

WOMEN'S STRUGGLE FOR WATER

REVIVAL AND UPGRADING OF TRADITIONAL WATER SOURCES

Traditional sources of water often face neglect with the establishment of piped water supply to many villages. This was what happened in Patan, with the initiation of the Santalpur Regional Water Supply Scheme in 1987 to supply piped water to 98 villages in the district. While the facilities provided were found to be in poor condition by studies in the early 1990s, the traditional sources had been neglected or had gone dry due to negligence (James, et al: 2002).

Ever since, SEWA, with local grassroots women, has been campaigning to revitalize traditional water sources. Together, they have set up local water committees to repair traditional sources. And with success! Neemuben from Zandala village says: *"The time I save from fetching water, I spend on our plantation. With that income I could send my children to school. My status also has improved; I am no longer scared to speak during village meetings."* During the last decade, SEWA has repaired and constructed 190 village ponds, 105 wells, and 6 plastic-lined ponds.



SEWA
SELF EMPLOYED
WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

IMPORTANCE OF TRADITIONAL SOURCES



For hundreds of years, 1.2 million wells and 1.5 million ponds have provided Indian villages with water, even during prolonged spells of no rain (Pandey: 2000). Ponds are mostly formed at natural depressions in the landscape where rainwater collects; two hundred millimetre of rain over a four-hectare plot would fill a village pond with 8 million litres of water. In many places local communities have further improved their ponds by deepening them and blocking the outlets to increase storage capacity, or planting trees around the ponds to

decrease evaporation.

However, a strong community structure is needed to ensure that sources such as ponds and wells are regularly maintained regularly and to establish clear-cut on their usage. For instance, bathing livestock in a pond that is also used for drinking water is bound to create health problems. The downside of the same social structures is that in some places they lead to the exclusion of communities with a low social status. However, such

practices are very rare in Patan.

In Patan district, community ponds provide drinking water for people and livestock. Moreover, these ponds often recharge nearby wells. During the monsoon and winter seasons, ponds and wells are a valuable water source. While most ponds dry up at the start of summer, wells remain an important water source even in summer. An important advantage of traditional water sources is that water is available round the clock while piped water often breaks down and is available only at some, often unpredictable, hours.

However, neglect had caused much depredation to many ponds and wells in Patan, as a survey by SEWA and the Foundation of Public Interest (FPI) discovered. The situation was further exacerbated by falling ground water tables and high soil salinity. The story narrated by the women of Datrana village is illustrative:

Ponds—the lifeline of the Indian village

"During summer we hardly slept as we had to collect our drinking water from small virdas (shallow pits in the pond), each of which would take an hour to fill up with a pot of salty water. This would go on for the entire night; during the day the water would evaporate immediately. There were always quarrels over water." SEWA had its task cut out in its bid to revive these sources in Patan.

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

SEWA is a membership-based movement and trade union with more than 500,000 poor, self-employed women members. Its primary goals are to organise women workers to obtain full employment and economic self-reliance. For this purpose, SEWA combines 4 specific strategies:

- organising women, since individual poor women have no voice;
- building new skills and capacities so that women can become owners and managers and not just producers and labourers;
- encouraging capital formation, at the household, group and community levels with the income earned;
- increasing social security to enhance women's well being and productivity and reduce the impacts of sickness or sudden crises on fragile household economies.

SEWA's Water Campaign

SEWA started its water campaign in 1994 on the demand of its members who consider water scarcity the major factor affecting their lives. The campaign seeks to give poor women access to reliable and safe water supply and to build their capacity to become owners and managers of the local water supply. Today, more than 200,000 women spread over 500 villages and 9 districts of Gujarat have joined the water campaign.

Significant achievements of the campaign include: ■ building of 2,000 roof rainwater harvesting structures; ■ repair of 190 village ponds and 105 wells; ■ maintenance of 1,501 handpumps by barefoot water technicians; ■ O&M of a piped water supply scheme by grassroots women; and ■ participation of 21,000 women in awareness programs on saving water and hygiene. All this has had an enormous impact on the quality of the local water supply.

