

Multi-stakeholder Approach—The New Development Paradigm?

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In India, collectivism was quite common both in terms of habitation and natural resource management. Whether it is management of forests, water, pasture land or a community, groups of people of a particular hue, or a particular caste, were coming together, taking decisions and acting for a common cause. With increasing globalization and urbanization, and competition for limited resources, the collectivism is certainly challenged. However, the same phenomena are used to explain some of the recent changes in collective behaviour of the people, and Multi-stakeholder Approach is perhaps the latest form of collectivism that is increasingly being tried out.

Collectivism and Multi-stakeholder Approach

Till the 70s, the concept of collectivism based on the premise that groups of individuals having common interests work together ruled the roost. Collectivism was and, to a certain extent, continues to be accepted as a basic concept for achieving common goals. However, in the recent decades, there has been a significant change in terms of refining and redefining of the concept of collectivism. Mancur Olson (1971) has challenged the concept and imposed restrictions saying that "...unless the number of individuals in a group is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational self interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests". How can one define "small"? Olson did not specify any number; however, he provided a qualitative explanation by asserting that small implies that the individual actions of any one or more members are noticeable to any other individuals in the group (Mudrakartha, 2001).

It is here that the multi-stakeholder concept comes in. The domain is obviously much bigger than the domain of a group, both in terms of time and space. In particular, while dealing with natural resources and humankind, time and space become very important. At a different level, Giddens (1998) coined the term 'stakeholder society' as a way nations should be governed. Society is thus represented as an enterprise, with all the risk taking, profit and loss that involves, rather than a secure living environment.

The multi-stakeholder platforms (MSP) is in fact a recent phenomenon (Warner, 2005). Warner also emphasizes that the word 'multi' does not denote 'multiple stakes' on the part of one person or group (although they may well be present, as well as single stakeholders wearing multiple hats), but to the diversity of identities of stakeholders. Why is it that this is a recent phenomenon? To my mind, the MSP domain has come into focus because of the increasing demands on resources, their interconnectedness coupled with increasing scarcity. Combined with this, the tremendous leap frogging of technology and communications has made it possible for interaction between stakeholders located in dispersed and far off locations.

There are various forms of institutions existing in this context. The ones relevant to us are platforms, networks and forums.

Platform, Network and Forum

A platform is defined as a decision making body (voluntary or statutory) comprising different stakeholders who perceive the same resource management problem, realize their interdependence for solving it, and come together to agree on action strategies for solving the problem (Steins and Edwards, 1998). The platform operates in a public domain and is subject to public scrutiny and therefore its members are expected to behave and act in greatest public interest. While voluntary platforms are less prone to default, statutory platforms have confidentiality factor to avoid explanation of their actions, in particular, when found objectionable. Forum is more or less synonymous with platform the key word being 'voluntary'.

Networks are formed for specific purposes either of individuals, groups or institutions. While the constituents retain their identity, they work for a common objective in a common domain created for the purpose of the objective. Often, networks have limited life span; after serving the purpose, if a new purpose is not identified with the same previous vigour, the network tends to die or become dormant. A network operates basically with shared responsibility. Interestingly, in a network, the entry and exit is open for members any time with no serious liability.

Application of the MSP Concept

Let us consider an example of the MSP approach such as the river basin management. In a river basin water management, there are a number of so-called stakeholders who have something to do with the events or actions that happen or do not happen. If we consider the water element, the impacts are experienced to varying degrees by various stakeholders in the river basin domain (and beyond). For example, if a medium irrigation structure (check dam) is installed across the river, then the farmers in its neighbourhood and the downstream are clearly impacted. The irrigation department too is impacted because their estimates of river flows and thereby supplies from (other type of) irrigation structures or reservoirs will get affected. Groundwater recharge too is impacted. All these impacts are either positive or negative having implication on the management systems and livelihoods. Therefore, the key question of who should be the stakeholders will get answered if we are attempting to map all those who get affected by considering one element or a set of elements. However, the multi-stakeholder domain and its constituent partners would vary, more, or less significantly depending upon the particular theme in focus. For example, if the river basin management by stakeholders concerns with water, you may have a set of stakeholders with varying stakes, which will be different if the MSP was for catchment treatment of the river basin.

MSP Applied for Specific Purposes

A quick literature scan indicates that the concept is applied in a variety of ways. For example, PRIA has applied MSP with different foci in select towns and municipalities of different states (Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Gujarat) for different purposes. The purpose was to address some priority problems in towns and municipalities. To begin with, in the project towns and municipalities, mapping of ward specific profiles was done to include data on spatial locations of marginalized or vulnerable groups, social mapping, identification of key ward-wise respondents and citizens and leaders. Exercises such as brainstorming and interactions were carried out to collectivise people's thinking, improve upon negotiation and provide interfacing. This process has also thrown up citizens leaders who took the process forward. Some of the objectives of the campaigns included 100% registration of births and deaths, polio eradication, sanitation and solid waste management, drinking water problem and town planning.

Another common example popular in India is the Joint Forest Management in which at least 60% of the village families are members, who protect and manage the forest, and share the benefits. The primary stakeholders are the forest dependent people while the forest department "owns" the land.

