

CFTs in Maharashtra

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Required to be run by the government and be embedded in the local community, Cluster Facilitation Teams need to provide the necessary impetus to generate demand, to create the right type of infrastructure for the people and the area, and to strengthen gram panchayats to take decisions for their communities

“Maharashtra has 40 per cent of the country’s large dams and, yet, 82 per cent of the area of the state is rain-fed. We have moved away from our vision of watershed and conservation...We did not think about hydrology, geology and topography of the region before pushing large dams everywhere. But this has to change.” These are not the words of an activist or a water researcher. This was said by Maharashtra’s Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, during the monsoon Assembly session of Maharashtra on 21 July 2015.

MGNREGA assumes significance in this context in a state where 79 per cent of the farmers have less than 2 ha of land and this constitutes 45 per cent of the total cultivable area. (Agri Census 2011).

Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) data show that there are 35.26 per cent of landless households in the state. Almost 40 per cent of those that do have land do not have any kind of irrigation facility. Maharashtra has the lowest casual wages at Rs117.36; MGNREGA wages are Rs181.00 (The Rural Wage Boom, Livemint). If this is the scenario in all of Maharashtra, one can understand that the figures for the Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) blocks will be all the more dismal because the criterion for choosing these blocks ‘backwardness’.

CFTs are being formed in 12 blocks across 8 districts in Maharashtra. The purpose of the teams is to provide support to cutting-edge functionaries.

At the outset, we, in Maharashtra, decided to come together as a Civil Society Organization (CSO) and form a group of co-learners. This has been feasible because we are a small group of 10 CSOs. We met four times in one year. We realized that most of the CSOs were well-versed in watershed and natural resource management but were not up-to-date with the aspects of MGNREGA. Our first meeting focused on that. We learned about the latest implementation mechanisms of MGNREGA in Maharashtra. We shared soft copies of Information Education Communication (IEC) material so that all of us are able to use these in the awareness campaigns.

In subsequent meetings, problems related to the field began to crop up. We were then able to understand these problems better and discuss strategies to resolve them. When there were severe problems such as non-acceptance of demands by government functionaries, we felt dejected; however, we also realized that many other blocks faced similar problems, and it became clear that this was more of a systemic problem and was not confined to any particular area.

We wrote a joint letter to the Commissioner, to address the problems faced by CSOs. The Commissioner's office has been forthcoming and we have had a few video conferences and three state-wide meetings.

After our meeting in January, there was gloom among CSOs because they thought that nothing was happening. There was no

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response to the demands we had put forward or to the works being suggested.

Subsequently, an initiative was taken by the National Consortium on MGNREGA and a state-wide meeting was organized on 27th February, 2015, which was attended by the Rural Development Department (RDD) Secretary and the NREGA Commissioner as well as the concerned officials and CSO representatives. This gave the necessary clarity of roles to the government officials at district and block levels as well as CSOs. This has given a fillip to the programme and the indicators have picked up since then.

The Revised Guidelines of MGNREGA mention the idea of a CFT for the first time. In a situation where the basic objectives of MGNREGA, namely, employment generation, productive durable assets and empowerment of *gram panchayats*, are not up to the desired levels, it becomes necessary to explore new ways of implementation. This means not only tweaking the present delivery mechanisms but also looking for more meaningful ways of changing the direction of the implementation. So far, implementation meant that the government was to deliver and the villagers were to receive, especially as MGNREGA is a demand-based programme.

The idea of involving local community volunteers to implement schemes effectively and to make the implementation mechanism more rooted is not novel to CSOs. Working in rural areas, and especially working on natural resource management programmes, CSOs have realized the necessity and significance of the participation of the local community volunteers in achieving objectives. However, this has not yet been integrated into the government's systems of implementation.

During our meetings, we realized that most of the CSOs, now involved as CFTs, have had a long and steady experience of working in watershed-based projects, and not merely as 'mobilizers' for MGNREGA or as agencies that put forward the 'grievances' of MGNREGA workers.

There were apprehensions that CFTs may be restricted to the role of being agencies for providing watershed-based technical plans and estimates. The arrangement would fit into the district-level administration's view of CSOs as agencies to 'outsource' watershed plans to, and not be seen as 'knowledge partners'.

The concept of a CFT demands that we be knowledge partners, facilitating the workers to get their entitlements, supporting them with capacity building and helping the local administration to prepare plans for creating durable and useful assets for marginalized, rain-fed farmers.

Because this was a pilot, and we had been chosen to implement the pilot, it placed an additional responsibility on each one of us. We needed to design each step thoughtfully and keep the aspect of replication, scalability and sustainability for each activity in mind when working with the government. CSOs work simultaneously with the *gram panchayat* Secretary and the Rural Development

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Department (RDD) Secretary of the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). This unique experience was meant to be captured by MoRD and utilized to make schemes work to full potential.

Clarity of roles was key to this pilot. Coordination among actors would ensure its success. The larger objective, however, was not just to make the pilot 'project' successful but to make the concept of the CFT into a

model that can be replicated. So, CSOs need to carry the responsibility of articulating the experiences of CFTs and put these together to produce a coherent image of a CFT.

CFTs need to be run by the government and be embedded in the local community. They need to provide the necessary impetus to generate demand, to create the right type of infrastructure for the people and for the area, and to strengthen *gram panchayats* to take decisions for their communities. This is possible if the members of the CFT are from within the local community and they get timely, appropriate and adequate training in the management of the programme and also in designing appropriate works for the area. There is danger, otherwise, of this becoming just another project for CSOs, rather than a new beginning with a different approach for the delivery of MGNREGA.