THE REVIVING OF TRADITIONAL WATER SOURCES

Rejuvenation of traditional water sources such as wells and ponds faces two stiff challenges:

■ Being community assets, these sources require a community-based approach. A short-term repair effort is not enough; what is required is a long-term commitment to maintain the pond or well, and to distribute the benefits equally.

■ Women, the main water users, are traditionally not involved in the management of local water sources. Effective management of traditional water sources entails a change in existing power relations in favour of the poor, and poor women in particular.

Over the last decade, SEWA has developed a highly effective approach to upgrade traditional water sources and to empower poor women to manage these sources. As with its other water campaign activities, this one also usually begins with visits paid by SEWA organisers and grassroots campaigners (the so-called spearhead teams) to persuade the Sarpanch (elected village leader) to organise a Gramsabha (village meeting). In the Gramsabha, water problems and concrete solutions are discussed with the entire community and a pani samittee (water committee) is elected. SEWA insists that the president of this committee is a woman and that at least 70% of the other members are women as well. This is often met with a lot

of resistance from the men. As Jammuben recounts, "There were many problems. We used to quarrel with our husbands if we had to go for a meeting. No matter what they would say, we went. Now, after seeing the results, they are happy."

The execution of the actual repair work, including financial matters, is the responsibility of the water committee. SEWA organisers and engineers only provide the necessary logistic and technical support. Thus by ensuring that poor women play a leading role in the entire process of repair / upgradation of traditional water sources, and undertaking tailor-made training and on-the-spot capacity building for them, SEWA ensures that women become effective managers of the water sources.

In case a pond needs to be repaired, the pond and feeding channels are desilted, bunds improved, and an outlet is constructed. In six villages, ponds have been lined with plastic to block the entry of saline water. Wells are desilted, cleaned, and a new border and a concrete platform are constructed around them. A large number of wells have been fitted with a

pulley to make fetching water less strenuous.

The community is expected to make a contribution of 10% either in free labour or cash; a community maintenance fund is set up with the cash contributions. A survey in 5 villages (in 2002) revealed that 92% of the respondents had contributed to the repair of their pond. However, during the summer of 2002, villagers were unable to contribute as a fourth consecutive drought left them without any means of income.

