

## DIAGNOSTIC

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In this feature a caselet with rich policy implications is presented to a panel. The panelists diagnose the problem, analyse the causes, and make policy-level recommendations that go beyond the immediate situation presented.

Readers are welcome to send interesting caselets (three copies) to the Editor for possible use.

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### CASELET

#### **MATCHING PEOPLE AND PROGRAMME: AT WHAT PRICE?**

During last year, a drought prone district was experiencing acute scarcity of drinking water. The state government, however, was very keen to provide drinking water facility to as many villages as possible. Thus, under a UNICEF project, more than 1,200 newly designed hand pumps were installed. These pumps worked alright for some time. However, during the summer months, when the pumps were needed most, most of them broke down. This led to lot of discontentment among the people. The chief minister of the state as well as the minister hailing from the district were very keen that the hand pumps should be repaired at the earliest possible opportunity.

The Industrial Training Institute (ITI) had been asked to train various young people under TRYSEM so that they could repair pumps. The scheme provided for three months of training; subsequently jobs were to be provided by the panchayats (local self-governing bodies). The ITI's efforts to get loans for these trainees (to buy repairing kits) from the banks failed because the banks would not consider their request unless they were provided jobs. The panchayat authorities would not employ ITI trainees because they did not have funds. The Public Health Department (PHD), which was supposed to undertake the repairs, did not have the required manpower.

The situation was extremely fluid and it was difficult to decide as to how the repair work would be done. The zilla parishad had passed a resolution that it could not get this work done. Its argument was that during a drought year if it was identified with this task, the fury of the people would be directed at it and it did not want to take responsibility for the acts of commission and omission of the PHD.

Ultimately it was decided that when the funds were made available by the Drought Prone Region Development Authority (DRDA), the PHD

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Vikalpa thanks Professor Anil Gupta of IIMA for making this case available.

would start a campaign for the repair of hand pumps. The ITI trainees as well as some others who had already completed the training were unofficially given the kits which were meant for use only in the ITI workshop for training purpose.

All the 1,200 pumps were repaired in 25 days. In the scorching heat of May-June the young boys had to take out the cylinder and the pump from the ground, change the washer which was defective in most of the cases, and replace the same. On an average, three to four hand pumps were repaired every day. The boys, in fact, had developed boils on their hands because the pipes were very hot. Moreover, these boys, though skilled, were paid wages at the rate of unskilled workers, i.e., Rs. 9 per day.

However, after the crisis was over, the panchayat samiti was no more keen to employ these boys although there was a provision of paying Rs. 150 for maintaining one pump per year. The banks could not give loans and all the 102 boys who had been trained for either self-employment or employment in the panchayat samiti were again out of job.

Barely three months after repairs, the hand pumps again started giving trouble. Apparently, during the process of repair, some of the washers had been excessively scraped because they would not fit otherwise. While the politicians claimed that 80 per cent of the hand pumps were out of order, a survey done by the superintendent engineer of the PHD revealed that only 20 per cent were found to be out of order. Reports regarding breakdown had been exaggerated at all levels creating another crisis.

The government had devised a scheme which provided for a three-tier system for maintenance of hand pumps. Each panchayat samiti was to be given funds at the rate of Rs. 150 for each pump to employ one person for every 20 pumps. The person concerned had to provide spare parts besides services within the amount of Rs. 150 per month. He was to get about Rs. 3,000-4,000 per year for this activity. The panchayat samitis were to certify the work done and also inform the block development office whenever a problem could not be tackled by the local person. The Agro Industries Corporation was in charge of supplying the required tools and kits to the person thus appointed. The total cost of the kit was Rs. 3,000, a part of which was to be met by the subsidy that was available from the Integrated Rural Development Programme. In order to secure a loan from the bank, the person had to submit a proforma invoice along with the loan application. When the Corporation was requested to provide the invoice, it became known that the kits were not yet ready. The money was still to come from the government and the ITI boys were yet to be employed either in their jobs or by the panchayat samiti. The hand pumps continued to be out of order though the problem was less acute because rains had already started. With the crisis off, the bureaucracy was moving at its own speed. The ITI principal was disillusioned.

