



## Role of Government, NGOs and private bodies

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IN THE CURRENT scenario and more particularly, in the context of challenges for the 21st Century in 'Reaching the Unreached', the Government, people, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and increasingly, even private bodies, have an important role to play in most programmes.

Over the years, the Government and Government organisations have assumed and acquired a very dominant role. With large scale development activities, the role and involvement of the Government and Government officers began to increase. And so did the dependence of the public on the Government, which came to be viewed as a "provider". Self reliance was gradually replaced by reliance on the Government.

### Government responsibilities and role

In the context of water, the role of the Central Government of India is limited to policy formulation at national level, framing of guidelines, monitoring and optional funding. As per the provisions of the Constitution, water supply is a State subject.

State Governments are assuming a widespread and clear role in providing water supply to the needy people. The role of the State Governments encompasses:

- Planning - As a part of the broad framework at national level.
- Conception and preparation of schemes.
- Identification and allocation of water resources. There are competing and sometimes, conflicting demands from various users, particularly in the agricultural sector.
- Construction and development of storages.
- Pollution control as far as sources are concerned.
- Funding - grants and loans including arrangements for funding from internal and external funding agencies.
- A decision making process which will help in reducing the incidence of capital expenditure.
- Organisation of the implementation aspects. A State Government may execute the works itself or create some quasi Government agencies such as Water Boards or Jal Nigams, or even privatise if necessary.
- Training - Government arranges for inservice training for those who are involved in execution of schemes, as well as those who are engaged in operation and maintenance.

### Problem areas

In India, entrusting the responsibility of implementation to Water Boards has done more harm than good. Inept management and lack of discipline have led to a situation in which Water Boards are in jeopardy financially. Unless concentrated efforts are made in the right direction, the position is unlikely to improve.

Similarly, the State water authorities are running in huge arrears. Yet nobody is thinking in terms of winding up these white elephants. Some sort of "oxygen" is provided to them to ensure that they do not collapse. A large portion of Government funds allotted for execution of capital works are diverted to meet the shortfall in operating revenue, repayment, etc.

State Governments monitor the quality of water supplied and related aspects of public health. But this may not be very effective since the stress is on taking action after an incident occurs. A new beginning has, however, been made in Maharashtra in the context of policy formulation as enunciated in the 'White Paper', and attempts are being made to control the activity and prevent the problem before-hand. This is proposed to be done primarily in rural areas through a Committee constituting a representative of the Civil Surgeon, the local body or Zilla Parishad and an NGO. Good quality bleaching powder will be supplied and 50% of the expenditure incurred reimbursed as an incentive to local bodies so that they do not neglect disinfection.

In fixing tariffs and revenue realisation, the Government has a very small role to play. Government prefers only to issue guidelines to fix the tariff and is thus obviously not involved in revenue realisation, nor in taking action as called for.

In urban areas of Maharashtra, however, the Government intends to play a leading and meaningful role by insisting that the operation of the water works should be **at least** on a **No Loss** basis. The State Government will also direct the District Collectors not to approve the budget of the Municipal Body, unless adequate provisions are made towards revenue realisation to recover operating expenditure, including repayment to other State bodies, if any. Further, till the operation of a particular Water Works becomes self supporting, it will be made mandatory for the Local Body to charge at least the same water tariff as the Water Board is charging.

It can thus be seen that over the last 50 years, willingly or unwillingly the Government has increased its sphere of activities considerably. In fact, its involvement is so

great and public expectations pinned on it so much a matter of habit that a point of virtually no return has been reached.

### Role of public participation/NGOs

Any programme introduced by the Government and financed by it, particularly the water supply programme which directly benefits the common people, cannot be implemented effectively and successfully, unless the people themselves are involved in a participatory manner.

However, involving communities, making them aware of the programme and ensuring their active participation in successful implementation of a project is not an easy task. It is in this context that the importance of Non-Governmental organisation stands out fully.

With their "third party" approach, NGOs can play a crucial role as a bridge between the Government and the people. Generally, NGOs are already established in their own field, command the respect of the people and generate faith and confidence. They can communicate with the community in a language and manner that is understood by the people.

In public perception, NGO's have several advantages. For instance, people view Government organisations as top heavy with rules and regulations and therefore unable to deliver quick results. NGOs, on the other hand, are not burdened by the Government's hierarchy system and, therefore, quick service can be expected. NGOs are also regarded as being more flexible in terms of approach and methodology, depending of course, on the nature of the issues involved.

The issues which could be handled by NGOs include:

- Disputes, particularly over the source of water in case of urban or rural schemes;
- Rehabilitation of oustees in schemes which involve construction of a dam and the attendant submergence of land; (This aspect has been taken care of by MWSS Board in Maharashtra in the case of construction of the Poshir dam)
- Water resources getting polluted. In this respect, the shifting of the Head Works of the Chavne Rural Water Supply Scheme constitutes a success story.
- Taking over the water supply schemes and their successful operation and maintenance. Operating staff and the local people could be kept informed about the remedial or preventive maintenance.
- Up-keep of the system, locating bursts, initiating action thereon.
- Keeping a watch on the quality of water. NGOs can educate the people in urban areas to change the consumer pipes if they are likely to form a source of contamination.
- Economical use of water is an important but neglected issue. People need to be convinced that availability of water is not unlimited. NGOs could educate people to use water economically not only during periods of

scarcity, but at all times as a matter of habit. A beginning could be made at the schools level.