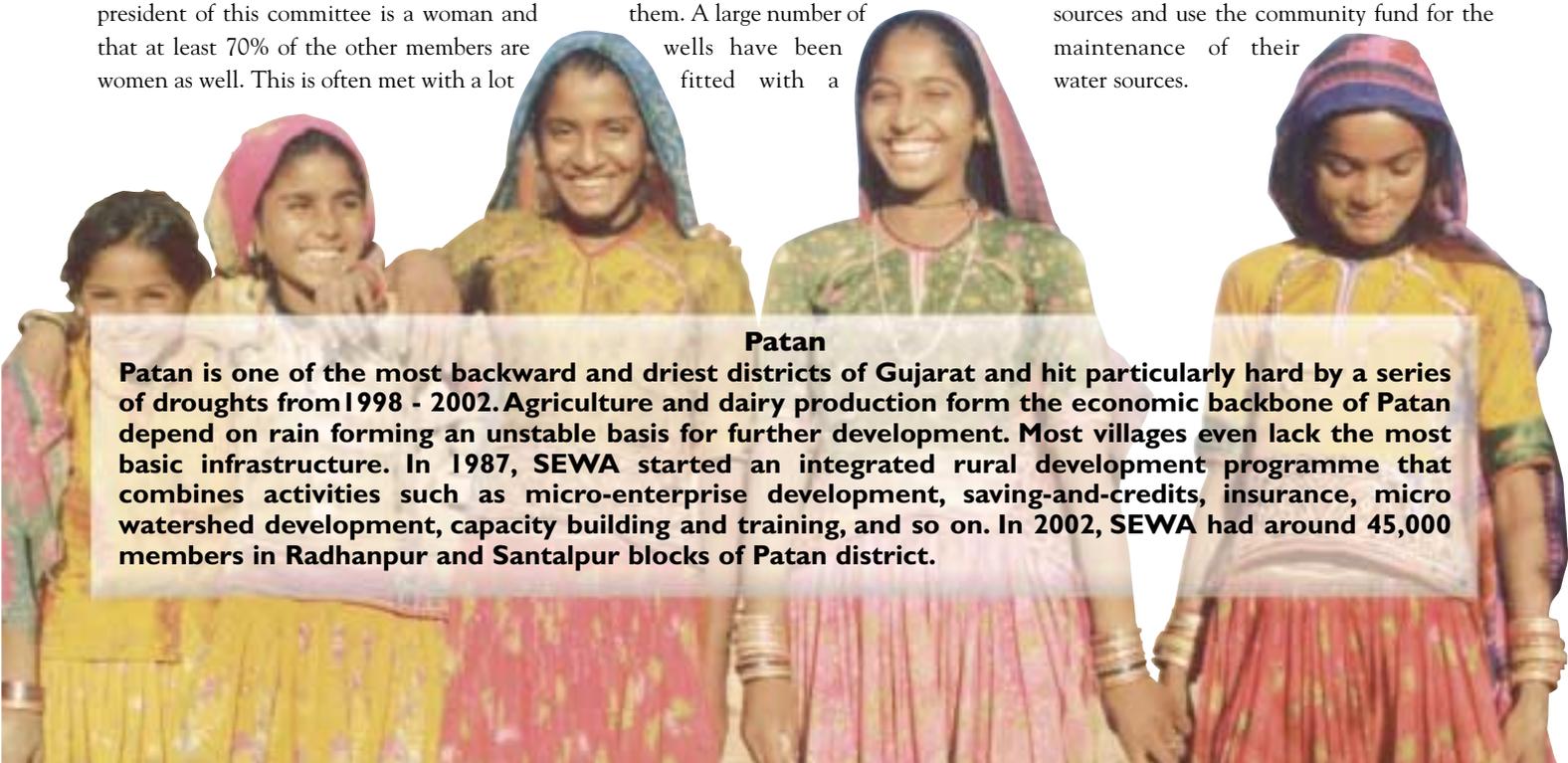
To create some employment, local communities were paid to desilt their ponds, 10% of the wages being deducted as their contribution.

In some cases, additional training and exposure visits are organised. For instance, the water committee in Maduthra village were inspired to construct a plastic-lined pond after an exposure visit to a nearby village to see a plastic-lined pond. Programs are also organised to raise the villagers' awareness on important issues such as hygiene and saving water. The capacity of the committee is thus built to maintain the traditional water sources and use the community fund for the maintenance of their water sources.

An organised, well-planned strategy focusing on capacity-building and empowerment of women

Patan

Patan is one of the most backward and driest districts of Gujarat and hit particularly hard by a series of droughts from 1998 - 2002. Agriculture and dairy production form the economic backbone of Patan depend on rain forming an unstable basis for further development. Most villages even lack the most basic infrastructure. In 1987, SEWA started an integrated rural development programme that combines activities such as micro-enterprise development, saving-and-credits, insurance, micro watershed development, capacity building and training, and so on. In 2002, SEWA had around 45,000 members in Radhanpur and Santalpur blocks of Patan district.



THE IMPACTS AT THE GROUND LEVEL



Repaired and upgraded community water sources have significantly improved the quality of the traditional water sources, and hence the domestic water supply, and reduced women's drudgery in fetching water over long distances. Table 1 shows the impact of the construction of two plastic-lined ponds.

Similar results were found in the case of repair of ponds and wells: 95% of the respondents stated that the quality of the water had improved and 98% were spending less time on fetching water. As far as the quantity of water was concerned, 55% of the respondents stated that more water had come available. Moreover, the governance of these traditional water sources has improved with the increased capacity of local water

Improvement all round in water supply, earnings, and status of women

committees to maintain the ponds and wells. In many villages strict regulations, including fines, have been laid down to ensure that the sources remain clean and no water is wasted.

