

Recently, NGO programmes in India sponsored by ICCO (Inter Church Organisation for Development cooperation) have been evaluated. The study focused on landuse programmes in semi-arid and sub-humid regions. This article addresses the study's core question: "What is and can be the role of NGOs in matching sustainable landuse with the alleviation of deteriorating living conditions of the rural poor, giving due weight to differentiating factors such as gender and socio-economic status?"

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To assure ecological and socio-economic sustainability of natural resource use, local populations need to actively participate in managing these resources. Such involvement depends on to what extent they really feel, accept and can take responsibility (accountability) for the protection and management of land, water and trees in their direct village environment.

For people to feel responsible for their environment, a number of conditions have to be met. To a large extent, these conditions determine the strategies and policy instruments needed. Basic conditions are (see Fig 1):

- Guaranteed property and usufruct rights. Customary law systems to use common resources are in many cases disintegrating. They are often only partly replaced by formal laws which recognise only little responsibility at local levels. Usufruct and property right for individuals and community organisations need to be made more explicit in formal legislation (land reform, forest codes, water use rights, etc). Such formal legislation could in many cases be inspired by local customary law systems.
- Appropriate skills. People need to feel competent and have the right skills to undertake activities leading to sustainable management of natural resources. There are often rich sources of local indigenous knowledge and skills as a basis for such management. This knowledge is often underestimated and should be given much more attention. However, in many other situations socio-economic and environmental conditions are rapidly changing, rendering indigenous knowledge less appropriate.
- Existing economic and other benefits. Protection and management of natural resources has to take into account the multiple interests of local people. Interests can differ in nature, ranging from religious or cultural to subsistence

and economic. If these interests are low, local people will refrain from investing time, effort and money in management activities.

#### Claim making power

To enhance a sense of responsibility at local level and to promote processes that help fulfil these basic conditions, strong village organisations are crucial. It is extremely difficult for individuals to secure the necessary rights of landownership, land tenure, usufruct, access to water, credit government schemes, information, etc., especially in the complex social and political context of India. Organising strong village groups with similar interests then becomes a necessity to increase their claim making power and to acquire sufficient autonomy and independence. NGOs can play an important role in strengthening and consolidating village organisations.

#### Specific tasks for NGOs

NGOs should be able to carry out the following three basic tasks in order to successfully implement environmental programmes:

- Functional education, awareness raising and strengthening of village organisations. NGOs prove to be essential in increasing the target group's own potentials and claim making capacities to change their socio-economic conditions. This gives them the feeling that they can take responsibilities in their own hands and that they do not need to depend on others (higher cast families, bigger landowners, government or NGOs).
- Transfer of appropriate knowledge and technologies on sustainable land use. NGOs should facilitate the target group's own experimenting and research to find solutions for technical, organisational and socio-economic problems related to sustainable landuse. NGOs have to offer new technology options, adapted to the target group's

physical and socio-economic conditions. NGOs can also play an important role in providing the necessary training in those solutions that seem viable to the target group as well as NGO staff.

- Intermediary role. NGOs could serve as intermediaries and facilitators to acquire needed (political) support from government, banks and other institutions.

NGOs need to be extremely competent in the technical sense, but they also need social/methodological skills to develop alternative farming practices with farmers in a participatory manner.

#### Constraints at NGO level

Sustainable landuse programmes implemented by NGOs could certainly benefit from a more integrated approach. Not only sectoral programmes like community development, health, landuse and education should be better coordinated, but attention should also be given to a more comprehensive area or watershed approach, increasing the impact of otherwise isolated interventions.

Still more has to be done to really consolidate village organisations. Especially the effective participation of women and, as a prerequisite for this, the development of strong women's groups deserves attention. Further development of programmes for socio-economic development like off-farm employment and sustainable landuse would help existing village groups focus on concrete actions and give them practical reasons to exist.

