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Is Participatory Watershed Development Building Local Adaptive Capacity? Findings from a Case Study in Rajasthan, India

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Abstract

Watershed development has emerged as a crucial intervention to strengthen natural resource-based livelihoods in semi-arid areas in India. It has evolved from an infrastructure-heavy, top-down approach, into an increasingly participatory process aimed at building rural adaptive capacity to deal with climate change and other risks such as water scarcity and natural resource degradation. However, the efficacy of watershed development initiatives in building local adaptive capacity has not matched intention, and farmers remain exposed to unpredictable water supply. Against this backdrop of inadequate alignment between policy intention and outcomes, this paper examines whether participatory watershed development, as it is currently implemented, contributes to building farmer adaptive capacity. A case study of a watershed project in southern Rajasthan is used as an illustrative example. The findings demonstrate that watershed interventions focussed on hard adaptation options such as building check dams without a matching emphasis on using soft adaptation approaches such as building inclusive institutions or incentivising sustainable resource use. In practice, community participation often reinforced existing power and gender- and caste-based hierarchies, raising

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