The improved water supply resulted in timesavings that are, amongst other things, used for income-generating activities. It was found that the repair and/or plastic lining of ponds has improved the women's monthly income by more than Rs. 100. In addition, during the 2002 drought, pond repair became the sole source of income for many of the villagers. Finally, empowerment of women to play a more prominent role in the management of the water supply, and their increased contribution to the household income, have led to greater gender equity (James et al: 2000).

	VERY GOOD	GOOD	AVERAGE	BAD	VERY BAD
QUALITY					
QUANTITY					
ACCESSIBILITY					

Table 1: Quality of the water supply after the construction of plastic lined pond (source 4 discussion groups in 2 villages)



AFTER



BEFORE

WHAT REMAINS TO BE RESOLVED ?

The provision of piped water supply to the villages of Patan led to a neglect of the traditional water sources. Hence, a more holistic and participative approach to the improvement of domestic water supply needs to be adopted by the authorities. Such an approach needs to recognise the limitations of most piped water supply systems to provide water for all domestic uses including water for livestock and kitchen gardens, and the role of traditional sources regarding this.

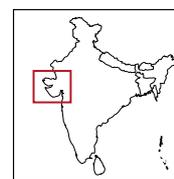
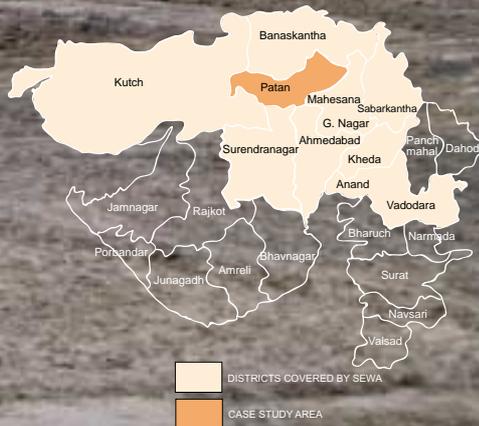
Because of depleting ground water tables and salinity the revival of traditional sources is expensive, especially when plastic lining is needed. The fact that no government program covers the revival of these sources aggravates the costing problem. More finance has to be made available and cost-effective technologies need to be developed. In addition, sufficient resources need to be allocated for community mobilisation to involve local communities in the planning and implementation of such projects.



KEY ISSUES AND LESSONS

SEWA's handling of traditional water sources, as with the rest of its water campaign, is not a stand-alone effort but part of an integrated rural development program. Upgradation of traditional water sources has not only improved the quality of the water supply but, combined as it was with a micro-enterprise development program, has also led to improvement of income.

The leading role of the community, and the water committee in particular, ensures that a local capacity is built to manage and maintain the traditional water sources. The active support given to women members of these committees ensures that women get an opportunity to establish themselves as capable managers of the local water supply.



INDIA

DATA SOURCES

Data collected from 40 respondents in 7 villages in May 2002 through a questionnaire.

Data collected from 25 respondents in 4 villages in May 2002 through a questionnaire.

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Nanavaty, Reema "Water as a Regenerative Input" SEWA



For further information contact:
Reema Nanavaty or Bharti Bhavsar
SEWA Reception Centre
Self-Employed Women's Association
Opposite Victoria Garden
Ellisbridge, Ahmedabad 380 001
E-mail: bdmsa@icenet.net
Telephone +91 79 550 6444

COLOPHON

This note is the second in the series 'Women Struggle for Water' which documents best practices for community-based water supply evolved from SEWA's water campaign. The series will consist of the following:

1. SEWA's Barefoot Water Technicians in Sabarkantha
2. Roof Rainwater Harvesting in Kutch district
3. Revival of Traditional Water Sources in Patan district
4. Fighting Drought in the districts of Kutch, Patan, and Surendranagar
5. Operation and Maintenance of Local Water Supply Schemes in Surendranagar district
6. No Access to Water in Anand, Kheda districts
7. SEWA's Water Campaign in Gujarat

Team leader, text, and visuals: **Joep Verhagen** (habicom@ndf.vsnl.net.in) with SEWA's water campaign team
Graphic Designer: **Vijay Barnela** Editor: **R. Borooh.**

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