The position, role and knowledge base of village level workers is often unclear or weak and this makes effective implementation of complex and demanding programmes often difficult. Although their role is crucial, it needs rethinking in view of pedagogic and technical qualifications required. Especially the technical knowledge base of both village workers and supervisory staff is a major problem within many NGOs.

Beside these internal constraints, one

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has to recognise that NGOs, even in India, have only little influence on the whole social, institutional and political environment. Although NGOs take their role of intermediaries between target groups and government and banking institutions very serious, their own claim making power is rather limited. Therefore, there is a strong need for more intensive networking among environmental and development oriented NGOs in India to lobby for more sustainable landuse policies.

NGOs' access to government funds is problematic, mainly due to constraining bureaucratic procedures, but also because of the very justified concern not to get mixed up in counterproductive political influences.

Another major constraint is the difficulty to secure long-term funding from government and external donors. Long-term commitments are needed if programmes with essentially long-term effects have to be implemented.

## Implications for NGO approaches

The development and extension approach of NGOs should have the following characteristics:

- A good analysis of the agroecological situation of the target area, the potential for sustainable landuse at different technology and investment levels and an analysis of the socio-economic and gender constraints.
- Developing appropriate solutions together with farm households, balancing short-term benefits with long-term environmental and socio-economic benefits.
- Emphasis on gender issues, like division of labour and responsibilities, men's and women's participation in decision making and possible differences between benefits derived from the activities.
- Close coordination between different programmes at village level.
- Integrated teams at grassroot and supervisory level. Although each member brings in her or his specialised knowledge, all should have sufficient knowledge in other fields (health, education, land use, etc.).

- Appropriate rewarding and supervision for village level workers.
- An area approach that facilitates involvement of secondary target groups on a differential basis.
- A comprehensive training programme to cater for insufficiencies in knowledge and to facilitate the extension approach outlined earlier.

The issue of sustainable landuse development can not be tackled at local level alone. Government and other formal institutions have to take their own responsibilities.

## Government policies

Despite India's progressive legislation, it was concluded that the overall effect of government policies can be characterised as short-term and mere production-increase oriented, unsustainable in the long run and overexploiting natural resources. The result is that the main target groups of Indian NGOs are hardly encouraged to invest in necessary improvements. Changing this situation for the better is of course a long and difficult process, largely dependent on mainstream politics. NGOs can, in a constructive way, through demonstration and critical cooperation, help the government to implement their own programmes. As intermediary organisations they can, where policies permit, facilitate links between village groups and government services, e.g. creating markets for seedlings raised in village nurseries, combining employment schemes with reforestation on State Forest lands, making common lands available for tree planting, making government lands available to landless families. NGOs could also put pressure on government institutions to promote sustainable landuse models, based on own field experiences and careful analysis of the potential. Stronger interaction between NGOs and government, however, should also be rooted in strong village level organisations.

## Conclusion

Achieving sustainable land use with very marginal groups in Indian society is not at all easy. There are considerable con-

straints in all domains from environmental, socio-economic, socio-cultural and organisational, to constraints at government policy levels.

Nevertheless, the study team feels that, without expecting quick results, NGOs in India have the leverage to achieve such a complex and demanding objective. This opinion is based on the dedication and often strong organisation of a number of NGOs, and on the remarkable results already obtained in relatively short periods in the organisation of their target groups which are often very backward and living outside the economic mainstream. Important progress can be noted in increased claim making capacity of the target groups. Women's involvement in this process is still limited, but the progress made in this regard should be noted. However, the long-term processes started by these NGOs both in social and political awareness raising, claim making capacity and sustainable landuse needs important support from Central and State Governments in India and in a complementary way from external donor agencies in India as well as abroad.

*The methodology of the study was based on a combination of rapid rural appraisal and problem analysis workshops. The concept of carrying capacity was used to illustrate links between degree of land degradation, required land use activities, farm-household dynamics and funding modalities for investment in sustainable land use. Participatory field workshops as well as a two-day general policy workshop proved to be crucial elements of the study, facilitating a learning-together process between staff and the study team.*

## References

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