It was felt that breakdowns occurred after the pumps were repaired

mainly because the trainees were forced to repair more hand pumps per day than they could have competently and professionally managed. The quality of the washers procured at the state level was also sub-standard. Another view was that the people had not demanded installation of hand pumps. They were thrust on them from above. In some places, the people probably preferred open wells. Young boys in the villages did not have any other source of entertainment and used the pumps for swinging. Also, the ITI trainees were suspected to have been trained hurriedly.

The ITI principal felt, however, that he had gone out of his way to participate in the programme. He was not expected to organize the repair of pumps by forming teams of trainees. In fact, their placement was not his responsibility. Although he had taken the initiative to organize his boys into teams and motivated them to work in the summer despite discomfort, he was getting a bad name. His regret was that while he did not mind the criticism, he could not understand why trained people were not provided employment when there was work and funds were also available.

The reality was that pumps were not working, trained manpower had not got utilized, the government had not yet released grants through the DRDA, and the zilla parishad had dissociated itself from a programme which affected the people. Since temporarily the crisis had been resolved due to rains, even the people were apathetic. The repair kits were not ready and the banks wanted to be sure that loans would come back.

## DIAGNOSES

### Failures on many fronts

The provision of potable drinking water is a dire necessity in rural areas. This need is compounded in drought prone districts, particularly when there are scarcity conditions. Though everybody drinks water, in a rural household, it is the women who fill the water. This is a daily chore for them and is not only time-consuming but also quite tiring. A reading of the caselet does not indicate any involvement of women who are directly affected by availability or otherwise of rural water supply systems. Any system designed for the maintenance of rural water supply schemes must necessarily cater to the needs of the women.

The caselet does reveal the involvement of 7 agencies in the implementation of the maintenance task. They are: the PHD, the DRDA, the zilla parishad, the panchayat samiti, the ITI, the banks, and the Agro Industries Corporation. However, it is not very clear how far these 7 agencies were involved, if at all so, in the decision for transfer of maintenance work from the PHD to the local bodies, namely, panchayat samitis. When decisions which affect the functioning of

different agencies are taken without involving them in the process of decision making, the chances of their half-hearted support, or total lack of support, to the implementation process are very high. In the present case it appears that none of these agencies was taken into confidence before the decision of transfer of maintenance work of hand pumps to panchayat samitis was taken. The non-support of local bodies is evident from the resolution of the zilla parishad stating that it could not get this work done.

In addition to involving the agencies in the process of decision making, the second crucial requirement is to allow them time for preparing themselves to take up this work. The caselet does not show anywhere that adequate time was given to the different agencies such as ITI, etc., to prepare themselves to handle the new task. The result was that each such agency was unable to cope with the task on hand. The Agro Industries Corporation failed to supply tools and kits, the banks failed to provide the loan, the ITI was not able to provide adequate training, and the PHD was not able to transfer the maintenance funds to the panchayat samitis in time for employing the trained persons.

The caselet does not reveal any mechanism for coordinating the field work of different departments involved in the process of hand pump maintenance. In fact, this lack of coordination was, to a considerable extent, responsible for the failure in implementation.

Another point which comes out in the caselet is the timing of the decision to change over from maintenance through PHD to maintenance through local bodies, namely, panchayat samitis. It appears that the changeover was sought to be done in the summer months when the demand for water is highest and, therefore, the need for maintenance greatest. Thus, a new system was being introduced at a time when its efficiency was to be put to the severest test. Such a timing for change was most inappropriate. In fact, the change should have been attempted after the summer was over so that the new system, with less demands on itself in the initial period, could overcome teething troubles before the next summer.

The caselet also shows that temporarily the situation was retrieved through a process of crisis management wherein the PHD took up the repair work on a campaign basis. However, such crisis management cannot sustain systems indefinitely.

The caselet clearly reveals the lack of involvement of users, of different agencies, of proper advance planning, of coordination, and inappropriate timing.

