

# Negotiation Processes in Institutionalising Grassroots Level Water Governance: Case of Self Employed Women's Association, Gujarat, INDIA

**Dr. Smita Mishra Panda**

Associate Professor, Kalinga School of Rural Management, Bhubaneswar  
KIIT University, Campus V, "B" Block, PATIA, 751024  
ORISSA. Email: smitafem@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

Several grassroots level institutions are currently playing a positive role in water governance in rural India. The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)<sup>1</sup> based in Gujarat state of India, a women's organisation, through its 'Women, Water and Work' campaign has proved how through strong grassroots level women led water institutions has turned around water governance in favour of the local communities. The focus of the paper is how through negotiation processes, women's groups have been able to institutionalise a sustainable water governance system at the village level. Two cases have been selected for detailed discussion, in which gender as an organizing principle has played a crucial role in the process of establishing a sound institution for local water governance.

## **1. Introduction**

People-centred water governance has proved to be solving the water problems in the rural areas of the country, much of the interventions being initiated by the civil society organisations, through mobilisation around water issues. What is increasingly seen is that for any intervention (programme or project) to be successful through people's institutions, the *negotiation processes* have played a crucial role in strengthening not only, the institution but also, sustaining the benefits of the programme. Often these negotiation processes initiated by the local people are not visible and ignored and therefore not documented. Currently, however, there is a lot of interest by development professionals and practitioners to take note of the processes for replication of different interventions/best practices in varying contexts. These processes also bring home the point that for any development intervention to be successful, there are no quick fix blue prints as they interface with complex social realities particularly in societies that are divided along caste, class and gender lines.

The paper at hand is divided into four sections. After the introduction, the second section introduces SEWA and its water Campaign. The third section delves into the negotiation processes by women's groups in two selected districts of Gujarat – Navakheda in *Sabarkantha* and Thala-Malvan cluster in *Surendranagar*. The last section draws some lessons from the negotiation processes for a sustainable water governance at the local level.

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<sup>1</sup> SEWA has won several awards (national and international) for its 'Women, Water and Work' Campaign as a best practice.

## 2. Self Employed Women's Association and the Water Campaign

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a development NGO, established in 1972, is the largest self employed women's trade union in the country. It is a membership based organization (NGO) with a total of around 800,000 members all over the country, of which more than 500,000 are based in the state of Gujarat. Its members are all poor women belonging to the informal sector, of which two-thirds are from the rural areas. SEWA strongly believes that the basis of development and progress is through organization. It works with the two-fold objective of providing full employment to its members and making them self-reliant. SEWA combines four specific strategies – organizing women into groups/collectives, since individual women have no voice; capacity building of women to become owners and managers (not just producers and labourers); encourage capital formation at the household, group and community levels; and increasing social security to enhance women's well-being and productivity to reduce the impacts of crisis on fragile household economies (SEWA 2003).

SEWA initiated its water campaign in 1995 in which diverse water issues affecting its members are addressed. It is active in 9 districts, mostly in the semi-arid regions of the state, where water is scarce and hardly available for 2-3 months in a year. The objective of the Campaign is to translate 'optimal and efficient use of water' into a mass campaign. Women, Water and Work Campaign – also known as the Millennium Campaign is guided by a water vision in which women should have rightful access to sufficient amounts of quality drinking water. The Campaign mobilises and empowers women to identify and address water related bottlenecks at the village, taluka and state levels. It enables women to control and manage their water sources. This has a direct bearing on women's livelihoods, incomes and employment opportunities.

### *The Campaign*

The water Campaign is both a movement and a development alternative, spread across 11 districts covering more than 200,000 women in 500 villages of Gujarat (SEWA 2003). It is based on the promise of decentralized water management that captures the specific cultural and environmental contexts where it is currently active. It attempts at meeting needs of women from different socio-economic backgrounds. The organizational structure of the campaign (Figure 1) illustrates a well-coordinated, decentralized approach to water management, involving various stakeholders at three levels of action and interaction – the state, district and the village.

