

# **WATER GOVERNANCE REFORMS: A CASE OF WOMEN AS GUARDIANS**

## **(1)Introduction**

Water scarcity is an increasingly urgent challenge to the developing world which needs politicians and policy makers to develop some enthusiasm for reforming the water sector. There are millions of local water crises largely borne out of a distribution of water, of knowledge, of resources and of managing the local water resources as well as needs. Unless all people from the individual households particularly women, farmers and industrialists of urban and rural communities, are involved, making water management everybody's business, it will be difficult to manage the looming water crises

In this context, a new governance paradigm is needed to meet the challenge of feeding the growing population especially in Asia. Governments lack incentives to implement the reforms necessary to ensure more productive and equitable use of water. Developing appropriate market-based incentives is vital to reform the water sector in which water has to be seen as something that can be valued and ultimately priced. A participatory water management paradigm will go beyond the reach of the large state owned mega -water supply systems as agriculture and survival of the world's most fragile eco-systems are still served by community based water systems in the developing world.

When considering the Mahatma Gandhi's viewpoint “ **We must think of last man when planning**” in the case of water, not only the last man-who is usually a woman can contribute a lot for the water management with suitable empowerment efforts. Moreover, water pollution has become a serious problem especially for the developing world. Growing population, agricultural modernization, industrialization and urbanization are sources polluting the water bodies which create serious unaffordable health problems mainly for the developing countries. The growing ground water pollution is also serious threat mainly for the rural communities as it is the most important source of drinking water .The fight against water pollution is an issue which demands people's participation and create a water conserving culture in which women can play an impressive role(CATCH WATER, 1999).

Therefore, in order to improve overall system efficiency in the water sector, a strategy is necessary to involve tail-end users through an institutional mechanism based on democratic principles through participatory approach.

## **(2) Women in Development**

Women's contribution to the economy, both informal and formal sections are multiple as they play diverse roles as mothers and workers. But only 1% of the world's assets are in the name of women and 71 % of people in abject poverty (living less than \$1 per day) are women. Two-thirds of the 876 million illiterate adults worldwide are women. More than the three-quarters of the world's 27 million refugees are women and children.

In Sri lankaan context, women's involvement in the top decision making level is less than five per cent and at provincial level less than two percent. However, there is a high level of literacy rate which accounts for 89 % in 2009 and level of education on the part of women in Sri Lanka. But women's participation in labor force is 33.2% compared to men's accounts for 68.1 percent including a serious demographic gap. This situation demonstrates the necessasity of reforms and redesigning of development policy to encourage the women's participation in the sphere of development.. In this context, empowerment of women, especially the poor, enables to take more control over their lives, secure a better livelihood with ownership and control of productive assets including water(Dept of Statistics, 2003, eu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory\_rural appraisal, 7/30/07).

Informed multi-stakeholder negotiations are needed to make decisions on water use and allocations. Civil society and the private sector are important actors in water management but the state is the critical driver. The reforms must take into account the history, culture; environment and vested interests that shape the scope of institutional change pertaining to water management (Water Front, 2007).It can be said that many solutions may need some adaptation to the local situation. In this context, women can play a pivotal role in a constructive manner as end users of water.

### **(3) What are the benefits of Participatory Approaches?**

Participation is a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions as well as resources. The need for stakeholder ownership has been well established in the development agenda. The essence of ownership is that the recipients drive the planning, the design, the implementation, the monitoring as well as the evaluation of the project. Thus the participative methods are meant to generate a sense of ownership of decisions and actions.

Participatory approaches are useful particularly in providing feed back to policy makers. By giving access to resources and a guarantee that they will share fully in the benefits of their efforts, the poor become more receptive to new technologies as well as services and achieve higher level of production and income. By participation, poor also contribute their knowledge of local conditions, facilitating the diagnosis of environmental, social and institutional constraints as well as for finding solutions while reducing costs. ([www.sanicon.net/topicintro.php3?topicid=23](http://www.sanicon.net/topicintro.php3?topicid=23), participatory Approaches, 7/29/2007)

The limited size and informal nature of small groups is suitable to the poor's limited organizational experience and low literacy levels. In addition, the small group environment is ideal not only for the mutual understanding and trust building but also for the diffusion of collective decision making and leadership skills which can be used in the subsequent development of inter-group federations.

