



Bringing the Periphery to the Centre

*Evolving a 'Rule of Law' in Mahewa
Gorakhpur City*



In 1992, following the 74th Amendment to the Constitution, India statutorily sanctioned the involvement of its urban citizens in planning their future and improving their present. But in real terms it meant the citizens cast votes, elect corporators once in five years, and development needs, priorities and goals are forgotten till the next elections. Citizens' rights become secondary to the whims and fancies of the elected. In effect a top down approach to development masquerades as a 'bottom up' approach, alienating and marginalising further the excluded. Governance, and all that goes with it, accountability, transparency and process ownership, gets reduced to being a paper tiger. The rule of law that is so critical for the establishment of good governance becomes an instrument in the hands of the elite, who seek conformity and acquiescence in the name of participation that at best is passive.

But in Mahewa ward of Gorakhpur city, the Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group (GEAG) has actually started planning from below to not only improve the situation of the people but also empower them. At the core of this lies an attempt to initiate good governance by establishing the rule of law through a unique process. Through this effort, the future of the city too is sought to be safeguarded through proactive measures to build resilience to climate change.

The initiative "Urban Community Based Micro Resilience Model of Ward exposed to Climate and Hydro-Meteorological risks" is supported by the Rockefeller Foundation under the Asian cities climate change resilience network (ACCCRN). GEAG has involved the residence of Mahewa in an unique experiment.

Mahewa: Gorakhpur's Mirror Image

Land sharks rule the roost in Mahewa, one of the 70 wards of Gorakhpur City. 50 percent of its 1200 households are Nishads (SC) whose traditional occupation once upon a time was fishing. Says Indrawati Nishad, 40, "My forefathers used to fish in the river Rapti but fisher-folk need rice too. Gradually they started cultivating the land around this area under a variety of tenures. Cultivation soon became the primary occupation of the Nishads."

Mahewa is Gorakhpur in a microcosm. Of its 2.4 sq km area, only 10 percent is cultivated. Another 40 percent comprise guava orchards. The rest is a congested urban sprawl devoid of basic amenities like street lighting and piped water, schools, roads, and health care facilities. Sanitation is abominable, with open defecation being the norm and the sullage from the homes spewing out into the lanes and pigs competing with dogs as scavengers. Mahewa is also a dumping ground for the city's garbage. Stray cattle graze the garbage. Illicit liquor brewing provides livelihoods to 30 per cent households.

The agriculturists, small and marginal farmers, are pressurised the most by the realtors. They don't get remunerative prices for the seasonal vegetables they grow, their produce being pest-ridden since untreated sewage water is used for irrigation. High doses of expensive synthetic fertiliser and pesticides are used.

Most of Mahewa is submerged in the monsoons. The embankment to protect the city from the ravages of the Rapti bifurcates the ward accentuating the misery of its residents. Moderately heavy monsoonal outbursts inundate the ward's eastern half. The western half is flooded by the Rapti, the water receding only after the rains. This inundation scenario has shaped the agricultural other livelihood pursuits of the people. During the rains water logging compels people to seek wage-work in the nearby wholesale market. Ramdin, 45, holder of six decimals land said they preferred wage labour to agriculture during the monsoons as the silt brought by the floods enhances the soil nutrients and increases the productivity of the winter (Rabi) vegetables. He didn't want to grow water resistant crops during the monsoons.





Objectives

A live learning model of a climate resilient urban community within a city will be developed. The lessons from the Mahewa experience will be replicated in other wards of Gorakhpur and the government will be persuaded to integrate climate resilience in the overall development planning process.

Approach

A multi-tiered approach based on participatory micro-planning to build resilience, addressing capacities for absorbing shocks and stresses through direct intervention at the individual, household, neighbourhood cluster and ward, will be adopted. This would be shared across other wards of the city, strengthening the argument for planning from below.

Inclusion of current data on climate trends and change scenarios would ensure that community's priorities and needs, and the current scientific information are reflected in the planned interventions.

At the household level, a differential strategy will address diversities in occupations, incomes, family size and other socio-economic characteristics. Education and awareness on integrated farming, waste management and flood resilient construction will be imparted to the households especially women and children. Community groups would be mobilised around health, sanitation, drainage, drinking water and micro-credit.

