

Book Review

Shahrukh Rafi Khan, *Government, Communities and Non-Governmental Organizations in Social Sector Delivery; Collective action in rural drinking water supply*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Hants, England and Ashgate Publishing Company, Vermont, USA, 1999. 144 pp., price not mentioned.

The author, a senior member of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad and well known figure in the sphere of participatory development and community effort, has compiled this work consisting of first, a brief overview followed by two detailed chapters based on field research reports.

The primary objective of the first report was to ascertain to what extent the transfer of rural water supply schemes to communities was sustainable and the conditions under which such transfers ended up as failures. The second report, initiated by the World Bank was on testing the hypothesis that the fundamental variable in the sustainability of rural water supply schemes was demand. The hypothesis was extended to include whether 'more sustainable water supply schemes result from the social mobilisation that NGOs engage in to induce collective action'.

From a layperson's point of view, perhaps the most interesting part of the book is the first introductory chapter in that it gives a succinct and comprehensive account of the concept of participatory development. The author likens the support NGOs use of social organisers to the use by Marxist parties of cadres to spread radical ideas of revolution and politically 'indoctrinate' and motivate the masses. 'The difference is that the goal of social mobilisation is community social and economic betterment via their participation and self help'.

The author then talks about past attempts at implementing participatory development in Pakistan, how this particular concept diverges from the conventional development approach, the crucial role of NGOs in bringing it about and lastly, a comparison with socialist and capitalist approaches to throw light on its salient features.

In passing, the author points out that some amongst us might see the role of NGOs as a substitute for the state and that it logically follows that if the state encourages NGOs, it is in fact simply being escapist and abdicating its responsibility. He then suggests various possible scenarios of the respective roles of NGOs and the state, among them being a sort of mutual supporting role of both. As to the market, Dr. Khan dismisses it

outright as a way to bring about participatory development, stating very cogent and convincing reasons in doing so. A little further he says that participatory development is market friendly, not opposing private property and hence inequalities. The difference lies in participatory development being concerned with collective goods in the main, in the interests and for the well being of the poor.

Chapter 2 revolves around the sustainability of the policy by the government to transfer rural water supply schemes back to the community. The transfers were thought of in the first place because it was rightly felt that the federal and provincial governments were over extended especially in terms of fiscal responsibilities and staff commitments. The study group found that all was not well and only 14 of the 50 sample schemes were sustainable. Further, even the sustainable schemes confronted the problems of default and mal-practice. The real problem for that matter apparently lies in tackling the nitty gritty of 'free riding', default, raiding, breakage and uneven distribution. An unusual and innovative scheme to deal with the problem was that of announcing the names of defaulters after the Friday sermon. Also to assist in enforcement problems were the field staff of the survey.

Throughout the survey the distinction between general variables that explain sustainability or its lack and policy variables which affect change was kept in view, with the focus of the survey being on the latter. One variable accounting for the lack of sustainability was absence of need for instance, a phenomenon which led to inoperability or a vestige of operability as in the case of the sample taken from Murree. Other problems in this area were the existence of households built singly or in clusters and hence a scattered population that would naturally lead to reduced contact amongst the villagers.

One insight gained from non-sustainable schemes was the chronic lack of basic hygiene with villagers rarely, if ever, cleaning water tanks and disinfecting the water. Women unfortunately were not overly enthusiastic to being involved, merely wanting an abundance of water of adequate quality. Somewhat stating the obvious, but worth reiterating no doubt is why bother about water supply in the first instance, the author explaining the health hazards of poor water supply in the process.

The author also adds a note of warning in that with the existing age of the schemes and population pressure to boot, the need for major rehabilitation, repair and extension would be extremely high in the not too distant future. The state, the author correctly feels, ought to assume responsibility for this in its entirety.

Again to make the projects feasible in the future, Dr. Khan sensibly points out that it is not simply the engineering criteria that matter, but the sociology of communities which is of critical importance. Attention should in fact be given to the latter, at least more than has been thus far.

Having elaborated on the various stages of the study, the outcome in the main was that, despite the fact that so few of the total sample schemes transferred to communities were sustainable, they found that raw potential existed virtually in abundance for collective action in village communities. The nuts and bolts of the study are spelt out amply in the appendices to the chapter and these could prove to be most useful to other researchers in the field and have an intrinsic value in themselves.

Chapter 3 is a comparative institutional analysis of the sustainability of rural water supply schemes. At the outset the author presents a conceptual framework of ideas such as 'participation' and 'motivation' which is again useful even if it somewhat belabours the point. The hypothesis tested in this survey was whether demand responsive project rules and social mobilisation are positively correlated with scheme sustainability. In determining the role of demand, the author conceptualises 'latent demand', this being revealed by community solicitation of the scheme. And, what seems like a foregone conclusion, latent demand did indeed play a vital role.

Logically, with a strong association between community demand and scheme sustainability, the author feels that public policy should at best be modified. Policy should be altered in terms of reducing expenditure on the military, enhancing agricultural income tax and a curtailment of urban bias in order that rural sectors do not encounter the scarcity of drinking water which presently persists.

The entire work, packed concisely, is highly readable and comprehensive even to the layperson. Its simplicity in style and clarity of ideas has an appeal in and of itself. Perhaps the only flaw I, for one, found was that the reader is bombarded by a maze of acronyms such as RWSS (Rural Water Supply System) and since these are hard to keep track of, can be problematic. But then, perhaps it simply could not be avoided.

The impression which one gets having been through the pages, is that neither does the author seem to romanticise poverty, nor does he at any point sound patronising and condescending either. A state of mind which most of us living in a society where dire poverty exists, should attempt to adopt. His views are balanced, he is the epitome of pragmatism with the necessary sprinkling of idealism, and he is down to earth. Despite

the relative dryness of such a subject, the very title of which the average reader would balk at, the author sustains the reader's interest almost throughout its length. In sum, a job well done and those concerned with rural water supply, not just specifically in Pakistan but throughout the developing world, ought really to pay heed.

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