Seelampur ICT Centre for Learning in Delhi has employed multi-stakeholder concept to promote hand and machine embroidered apparels, accessories and household items, hand-made paintings, shell and bead work etc. Their report talks about efforts to bring identified "stakeholders" such as the textile suppliers, export houses, muslim bank and other sympathetic organisations. The objective was to expose the products made by the muslim women to a host of buyers or brokers so that the income levels of the muslim women increase.

Public Hearings are also considered to be enabling a form of stakeholder participation. This can be considered as an attempt of the judiciary to enable and ensure participation of the concerned stakeholders by providing a platform using the Indian Constitution to do so.

Recently, in Tamil Nadu issues related with increasing exploitation of water resources, including from river beds, pollution from textile and leather industries and sand mining have led to development of a stakeholder forum by civil society groups (www.irc.nl/negotat). All available institutional mechanisms have apparently failed to restore order in such stressed river basins; in such a situation, the MSP dialogue is seemingly a logical solution to find ways forward. But the success very much depends upon the support the forum would get from the government (Janakarajan, 2005). The larger approach involved consultations among the farmer associations, government agencies and academic institutions. Politics is not excluded as for example the farmer associations in this case have political association.

Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), an NGO in Alwar district of Rajasthan, has motivated people to conserve water along the river course and exercise their right on the river water. When carried out on a scale, such activities tend to have an impact on the other stakeholder groups. In this case, for instance, the state irrigation department felt that its stake had been impacted adversely, and therefore tried to exercise its right on the river water by invoking a particular clause from the irrigation manual.

Discussions

From the foregoing examples, it can be seen that the MSP concept has been understood differently by different people. While PRIA tried to achieve certain objectives and used the MSP as a tool, at a town or municipality level, TBS tried to mobilize riparian communities around water. JFM is something

that was used by the Forest Department through the NGOs to rekindle interest of the communities in forest protection so that there is a win-win situation (in an overall sense). Public hearings are yet another forum that enables exercise of rights by the "affected stakeholders".

It should be noted that MSP is not an empowering mechanism. It is a process through which the stakeholders attempt to exercise their rights (or stakes). A strong MSP process would result only when all the primary stakeholders in the least participate and voice their opinion. In most of the above cases, there is a sort of fight for wresting one's right.

In my opinion, a real multi-stakeholder participation actually involves all the stakeholders coming together, discuss and debate the problems as well as solutions. The key characteristics of a multi-stakeholder forum are openness, transparency and participation. They are all together in arriving at a most commonly accepted solution for a particular problem. This problem may be as simple as getting a drinking water hand pump drilled or securing a municipal water connection. The other extreme end of MSP application, to my mind is the river basin management (considering the stakeholder society premise of Giddens as given) since water is the most critical need today for everyone. In a complex MSP, there cannot be any one overarching solution. The MSP too cannot be expected to solve the complex problem. What is important to recognize is that the MSP sets in motion processes that operate at various levels; there are sets of solutions that are arrived at; whoever can contribute to the solution does so. It is like untying a complex knot; even if one sub-knot is untied, one feels happy that he is progressing towards the greater objective.

The accompanying case study of Sabarmati Stakeholders Forum really aims at a huge mandate, ambitious at that, and hence qualifies to be a multi-stakeholder process in its real sense. However, when the domain becomes very large, and complex, the objectives tend to become difficult to achieve. Therefore, the best way to handle such an ambitious MSP is to "trigger" the process of multi-stakeholder participation at various levels embedded on the larger canvas. Precisely, this is what is attempted in the Sabarmati Stakeholders Forum. There are three core groups formed for Water, Agriculture and Industry. These core groups "lead" the sub-groups at dispersed places, provide linkages with other concerned institutions and facilitate information, education and communication. For instance, the industry core group has facilitated alleviation of the problem of effluents discharged by factories in the industrial estates on the eastern periphery of Ahmedabad into the Kharicut canal that flows into the Khari, a tributary of the Sabarmati (Mudrakartha, 2006).

Challenges for Stakeholder Forums

The biggest challenge for the stakeholder forums is that they are voluntary. Perhaps, this is also an advantage. Statutory bodies might function for a period of time during which they are pumped with money, men and material to achieve a specific purpose. Examples include committees appointed by a court to assist it in a particular case with more information, data and knowledge such as the Committee appointed to assess the Net Potential Value (NPV) of forests.

For voluntary forums, it is difficult to find a critical mass of people, in particular in urban areas, who are willing to provide time, if not money. Although being knowledgeable and inclined, very often, one is not able to spare time due to priorities focused elsewhere. Therefore, even well meaning forums, such as the environmental public hearings have become ineffective with real stakeholder groups not participating in most cases. Bigger forums spanning river basins too face this challenge. Wherever the forums are functional, it is because of the efforts of the concerned organization/institution.

Lack of funds to support forums or platforms is another big challenge. To keep going, a lot of effort needs to be put in. In some cases, financial support is provided by some donors, but is generally looked with suspicion by the government.

Another challenge is the participation of a key stakeholder which is the government. Response keeps varying depending upon the key persons. Although the common ground is increasing, there is a long way to go.

In spite of these challenges, the MSP is finding increasing patronage. The variety of applications is a proof that people would like to beneficially use the concept instead of getting stuck on definitions or academic discourses.

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