Moreover, participatory approaches provide opportunities for the poor to contribute constructively to development, which leads to increase self-reliance among poor and the establishment of a network of self-sustaining rural organizations, which contribute for :

- the greater efficiency of development services
- stimulation of economic growth in rural areas
- broadening of domestic markets
- promoting balanced national development

However, there are potential pitfalls in implementing participatory approaches because engaging the poor is generally a far more difficult task than engaging the more powerful stakeholder groups. On the other hand the implementing agency, should be prepared to accept a loss of power, listen actively, and to cede control to the community.

.([www.sanicon.net/topicintro.php3?topicId=23](http://www.sanicon.net/topicintro.php3?topicId=23), Participatory Approaches, 7/29/2007),  
(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/participatory-rural-appraisal 7/30/2007))

#### **(4) The Concept of Good Governance**

Governance is the process of decision making and the process by which decisions are implemented. Except the government, there are various actors involved in governance vary depending on the level of government that is under discussion.

In rural areas other actors may involve influential leaders, associations of peasant farmers, co-operatives, NGOs, research institutes, religious leaders, finance institutions and political parties etc.

There are eight major characteristics of good governance

- participatory
- consensus oriented
- accountable
- transparent
- responsive
- effective & efficient
- equitable & inclusive
- follows the rule of law

Participation by both women and men is a key corner stone. Participation needs to be informed and organized with freedom of association and expression on one hand and an organized civil society on the other hand. Transparency indicates that decisions taken and their enforcement are done in a manner that follows rules and regulations. Information is freely available and directly accessible to those who will be affected by such decisions and their enforcement. Equity and inclusiveness requires all groups, but particularly the most vulnerable to have opportunities to improve or maintain their wellbeing. Effectiveness and efficiency involves processes and institutions produce results that meets the needs of society while making the best use of resources at their disposal. Accountability is a key requirement of good governance which cannot be enforced without transparency and the rule of law. In general an organization

or an institution is accountable to those who will be affected by its decisions or actions.

In order to ensure sustainable human development, action must be taken to work towards the principles of good governance with the aim of making it a reality (Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration, 2007)

## **(5) A case study from Sri Lanka**

### **5.1 About Sri Lanka**

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is primarily an agricultural country having a 20 million of population with 52% women. The island country, Sri Lanka in Indian Ocean gained independence on 4<sup>th</sup> February, 1948. Its commercial capital is Colombo and the administrative capital is Sri Jayawardanapura with a tropical climate. There are several ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, Sinhalese makes up to 74%, Tamils 18%, Muslims 7% and others 1%. The four main religions are Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity ([www.asiarooms.com](http://www.asiarooms.com), Sri Lanka overview,09/01/10)

Sri Lanka's social-indicators are above the other developing countries in the South Asia as an outcome of free education commenced in 1945 and the free health services of the government. Sri Lanka achieves almost universal primary education. Life expectancy has increased up to 71 years and infant mortality rate is only 11.2 percent for 10,000 live births.

- Literacy rate is 92.5%
- Female literacy rate is 90.6 %
- Un employment Rate is 6.3% (2003/04)
- Labour force participation of female is 24.9% (2003/04)  
([www.cbsl.lk/cbsl/CBS-KSE-11953](http://www.cbsl.lk/cbsl/CBS-KSE-11953), 09/01/10)

Sri Lanka suffered for almost three decades of destruction from LTTE lead terrorism which was ended in May, 2009, militarily. Resettling of internally displaced persons of estimated 280,000 and preventing a resurgence of terrorism are major challenges. Mega development projects to reconstruct the war ravaged Northern & Eastern regions are underway with high priority. Demining and resettlement of IDPs as well as rehabilitation of terrorism involved youth are taking place (Jamal Afridi, Asia Society on line, 24/09/09)

### **5.2 What is a Cooperative Society?**

Cooperation means working together. At the primary level, a cooperative is a voluntary association of individuals who have similar economic needs, seeking to satisfy them through a common undertaking on the basis of democracy and self-help. Cooperation is a very adaptable instrument and it is one economic method that applies in all circumstances. There are six principles of cooperation as prescribed by the International Cooperative Alliance:

- I **Open & Voluntary membership** which is one of the elementary principles of cooperation which implies that membership in a cooperative society is open to all without discrimination on cast, creed, race, religion or sex.
- II **Democratic Control**
- III **Limited Interest & Share Capital**
- IV **Equitable distribution of surplus**
- V **Cooperative Education**
- VI **Cooperation among cooperatives**  
(Weeraman,1975,p.6,A.F.Laidlaw et al,1970,p.142)

## **WOMENS' COOP LOGO**



### **5.3 Women's Development Services Cooperative Society Ltd (Women's Cooperative Bank)**

The case study reveals small scale achievements of the poor women members of the “Women's Development Services Cooperative Society “ popularly known as Women's Cooperative Bank, through an innocent efforts of their own on the basis of helping poor by poor without depending on the government for assistance.

In 1989, economically and socially depressed poor women of the two urban shanty settlements ( Gajabapura, and Sri Siddarthapura ) in the Colombo

District, organized as Small Women's Groups consist of 10-15 members with an initial savings of Rs: 05/= per week.. These women members through constant dialogue, among themselves lead to develop confidence and understanding which contribute to help each other for their day to day needs. Subsequently, this organization started growing rapidly among Speer groups and registered in 1991 as a Cooperative society under the Cooperative Act No 5 of 1972 governed by the Commissioner of Cooperative Development. Though the Women's Coop started its work firstly in Colombo District based on participatory development processes, during the past twenty years, this cooperative has spread in 18 districts having 200 branches,(Fig:1-A+01-B) exceeding 70,000 women members. The structure of the Women's Coop is demonstrated in Fig: 2.(Women's Coop. 2008/2009)