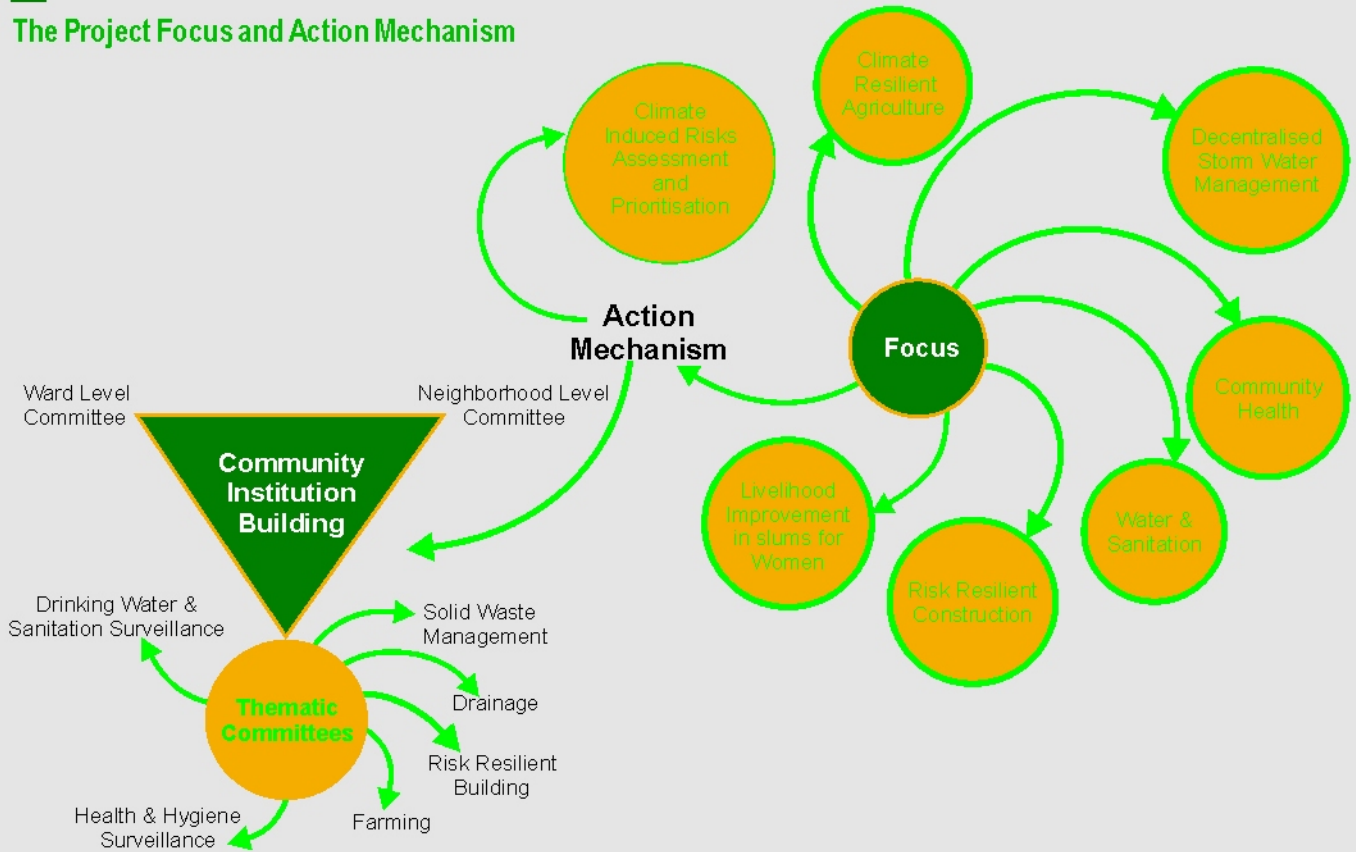
The ward committee will be persuaded to address issues like provision and maintenance of municipal services and conservation of natural water bodies. They will be the nodal points for climate scientists and city planning experts to establish relationships and an on-going involvement in planning from the start of the program. An active real time surveillance system and a grievance redressal mechanism coordinated by a ward liaison centre will be instituted.

Organisations like ARUP, ISET and SEEDS India will contribute to the planning, assessing, designing and piloting demonstration models for upgraded housing, sanitation, drainage and water conservation. Solutions developed will be decentralised so that risks are not transferred elsewhere in the city.

In project management and coordination, GEAG's strength of adopting innovative people sensitive approach would be leveraged for mobilising community institutions, supported by an active information gathering, documentation and dissemination process along with ISET's expertise in planning and communicating climate information. The climate scenarios for Gorakhpur already generated by ISET would be expanded to facilitate the interventions.

Overall, it is expected that at the end of three years micro planning mechanisms will be established in Gorakhpur. These will strengthen its resilience against impact of extreme climate events. Gender will be a cross-cutting theme throughout the project and in all the activities.

The Project Focus and Action Mechanism



The uniqueness of the project lies in the adoption of approach and methodology in local level resilient building to make the system responsive and accountable. Appropriate democratic community institutions will be developed by the people themselves, with GEAG acting as a facilitator. They will formulate their own rules and codes of conduct, thereby establishing a rule of law in their own lives in a scenario where the establishment has failed to do so. In doing so, the Nishads of Mahewa will be telling the officialdom of Gorakhpur and the citizens of the world that the poor are the best managers of their environment if they are empowered to do so as their lives depend on it, something that the late Elinor Ostrom had repeatedly stressed in her works.



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