The *objectives* of the Campaign are to:

- raise women's and community's awareness of water related problems such as availability, quality and its conservation;
- establishment of local water user groups (of mostly women leaders) called '*pani samitis*' for the maintenance of community water sources;
- capacity building for women through leadership and technical training for them to function as efficient water managers;
- facilitate women's ownership of water resources, such as registration of household rainwater collection tanks in women's names and;
- forge links with other organizations, both nationally and internationally to promote gender-responsive water policies.

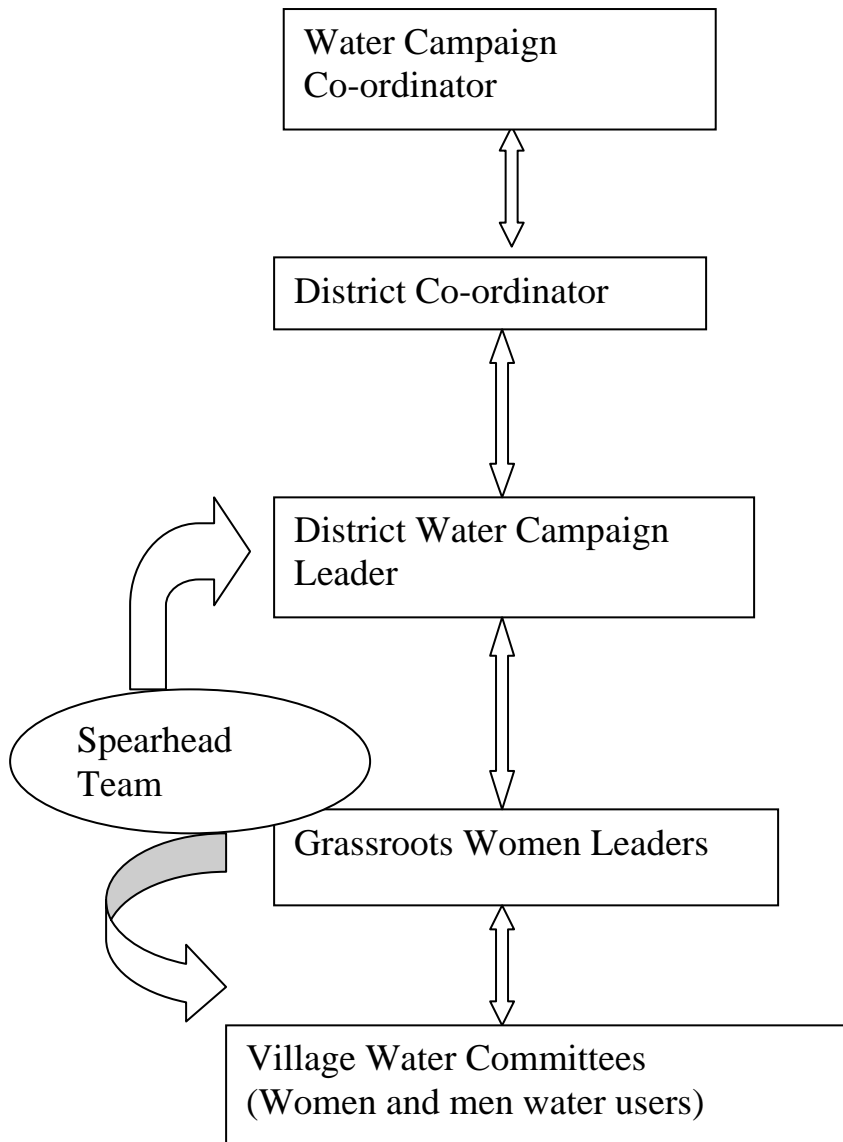


Figure 1. Organisational Structure of SEWA's Water Campaign.

### 3. Negotiation Processes

The two cases (Navakheda and Thala-Malvan) have been identified for detailed discussion as they represent a variety of negotiation processes by women's group with the facilitation of SEWA. These negotiation processes contribute to the development strategy (improved water availability, better livelihoods, health and sanitation and overall well-being) in the quest for

efficient water management. A point to be noted here is that a successful water management intervention may not be always the starting point for its success.

### *Navakheda*

In case of Navakheda, SEWA made an entry by organising women's Self Help Groups (SHGs) for micro-credit programmes to address their livelihood needs. Initially vermin-composting activities by the SHGs were promoted. During the course of this activity it was realized by both SEWA and the women members, that regular access to safe drinking water was more important than access to credit. Village women were concerned about instances whereby they had lost work opportunities on account of non-availability of water and ill-health.

