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On a Winning Path



Bottoms up – with water!



Women walk less for water from a solar-powered pump WOTR set up

An NGO involves local communities to establish save-and-use models

Kheda Bagdunda village in Rajasthan's Udaipur district. The Government Primary School. Children's laughter and shouts of excitement. Two girls play on a seesaw, two boys on another – competing to see which pair can jump up and down faster. At a tap nearby, a boy cups his hand to drink water, with two girls awaiting their turn.

The seesaws are connected to a hand-pump installed by the government just outside the school wall. The brainchild of a field worker of Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR), they make sure that an overhead tank gets filled, while the children are having fun.

"They come and play here not only during their break, but even after school hours," explains Gyanprakash Berwal, head, WOTR, Rajasthan. "They have also planted saplings – each child waters and cares for one, which is labelled with her or his name."

And so, children in villages learn the importance of water – that, obviously, is the best way to make sure that the conservation of this precious life-giving resource becomes ingrained in everyone's way of life.

Different strokes for different folks – and cultures: WOTR, which was co-founded 25 years ago in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra by a Swiss Jesuit priest, Fr Hermann Bacher and Crispino Lobo, takes this awareness down to ground level in various ways tailored to

the culture of each of the eight states around India where it now works.

Fr Bacher himself laid the foundation for this. A firm believer in community-led, participatory watershed development, he is remembered by villagers as having shouldered a pickaxe and strode up hills, even when he was in his 70s, to start digging and set an example to many reluctant farmers, when they complained that the soil was too hard to dig.

Good work

To those who accepted him, he laid down the law: *charaibandi* (a ban on open grazing), *kuradbandi* (ban on tree chopping) and *shramdaan* (contributing physical work). Not everyone listened. "Many of us went to Fr Bacher because we knew he had done good work at Darewadi," says Bhagwat Ghagare, who runs an electric motor rewinding business at Kumbharwadi in Ahmednagar district. "There was no vegetation on our hills, we had no water or work." Ghagare and a group of villagers went to Mhaswandi nearby for a three-day training programme. They liked the ideas to which they were exposed there, took these to heart, returned and convinced the whole village.

Fr Bacher's model of *shramdaan*, an important part of his approach, has a difference: the villagers are paid for their labour in project, while actual *shramdaan* of 20 per cent is their

contribution towards the total expenditure on a project. "As a result of this, we can usually execute double the work that is sanctioned by the funding agency," explains Romit Banerjee, head, operations, WOTR, Madhya Pradesh. "The villagers are proud of their substantial contribution."

The story is the same across the other seven states where WOTR works – even those to which it spread its activities after its co-founder left his adopted country and returned to Switzerland. "This has changed our lives!"

says Manikamma, a woman farmer in Mahboobnagar, Telangana, who pioneered the adoption of the scientific System of Rice Intensification (SRI) in her village. "I planted rice twice, and got much higher yields: seven bags of 50 kg each against only five using the conventional method. My inputs have also decreased, from four bags of DAP (Diammonium phosphate) fertiliser to just one bag."

"The success rate in large villages with a population of 1,000 and above is usually low – but it is 80 per cent in some of our villages!" says Crispino Lobo, programme co-ordinator, Indo-German Watershed Development Programme (IGWDP), from 1992 to 2001, and is the co-founder and managing trustee of WOTR.

Adds Marcella D'Souza, executive director, WOTR, who has led the establishment of the WOTR Centre for Resilience Studies (W-CRES), where she leads the multi-disciplinary research work: "We moved on from watershed development to water management, with a ridge-to-valley approach. This is the only method that ensures sustainability. Then comes agriculture management including micro-irrigation. All the work is bottom-up, to support what comes from the top. The individual's mission must fit into the institution's vision."

The organisation and the people working in and with it are bringing to life its co-founder Fr Bacher's words: "Without watershed development, there is no solution to drought" and "If water is the problem; then WOTR is the solution."

♦ SEKHAR SESHAN

sekharseshan@businessindia.com