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### How long "colonial" administration ?

The typical drought prone district is subjected to periodic evil visitations of nature: the failure of the monsoon, the drying up of rivers, tanks, and wells, resulting in acute misery to people living in the area. The government is supposed to come out with both long term and short term solutions to problems of a drought prone district. Many public policies are specially geared to tackle the special problems of a drought-affected region: the operation of special public works programmes, the drawing up of underground water from the water table lying in the deep earth, and the helping of farmers to cultivate those dry crops which give good yield in spite of the scarce availability of water.

The 1,200 hand pumps installed in the district, with funding from the UNICEF, were working very erratically. Most of the pumps almost broke down, thus accentuating the crisis of acute scarcity of drinking water. Popular discontent was building up in the district and both the chief minister and the minister from the area were aware of the crisis.

As in many other schemes of this nature, the lines of responsibility and accountability were blurred. As a result, effective running of hand pumps suffered. The zilla parishad refused to take up the repair work, concerned as it was with its political image. The PHD, entrusted with the responsibility of maintenance, had neither the manpower nor the funds to take up this specific responsibility.

The case also talks about a parallel system in vogue for carrying through the repair of hand pumps: the panchayat samiti being given Rs. 150 per pump per year; the Agro Industries Corporation entrusted with the responsibility of supplying the tools kit; and the commercial banks given the task of sanctioning loans, provided the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) endorsed the invoice.

This routinized system appears to break down during a crisis situation. Hence, the DRDA made the funds unofficially available for the purchase of repair kits. The ITI provided a 3-month special training programme to 102 young men under the TRYSEM scheme. These boys fanned out into different parts of the district and repaired all the hand pumps within 25 days. They worked under adverse conditions and, nevertheless, were paid wages of unskilled workers for doing the highly skilled repair work. Soon these boys were out of jobs, demoralized and demotivated. Once again, the hand pumps developed snags. There were complaints again, this time by politicians. A superintending engineer made a survey of the district and found that the complaints were exaggerated. Meanwhile the rains came, and the problem of water scarcity became less acute and the bureaucracy was once again its complacent self. Interestingly, in India, the rains seem to come to the rescue of the politician as well as the bureaucrat, when there is a need to take tough managerial decisions !

This case, once again, highlights the inadequacy of the control and maintenance systems even in the most meticulously planned develop-

mental and ameliorative programmes. Duplication of responsibility centres, multiplicity of organizations involved in programme execution, reactive rather than proactive strategies to tackle crises, and emphasis on temporary solution rather than creation of organizational mechanisms to manage on-going maintenance function—all these appear to be the recurring lacunae of programme management in public administration in India. Consequently, resources acquired at great cost operate suboptimally, if at all. The facilities intended for popular convenience degenerate into junk. Time and again, the safety valve gets blown, and popular discontent gets displayed in a dramatic fashion. Then only the political and administrative managers wake up to the reality of crisis situation and go in for firefighting strategies and mechanisms. Such instances only go to show that our “colonial” administration has not yet acquired the managerial competence to operate efficiently a development-oriented governmental system. There is, thus, a need to come out with bold and innovative strategies to manage facilities. For instance, the hand pump maintenance function in the district could be franchised to a private corporation, or a voluntary agency, or a specially created single window agency within the government. In spite of a tremendous proliferation of governmental functions in India, why is it that we have not come out with innovations in organization building for efficient management of programmes and schemes? There is a need for management and administration experts to ponder and reflect on this issue and come out with pragmatic, proactive solutions to problems, long before they reach the flashpoint.

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#### **How can we learn how to learn ?**

How do we generate optimism in the minds of local level officials when the designers of programmes and policies at the top are so insensitive to the basics of successful planning? Why do we build such responsibility structures where accountability is difficult to fix? Why should blame for failure always trickle down while credit often belongs to the top echelons in bureaucracy? How do we demarcate areas of responsibility amongst elected bodies and bureaucratic systems particularly when programme designs flow from above? Why do we design programmes which provide for generally very strict monitoring of capital expenditure but are found very lax in monitoring the maintenance of the system? Why do we have to burden the state with every responsibility? Can we not reduce the burgeoning bureaucracy of contracting out services to public, private, or cooperative entrepreneurs?