Ground water in the region was comparatively higher than other neighbouring districts in the region. Although there were handpumps installed by the government, they were not functioning regularly. A group of women along with SEWA personnel approached the government officials of the State Water Board to find out ways to solve the problem. After a series of discussions they realized that government either did the maintenance work through its own officials or gave out service-contracts for maintenance of these hand-pumps. However, in both the cases the handpumps were mostly in a state of disrepair.

The women's group came up with the idea of maintaining handpumps themselves. Initially the women members had doubts about their own ability to do so. Moreover, they were not sure whether they would get the support of the village community. Handpump repair work is considered a male domain and women were hesitant to encroach upon this space. However, with the support of SEWA, women members gathered the courage and confidence to undergo technical training for maintenance of water infrastructure. The government officials initially were reluctant to train illiterate or semi-literate women. SEWA convinced the government officials about women's capability to undertake the task of maintenance and repair of handpumps. Finally the Gujarat Jal Training Institute (GJTI) a government organization agreed to train women in the technical aspects of water infrastructure. After some initial problems and intensive round of training sessions, 4 units of women were ready to initiate the handpump repair work. The government signed a contract with SEWA for maintenance and repair of handpumps in villages in the district. Women were paid a certain amount as wages for their work by the government and part of the expenses such as transporting the tools etc. were borne by SEWA.

In the initial phase of application of their skills for maintenance of handpumps, the village community, especially men were most skeptical about women's abilities and refused to cooperate with them. Women also received threats that if the handpumps failed to function then they would have to face grave consequences. Despite all odds, women in the Sabarkantha villages did not give up and subsequently the handpumps were all repaired on time and people could access water on a regular basis. Not only were the repairs carried out at the earliest but the women were able to motivate the communities to keep the surroundings of handpumps clean and free from water logging to maintain a clean environment. In addition, women also came up with suggestions to improve the quality of work by modifying tools used for repair which would minimize labour and time. Consequently, SEWA-trained women could not only, save on the cost towards repair but also, provide suggestions to the community to adopt practices for better maintenance of these

handpumps. Today the community wants the women's group to continue with handpump repair work even though the government has pulled back its service contract in some areas.

The unique feature of the interventions in Navakheda has been making water accessible to a small cluster comprising 17 households belonging to the marginalized section of the village. This section was faced with government apathy and the village community was also indifferent to their problems, but the women's group with the support of SEWA could meet their water needs. Women bare-foot technicians as they are popularly known, have been able to adopt innovative measures in terms of cost reduction and design of new implements/tools for maintenance of water infrastructure.

In case of Navakheda, the community acceptance of women trained technicians as better alternative to traditional service contractors has threatened the bureaucracy and the politician-contractor nexus. Under political pressure the Water Board was forced to withdraw the service contract in one of the talukas allotted to SEWA. As a result in Dhansura village around 50 technically trained women are idle and there is a possibility that they might lose the skills that they have developed in the course of two years. Further, when the contract is renewed after a time gap, they need to put in more efforts to maintain the handpumps which have been lying in a state of dis-repair for a long time.

#### *Thala-Malvan*

Thala Malvan is a 19 year old scheme, although its management has been with women members only for the past four years. The scheme involves five villages being served by a group water supply, covering a population of about 8500. The scheme has a tank in Isadra village with a capacity of 450,000 litres. Water is chlorinated once a day before it is released to the rest of the villages. Each village has their own smaller capacity tanks and water is distributed through stand-posts located at strategic points in the village.

SEWA had started its work in the area for the promotion of hygiene and safe practices in procurement and usage of drinking water. The Thala Malvan Scheme was located in the area which was once infested by a major water borne disease. Subsequently, SEWA had approached its members to explore the possibilities of management of the scheme. Initially women resisted taking up the responsibility, due to lack of confidence. There was also a feeling among the villagers, and the officials in the GWSSB, that women, being illiterate and unexposed to any work except unskilled labour and salt work, were incapable of managing the water supply scheme. It took time and great effort on the part of SEWA to give assurance to the people about the project's feasibility including the economic and technical benefits. Gradually, a few women came forward to participate in the experiment. The village panchayat also nominated a few women to take the lead who they thought were capable of managing the system. The Gujarat Water Sewage and Sanitation Board (GWSSB) provided the women with six-months technical training in mechanical and technical aspects of maintenance of the water supply system. Eventually those women trainees who could meet the standards set by the Board were selected for the final task of operation and maintenance of the system. Finally a contract was signed between GWSSB and SEWA to hand over the management of this scheme to the women. The contract includes the operation and maintenance of the system. All required repairs at the time of handing over of the scheme were done by GWSSB.

