

NOTE

WORLD BANK 'SERVES' Bharti Patel writes :

For years, loans from World Bank have been used to fund India's infrastructural projects to include road and dam construction and watershed management. But despite the enormous expenditure on every project, there is a growing body of evidence and disappointment in the outcome of these projects and its ultimate impact on India's community and environment. A recent exposure of one such project in Tamil Nadu adds to the evidence. The project, 'Irrigation Agriculture Modernization and Water bodies Restoration and Management' (IAMW-ARM) is in Pudukottai where the tank rejuvenation work is carried out with a loan from the World Bank of Rs 2,457 Cr/US \$556 million.

Standing on one of the newly restored tank bunds, this correspondent could see the cracks and feel the bund crumbling under the feet. On speaking to the local community it was clear that there was a feeling of alienation from the project, and anger among the farmer community as it directly affected their livelihoods. "I am not able to sow this year as the work undertaken on the bund and sluice gate has diverted water away from my farm," said one farmer.

Everywhere in the region the story from the community was the same. Every tank bund had a notice board detailing the cost and duration of the project. Financial assistance from the World Bank was clearly stipulated (ranging between Rs 18 lakhs to Rs 56 lakhs per tank); but little awareness campaign amongst the local community on the project proposal or activities to be undertaken. More importantly, there was no involvement of the local community in the rejuvenation of tanks that rightly belonged to them. The main contractor for the project and labour were from the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh; a factor that created conflict and mistrust in the local community.

Concerns were raised on the unscientific and haphazard approach to the repair and rejuvenation work. This included water being diverted away from farm land and directly into the sea, as well as to the wrong approach to bunding, which would further damage the local ecology.

There was consensus among the communities and the governments that the physical condition of many tanks in India is rapidly deteriorating and investment for repair and maintenance of the tanks is necessary. The question, however, is why such a huge loan from the World Bank when rejuvenation and repair can be carried out at a fraction of the cost according to community experience.

The recent Independent People's Tribunal consisting of prominent Indian and international jurists, scientists, retired government officials, and social and religious leaders, met at the Jawaharlal Nehru University and took evidence from affected communities, expert witnesses, and testimonies from over 40 concerned groups to evaluate the impact of the World Bank across 26 sectors of social and economic development in India. The panel, in its report of September 2008, found the institution guilty of environmental destruction and lowering the standard of living for most Indians. Charges in the final report included the "failure of the World Bank in its mission to reduce poverty, advocacy of policies which contribute to increased hunger, contributing to the agricultural crisis..."

IAMWARM in Tamil Nadu will leave the local community in the cold and in further debt unless the community and local stakeholders take direct responsibility for the protection of their local resources. □□□