There are several such questions which arise in the context of this case which is not unique by any standards. The greatest pity is that these

questions are not new. Why don't we learn? How big a price should we pay for making even small improvements in the policy making and implementation ethos of our society? Perhaps, the tendency to explain frequent failures in public policy implementation by way of bureaucratic inertia is the bane of our current development crisis. A few issues which deserve attention in this regard are the following:

- \* Bureaucracy, like the larger social structure, cannot be assumed to be a conflict-free entity. It suffers from all those contradictions which characterize the larger social system. Further, if we accept these contradictions, we must ask ourselves questions as to what avenues exist for a minority in the bureaucracy which genuinely wants to serve the interests of "target groups," i.e., the people for whom the programmes are meant.

The deviants in a bureaucratic organization who transcend their formal roles and boundaries often provide the link between "providers" and "receivers." However, how do we sustain such deviants who are imaginative, committed, and assertive? Those who believe that training or the so called human resource development is a panacea for the ills of the bureaucratic system should note that the key problem is not lack of motivation but the fact that a self-motivated person finds it difficult to survive in a bureaucratic set up. This is true not just of the ITI principal. A major crisis of our society is that it has a long history of feudalism and authoritarian polity.

- \* There is a dominant tendency amongst socially enlightened elite to equate government control with public welfare. It is generally ignored that public purpose need not be best served by burdening existing bureaucracies. We fight shy of admitting the efficacy of many public services already provided by the so called brokers. As an esteemed friend once mentioned, we all go to stamp vendors outside the courts, travel agents for buying tickets, and contractors for getting our house built. But when it comes to public facilities, we want to take upon ourselves not only the design but also the maintenance function. With our deeprooted subsidy culture, we also feel shy in charging the price for various services from those who can pay, and the result is either allotment of very low budgets for maintenance or use of given funds in a very inefficient manner. Why could not ITI be given a contract for organizing groups of its trainees and encourage them to take up the entrepreneurial challenge inherent in large scale public investments needing regular maintenance support? The state financial corporations might find extending small loans very distracting. Banks, being basically conservative institutions, may generally be cautious in such matters. So should we then allow moneyed big contractors to take service contracts for such facilities and in turn hire the same ITI boys on low salaries and may be on exploitative work conditions? Perhaps, by restricting work size, competition among different small contractors could be encouraged so that more efficient providers of services expand their business.

It is difficult to suggest which alternative would be ideal though my

own preference is for organizations of ITI boys into small entrepreneurial teams rather than ITI taking up the whole responsibility.

\* Another important issue is related to education policy. We do not link training with skill utilization. There has been a strong criticism of some ITIs in the sense that they drain rural society of youth who get absorbed in urban factories instead of revitalizing the rural economy. Also, it is said that the ITIs subsidize the cost of apprenticeship training which should be borne by the private sector. Even though these criticisms apply to many other elite educational institutions, the point still remains as to what role we envisage for placement, utilization, and upgradation of skills created by ITIs.

\* Finally, why should we continue such sloppy project planning despite very rich experience of several decades of developmental planning? Should not policy makers be held accountable for designing projects that fail or flounder? By weaving a very complex fabric of inter-organizational responsibilities in an essentially unified project like drinking water supply, are we trying to achieve too many objectives through the same instrument?

Despite the fact that millions of people even today do not have access to clean drinking water, particularly in backward dry regions, when would we stop being criminally indifferent to the basics of proper project design? The politics of responsibility shirking illustrated in the case is not an aberration but an endemic feature of our polity. We must anticipate it and deal with it. How can we ever take India into 2000 AD without millions of people getting even clean drinking water? But would this case make any difference to our planners? I doubt it. This scepticism is unfortunately infectious and not a very responsible way of being a good citizen!

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