As agreed in the contract, the day-to-day maintenance of the system is the responsibility of the women's group, although the GWSSB extends help if needed. The cost sharing in the operation and maintenance between SEWA and the women's group is shared on a 70 - 30 basis. The women's group bears the cost in the form of labour. While the wear and tear of the system and the replacement of parts such as the taps etc. is the responsibility of SEWA, the water board pays the electricity charges. The expense incurred on the maintenance of the system is recovered from the pre-decided amount as mentioned in the contract with SEWA. At times, there were some problems with finances as the amount received in the contract from the GWSSB was not enough to cover the costs of the project operation and maintenance. Currently, SEWA is faced with the problem of non-renewal of the contract. The scheme is being managed by the GWSSB officials. However, due to poor accountability within the government system, it is poorly maintained as a result of which water shortage for long periods has become a common phenomenon.

The unique feature of the efforts in Thala-Malvan has been the successful management of the piped water supply scheme in all aspects like chlorination, maintaining pressure and flow, repairs and water storage maintenance. Another important feature of this initiative is the emergence of women as local managers of supply systems, who are accountable to the village community. Moreover, women tend to be aware about local realities, needs and conditions which give them more space to negotiate on water issues. Such features are evident in the initiative taken for collection of water charges in the cluster of villages at the local level, although it has met with partial success on account of political and institutional hindrances.

The limitation in Thala-Malvan is that promotion of efficiency through dialogue on inter-village water issues has not materialized. Women's groups have met with non-cooperation from the affluent sections of the village as their power was being threatened. Just like any other natural resource, water is also a source of power and traditionally access to water has been directly and indirectly controlled by a few. Dependency of marginalized groups on those who control water, was reinforced particularly during the lean months of summer every year. Due to the availability of piped water and RRWHS the dependency has got diluted. To counteract the situation, the affluent people in some of the villages are not agreeable to bear their share of water charges, as a result of which there is a likelihood of the water supply being finally stopped.

Both Navakheda and Thala-Malvan experiences show that access to water and water supply infrastructure is intimately linked with the power balance at the local level. Therefore any efforts to change the existing set-up will have to face opposition from vested interests that have the power to influence the political and administrative set-up governing the water sector.

#### **4. Institutionalising Local Water Governance - Lessons**

Both the cases indicate a need based development of an integrated approach for better water management (access of local community to clean safe drinking water for the entire year) that has organically developed from grassroots realities based on women's lived experiences. With the support of SEWA, women' groups have been able to take active participation in activities related in water management in the public domain and over the years have gained the support of the local community to a great extent. The cases here clearly depict that women have broken social barriers and by organizing themselves into collectives have been encroach in the male space as water managers. Some of the distinctive features of the Campaign which can be represented as

outcomes of the long negotiation processes by the women's group are: (a) Formation of strong *Pani Samitis* or grassroots women's institutions which forms the backbone of the Campaign; (b) Formation of a *Technical Cadre* comprising the formally trained women engineers and a grassroots cadre of 'barefoot technicians' who have substantially contributed to the maintenance of the piped water supply and the handpumps in rural areas. In the process they were also trained in environmental protection, sanitation and maintenance of water quality for drinking purposes; (c) Women were able to transcend all social barriers in the highly stratified rural society, and have come together regardless of caste, class and ethnicity for a common cause; (d) As a collective women have come to represent a strong political voice and have been able to dialogue with the state on various water problems affecting them.

### **References**

SEWA (2003), *Women's Struggle for Water*. Ahmedabad

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Mr. Ravi Sannabhadti for research assistance and Ms. Bharti Bhavsar of SEWA for her kind cooperation in organizing the field study in the SEWA water Campaign villages in the 2 districts of Gujarat.