**Fig. 01-A**

### **Spread of Women's COOP branches in Sri Lanka**

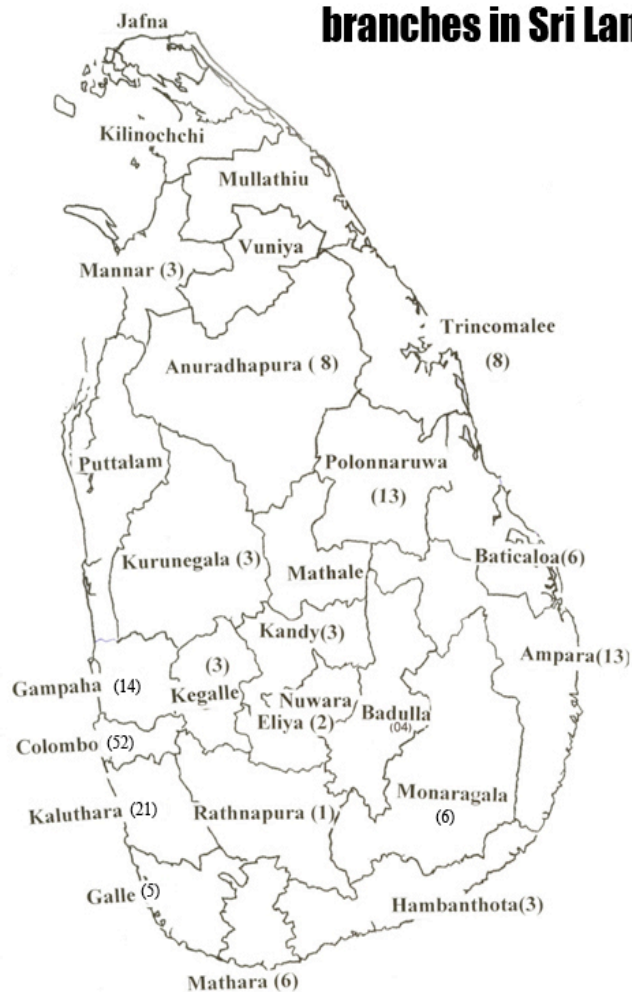


Fig. 01-B

**DECENTRALIZATION OF THE BRANCHES OF WOMEN'S COOP**

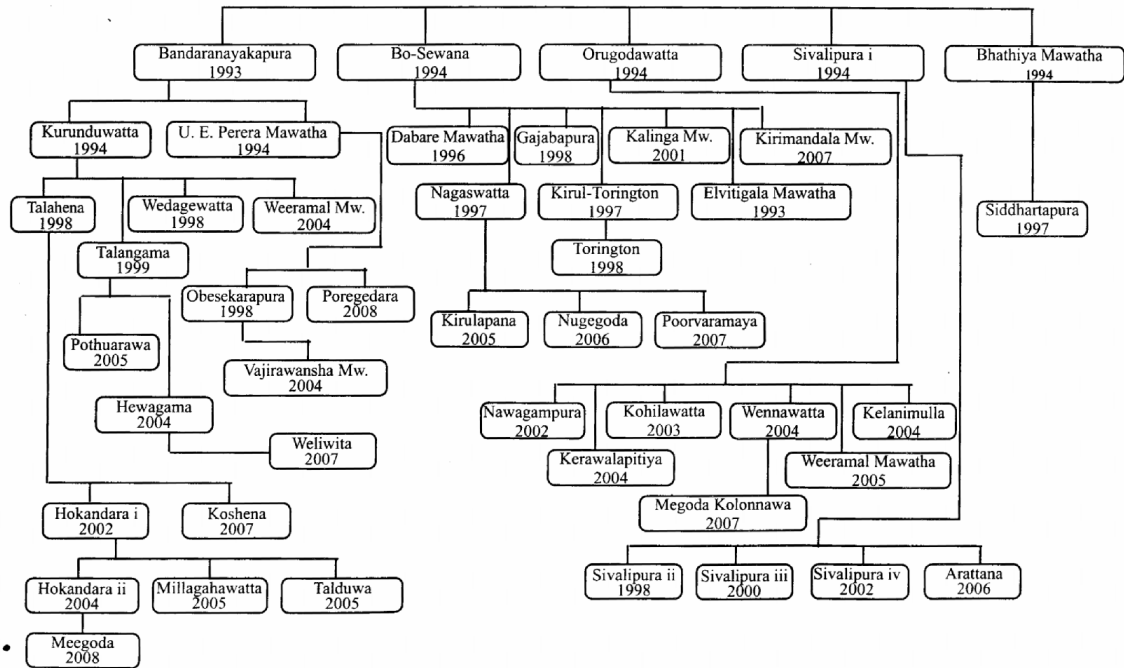
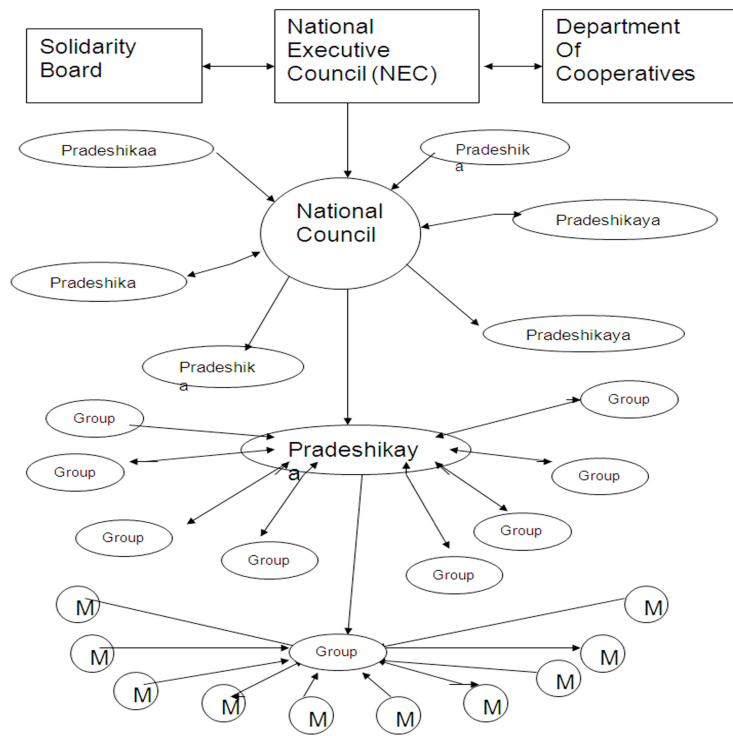


