to expand from just ILR to the national water policy, management of water resources and other large scale projects. Also, we should look at traditional water management methods.

We should find a forum to take these things to some of the local organizations/NRI community.

Key thing is to influence policy level changes. In India, we have a lot of knowledge, local resources but people making the policies are totally disconnected with these. We should address this disconnect.

For the ILR campaign, we should first think whether reaching out to the NRI community is more important or reaching out to people in India. Asking experts to make statements is an excellent idea. We should reach out to folks in India since they are more opinionated. That will make a lot more difference.

Since we have technocrats at power, we can have a systems approach to ILR. Model the system and find out how much efficient/practical is the plan. The idea is to work on this and publish it in a big journal like science/nature etc. This will generate a lot of interest/public opinion.

Basically have a technical study project. But we will not have sufficient information/data to do it. Manoj (IISc.) is already working on a similar thing with other Professors.

Instead of studying/collecting information and proving to be a failure, we should take concrete examples and prove/publicize their failures.

(R.Singh) – Repeating the biggest strength of AID. Make a civil society/public opinion document on the failures in India. The three previous links in India are all big failures (even after 30 years). We should highlight this – make an independent case for it. This will have more impact than a

Rajendra Singh or Medha Patkar talking about it. AID is viewed as independent and hence a report by AID will have more impact. We just need to document all the previous data and present it. The Govt. shows Bhakra-Nangal and Hirakud as successes but they are big failures. Bhakra-Nangal led to the green revolution but also led to huge seepage all over Kurukshetra. Hirakud was supposed to stop flood in 500 acres but the 2001 Cuttack flood was caused by it. We should highlight the failures of centralized planning instead of taking a position directly and people will understand the implications of ILR.

Another thing to do would be formulating the alternative water policy – make 5-6 cases – one zone from each category. Look at Govt. cases and also alternate movements.

The mandate of the new Govt. is not for ILR – we need to opionate this in the media. Write emails/letters to Govt. Should say that the last Govt. fell because of water, so they should change the water policy. Just focus on article 13 that says water is an asset not resource. Should write letters to Sharad Pawar (agriculture minister), Raghuvansh Prasad Yadav (water resources).

Q. How do we use the proposed report?

A. You should publish it and also send it to the 'water warriors' for their opinion. The water group at AID should be in direct contact with the 'water warriors' in India. Ministry is silencing some people by giving projects. The water rights issue is very important – but it needs to be done very fast. Right now it is at the policy level but within two years it will become an act. There are a lot of letters going to new Government from the Rashtriya Jal Biradari in the recent days – you should also write letters as soon as possible.

Q. How about approaching the judiciary – PIL from PM's speech saying it is a resource.

A. There is already an amendment (83 ?, section 32) that says it is a resource controlled by local groups. So there is a legal case to be made for it. Somebody independent should go to the court case. We have a precedent – Plachimada (Kerala) and Pulcherry (pepsi plant).

Q. AID has never worked in this area (legal approach) before. If there are already people in India working on this, maybe we can provide support by getting information/resources and media attention. Anybody specific who are working for PIL?

A. There are 3-4 groups working but we should also proceed ourselves and not wait for somebody else to do it. You can do it with Prashant Bhushan.

C. We can glamorize our campaigns by asking stars like Rajnikanth to talk against ILR. Somebody in Madras is arranging a meeting with actors/actresses.

C. In each active water chapter, we should have actions/events very often. There is a set of 8 videos on water from CSE. Each chapter show show/publicize these. Srihari from San Diego in charge of the library. Somebody from Albuquerque also volunteered.

(discussion about the report on previous linkages)

Telugu-Ganga: we have information and more information available on the internet. (Taken up by Karthik – AID Columbus, Pranav – AID Houston; supporting role: Kiran)

Sutlej-Yamuna (SYL): will have more impact in north. Supreme Court case will have information. 300 crore project, Govt. spent 150 crores on advocates. On-the-record advocates will have information. (Taken up by Chandrika – AID Austin, and Nirmala – AID San Diego)

Other action items:

Everybody write letters to new ministers (10 days)

Get one AID-Delhi volunteer (Anuj Grover) to attend the meeting with Ministers.

Links (2 weeks for initial contact on SYL, 3 weeks for Telugu-Ganga)

Pranav (Houston) – Look at alternate successful models in different groups (zones)