- Providing a platform for a common person to air his/her grievances.
- Developing consumer awareness, consumer education etc.,

### Private bodies

It would be reasonable to accept that for quite some time, the dominant role of the Government would continue, meaningfully supplemented with the complementary role of NGOs. However, while this supplementation could mean improvement in the quality of service and performance, it would give barely any relief to the Government.

But is this is the only way to continue? Are there no alternatives? Both these questions require serious thought, especially as the performance of the Government is being increasingly criticised not only in the water supply sector, but in many other sectors as well. It is being felt that the Government suffers from the following drawbacks:

- Eroding credibility.
- Reduced reliability.
- Questionable accountability.
- Absence of professional management.
- Absence of autonomy to manage.
- Self finance - Large investments putting strain on budget - Investments at times remaining idle/under utilised.
- Poor operational performance.
- Consumer totally neglected.

Given this background the question arises: is privatisation the answer? Some of the positive points of privatisation could be enumerated as under:

- Govt. relieved from responsibility of funding
- Change in approach and methodology—freedom for working
- Professional management
- Cutting down costs with probably reduction in employment
- Adopting innovative methods/techniques, adoption of new styles, use of modern equipment etc.
- Improving work culture, financial discipline and efficiency
- Relief from political interference
- Consumer orientation, consumer satisfaction

But a changeover to privatisation may not always mean the end of problems. Perhaps the nature of the problems would change, or, the problems would become less critical. Several minus points are evident in privatisation:

- Major changeover at one stretch may not be acceptable/palatable.
- Politicians may not welcome the change, particularly in the service sector.

- Initially, there would be serious problems inviting criticism, making privatisation unpopular.
- Privatisation runs contrary to the recent Constitutional Amendment that the local bodies must take the entire responsibility of supplying water to their citizens.
- Control on water resources and optimal utilisation would continue to be a problem.
- A large number of agencies may not venture forward.
- Who will take care of the economically weaker sections ?
- Control would be necessary to ensure that a private body does not stress only the profit making aspects and neglect provision of satisfactory services.
- If the Government considers it appropriate to regulate the tariff, (by constituting an apex authority) the private enterprise may not get the expected returns; alternatively Govt. may have to partially subsidise, defeating the main purpose.
- In certain cases court decisions are likely to go against the private body in dealing with labour.
- In case a large number of people do not pay up, the water supply cannot be stopped, as it may create a law and order problem.
- In case of major disputes between private bodies and their employees, and the latter proceeding on strike, the situation would be very difficult (at least in India) to handle.

Considering the strong and weak points of privatisation, it seems apparent that in developing countries like India, privatisation may not be successful immediately, and not in all the sectors. Moreover, privatisation cannot be forced on the people. Besides, if private bodies are involved in supplying water, there has to be some authority at the top to control a number of basic issues. Private bodies cannot be given a free hand.

However, if privatisation is accepted in principle as a goal, it may be possible to reach it in stages through "hopping methods". At the same time, we need to ask ourselves: if the working of the Government or quasi Government bodies is not satisfactory, what can be done to improve it? Could improvements be achieved by:

- Introducing clear thinking and perception.
- Changing the mentality/psychology.
- Carrying out a critical in-depth study of the organisation to locate the faults and weak points and take corrective action.

- Motivating the staff by following the Management principles.
- Pursuing excellence in operation.
- Appreciating and rewarding good work of the people and at the same time punishing the lazy, the incompetent as well as the unscrupulous elements.
- Adopting a consumer oriented approach.
- Carrying out consumer surveys, finding out what people want, what is missing and take necessary steps.
- Continuously seeking ways to curtail the expenditure?

Attempts should first be made to run our present organisations in a "business like" manner rather than "as a business". This was successfully achieved in the United Kingdom in the case of Thames (and other) Water Authorities. When these Authorities succeeded, privatisation was introduced.

Different models of privatisation could be tried as was done in France. A beginning could be made by contracting out the operation part. This can be followed by entrusting to private agencies the activity of billing and collection of revenue.

### Conclusions

- The dominant role presently assumed by the Government will continue for some time.
- Privatisation does have some good points. But the time is not yet ripe for it. If introduced immediately, privatisation is not likely to succeed.
- Follow "hopping method" approach, i.e., introduce privatisation in stages.
- Bring in professionalism to the extent possible, introduce management aspects. Try to motivate the people, recognise good work, reward good workers and punish the shirkers.
- Ultimately, the credibility and reliability of Government bodies has to be re-established.
- Introduce consumer oriented approach.
- Associate NGOs with the activity. But their association should be meaningful and not superficial. NGO's too have some problems which need to be solved.
- All NGOs are not alike. Their performance too has to be reviewed. It should not happen that NGOs receive financial support, become complacent and their performance becomes no better than Government working.