Fig. 02

**Structure of Women's COOP**



**Pradeshikay= Primary Branch**

Though, it started with a very small deposit of money, the current asset exceeds 1.1 billion Rupees. The specialty of the Women's Coop is supplying loans for all and every purpose big or small in member families, based on their mutual understanding and confidence developed. Their loan procedure is based on easy payment terms instead of traditional interest systems, depending on the understanding of members of the Women's group. As a result, these women are not confronted with collateral problem as needed by the commercial banks. Women Coop is a leading community banking system in Sri Lanka which is owned and managed by women coming from very poor urban and rural communities. They don't depend on traditional managers and all services are provided by the women members themselves who improve their skills through various training programmes conducted by the society. It is engaged in a mission to put the resources, ideas and support of its own members to raise their socio-economic and cultural status on the principle of self-help and mutual help engulfed with transparency and accountability.

The prominent factor of this society is organized dedication of its members with mutual understanding, which paved the way for its success. Experience of a social democratic atmosphere is of great importance for the practical, collective planning and activities of the downtrodden poor women uniting with their own people

The Women Coop teaches how to handle financial transactions efficiently for the low income women who are deprived of formal education and all privileges of the society, which is a great challenge. Women in deprived category have been joining the Women's Coop movement day by day because of its success in helping the poor women at the grassroots level, covering all the needs of the women members including **health, education, credit needs, shelter, skill development for self-employment, food** requirements covering all basic needs as well as **social security**(Women's Coop, 2007/2008)

The important feature is the entire organization is managed by the members themselves following the co-operative and good governance principles **without any political and bureaucratic intervention**. The structure of the Women's Coop is demonstrated in Fig:3 which shows the **democratic nature of the institutional network** from the grassroots level to the national level.

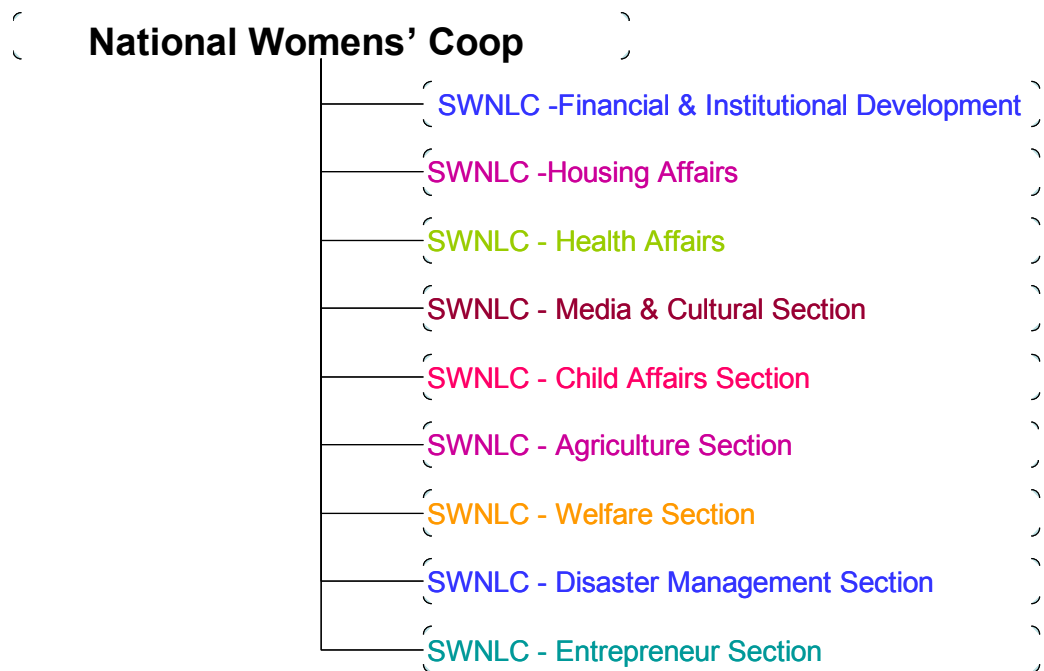
**Auditing unit** is the powerful guardian of the Women's Coop which comprises of three tiers. The first tier is the **Internal Auditing Unit** and it attends auditing inside the Primary Branches themselves. In addition, there is a Shadow Auditing group which is a primary auditing group who undergo practical training to work on books and ledgers including the regulatory framework in their own Primary branch. Then they should participate in the Training classes conducted by the Women's Coop and sit for an auditing examination conducted by the Examination unit of the Women's Coop. Subsequently, the successful members are promoted to the **District Auditing Unit** in addition to their auditing of the respective branches. After one year's training, these members will have to sit for an examination to be eligible to become members of the upper tier of the auditing "**Central Auditing Team**" of the Women's Coop. Then they are liable to audit any Primary Branch of any district in the country and depending upon their capacities and dedication, they



