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## ***Right to Water as a Tool for Mobilizing Women to Improved Access.***

***Empowering marginalised communities:*** CRSD is a rights based organisation, established in 1991 with the purpose of empowering the rural poor to organise themselves and access their rights. CRSD's model of facilitating community organisation as well as carrying out development interventions provides a cohesive perspective rooted in a rights-based approach that encourages participation and local leadership. The process of empowering the rural poor around the right to water is an important area for CRSD.

With a population of over one billion, India is well known for being the largest democratic country in the world. The primary responsibility of providing drinking water and sanitation facilities in the country rests with state governments. With the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Constitution the local governing bodies have a role in provision of drinking water. Although the government has made inroads in providing drinking water over recent years, there are reports that some areas previously fully supplied with clean water have now partially or totally lost access, due to the water source going dry through lowering of the ground water table or the quality becoming adversely affected.

***Legal recognition of the right to water and sanitation:*** A basis for a right to water can be found in the Indian Constitution (1950) under the fundamental right to life. Whilst India has recognized the right to water and sanitation by signing the agreement on the Economic, Social and Cultural rights (UN General Comment 15), and has supported a range of political declarations, it has yet to be implemented to the fullest extent.

***Problems faced by communities:*** CRSD works in villages in Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, South India. The region is semi-arid region, with very low annual rainfall of about 540mm. Due to the overexploitation of groundwater for irrigation purposes since the 1970s, there is an acute water shortage in the summer. Drinking water hand pumps dry up and become defunct from lack of maintenance. Women, who are the primary water collectors, can spend up to six hours fetching water, travelling to distant farms where there are irrigation bore wells fitted with electric motors. They may also have to go at irregular times, due to the erratic nature of the state-controlled electricity supply and its unpredictable power cuts.

After initially working with both sexes, CRSD took the strategic decision to work intensively with women on gender issues. There was a feeling that women should be organised first and that men could join the federation later, due to the far greater time and effort needed to start bringing women together and breaking the culture of silence.

***Interventions and lessons learned:*** Women were selected from the community and took part in regular advocacy and human rights training, so that they could become effective change agents. Women were educated about their right to water and the role of the government machinery and the elected representatives. For this coaching and nurturing of leaders to be truly effective and have a significant impact on capacity, it may need to be extended for at least five years.

The selected women built women's groups in the villages, conducted meetings to create consciousness about women's issues and facilitated analysis of what solutions or strategies could help improve their lives. The issue of lack of access to safe drinking water came up as an important issue. The women's groups and CRSD came to a common understanding that it is the constitutional obligation of the state to provide an adequate quantity of drinking water to its citizens and to protect water resources, which are common goods. From a human rights perspective, the state is duty bound to protect and enable citizens to enjoy their rights. Any policy of the state that jeopardises the ability of the citizens to realise their fundamental rights amounts to the violation of their rights.

Workshops were organised with the Panchayatraj Rural Water Supply Department officials and community leaders to familiarise communities with services provided and to help make the department more responsive. Networking with community leaders, other community-based organisations, youth leaders, likeminded NGOs, academics, politicians and sympathetic civil servants was essential to garner a support base for the issues at stake. Using the media for advocacy proved to be effective, as decision-makers and politicians usually follow local newspapers closely, and they then pressurized the department to respond and take corrective measures. It is well-known that the issue of water represents maximum social capital to be converted into votes for the politician. The election year was an important time when elected representatives and political parties vied with each other to exhibit their concern for the poor. Many of the pending issues brought up at this time were resolved much faster than otherwise.

Small but strong units of organised people are more effective and sustainable than large formal networks which can break up easily, as CRSD's past experience has shown. It is important to constantly review the successes, failures or changes in internal or external environment in order to take corrective measures promptly.

Large meetings, such as World Water Day and International Women's Day, were used to mobilise women on rights issues, including that of water. Rallies and peaceful demonstrations were held to demand for rights. Women felt confident in large numbers and developed a sense of solidarity and strength.

**Outcomes:**

- The time taken by women to collect water has reduced by an average of 20%.
- With the increased mobility of women to participate in training, meetings and advocacy, their ability to be articulate and represent an issue has improved, and they have used the same tactics for alleviating poverty in other ways.
- In some homes, men have begun to help out with household chores when women go out to attend meetings. Men are slowly beginning to accept the new leadership roles of women and the priority that the state government is giving to women.
- Most importantly, the Rural Water Supply Department is more responsive and accountable to empowered communities and its quality of service has improved.

**Future plans:** This experience of the rights-based approach and building networks to advocate and lobby the government to ensure the right to water for *dalits* (lower caste groups) and the poor has been a success. CRSD now plans to work in a larger area, with a population of more than 200.000 in 182 villages, and to share this experience of empowering *dalits* and the poor around the right to water through the Andhra Pradesh Freshwater Action Network.

Advocacy work with politicians across party lines is another promising avenue, through providing a database of information to raise the issues in the legislative assembly. Establishing a positive working relationship with government departments is a good first step.

Educational material on the right to water and sanitation for use as an advocacy tool and for training and empowering leaders is lacking. In general, the water and sanitation sector has much to learn from peoples' movements on strategies for empowering the poor.

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