

Watershed Management & Mismanagement: Examples from India & Kenya

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Two very different approaches to rural watershed management in Kenya and India have produced sharply contrasting results.

In a Kenya community, the Oriema Gully project was organized more than 20 years ago. However, a recent visit by a local NGO representative sponsored by the IECA SOIL Fund revealed that watershed management has been ineffective. Poor decisions include establishment of eucalyptus plantations and subdivision of farms into smaller units making sustainable farming uneconomical. Community members are unwilling to take collective responsibility for addressing land degradation and instead blame it on people farming and living next to gullies. Consequently, this once fertile area has sunk into poverty with both farming and fishing becoming increasingly unprofitable.

In two Indian villages, members of Rotary International from Mumbai by-passed government bureaucracy to help a motivated community. Rotarians took a “watershed management” approach helping local people control erosion by constructing “low-tech” check dams, planting trees to furnish a sustainable timber supply, and promoting groundwater recharge using infiltration trenches. As a result, groundwater levels rose, eliminating the need for women to haul drinking water long distances, providing excess water to use for irrigated gardens, and freeing women for other economic and educational activities. Central to success of this program has been involvement of local women in decision making.

A comparison of approaches to addressing landscape degradation in these two areas illustrates the importance of community involvement and cooperation as well as technical support by professionals who understand low-cost, low-tech, and sustainable methods of watershed management.