



Deutscher Tropentag, October 8-10, 2003, Göttingen

“Technological and Institutional Innovations
for Sustainable Rural Development”

Equity and Poverty Issues in Watershed Development Projects — A Case Study of Impact Assessment on Marginal Farmers and the Landless

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Abstract

Participatory watershed development projects have been seen as the solution for the problem of rural resource degradation and poverty alleviation in the past decade. Studies conducted on a large number of projects claim substantial improvements, mostly based on the positive bio-physical indicators as well as the new institutions built during the project. However, there is still no convincing evidence if there has been equity in the distribution of benefits and if they have been successful in alleviating poverty of the most vulnerable sections.

Given this background, the case of Indo-German Watershed Development Programme in Maharashtra in India has been studied in detail to assess the impact on marginal farmers and the landless poor. Following the different components of Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, the watershed concept with special reference to address the issue of equity and poverty alleviation has been studied and necessary methodological issues and indicators to support them for the investigation have been identified. Based on the identified methodological issues, relevant indicators and the institutional approaches in practice, the impact of different measures on selected households of marginal farmers and the landless in the project has been analysed by comparing before and after project empirical data.

Though the overall impact of the project on the livelihood of the people of the project area has been remarkable, there have been significant differences in the benefits accrued between marginal farmers and landless labourers. While the marginal farmers benefited from the improved natural resource base directly by increasing productivity and adopting economically favourable cropping patterns, the landless could not derive their full share of benefits from the project due to lack of access to land. Other institutional building efforts did less to strengthen their voice and bargaining power to articulate their interests. Hence equity and poverty issues could not be addressed effectively. This study, therefore, recommends concerted further research efforts directed towards the implications of promotion of watershed activities under different property regimes and social groups to identify the underlying economic, cultural, social and institutional factors influencing the said equity and poverty issues.

Keywords: Equity, marginal farmers, natural resources, sustainable livelihoods, watershed development