get opportunities to join the Auditing section/Training Section/Examination Section of the Women's Coop. **The three tiers of the Auditing Unit is the decisive factor regarding the Women's Coop's strength, protection and progression.**

Women's coop with its speedy development and increasing membership during the past two decades, the structure has been broadened by establishing separate national level council for each subject as follows:

- \* **Financial & Institutional Development** (to expand membership, promote savings, coordination with branches, training and develop auditing process)
  - \* **Housing Affairs** (to collect information on housing needs of members, encourage members to open "Housing" Accounts for house construction, organize workshops and meetings to impart knowledge on house construction at national, district and local levels)
  - \* **Health Affairs** (to collect the health needs of the members, promote Health accounts and maintain them properly for health safety, impart knowledge to promote members hygiene through workshops , free health camps and meetings)
  - \* **Entrepreneur Section**(to collect necessary information entrepreneurial and consumption needs of the members, introduce new income sources, provide training and skills as well as capital, link urban and rural markets)
  - \* **Media & Cultural Section** (to collect information on media and cultural needs including resources of members, provide training for members on music, dancing, drama and fine arts etc, organize cultural events and exhibitions)
  - \* **Child Affairs section** (to collect information related to children of members, promote opening of Special Children's accounts for the benefit of their children, monitor school goers and dropouts and take necessary actions, provide education to members about welfare of children)
  - \* **Agriculture Section** (to collect all types of information on agriculture needs and resources of members, promote home gardening and usage of organic methods ,establish agriculture groups , launch surveys to identify problems promote collective actions, organize training to introduce new agricultural methods and tools, promote coordination among members)
  - \* **Welfare Section** ( to identify all welfare needs of the members, establish relationship with relevant government and Non Governmental institutions' to obtain assistance for the members, provide training for the community leaders)
  - \* **Disaster Management Section** (to organize training and education regarding all sorts of disaster management needs, plan and implement disaster preventive strategies, plan relief facilities in short term and long term, keep ready with necessary materials and support groups for any emergency in disastrous situations, exchange views and maintain relationship with the selected leaders)
- (Women's Coop, 2009)

**Fig .03****Subject-wise National Level Councils (SWNLC)**

### 5.3.1 How Coop Women function as Guardians of their Water Resources

The women's group located at the E zone, Seevalee pura, Colombo 08 in close proximity to the Head Quarters of the Women's Cooperative Society is managing their water requirements by constructing a big well through joint efforts following the principles of good health practices and supplying water needs to the door step of the group members in an economical manner on self-help basis. Not only the water needs of the 15-20 family members of the Seevaleepura Women's group but also the water requirements of Women's Coop Headquarters as well as visiting members are met through this joint project (Women's Coop, 2007/2008)

The water is used for drinking purposes, bathing and washing clothes while maintaining the cleanliness and hygienic conditions under the supervision of the Women's group. They maintain constant dialogue with the users to sustain the clean environment and the children of the area are entrusted with responsibilities pertaining to the protection of the water asset. They are educated on water usage as well as importance of clean water. This project has become an example for other Women's Groups as well. The Women's group maintains a Fund for the maintenance of the well involving all women member users. Because of their constant dialogue and education among member users, surroundings of the well are prevented from pollution.

In addition, the women members maintain the well as a sacred place and during New Year Festival Day, they collectively perform praying at the well on the auspicious time and this tradition has bonded them to maintain the cleanliness of the well as well as environment.

Similar type of water resource management projects have been implemented by the Coop Women's Groups in several other urban shanty settlement areas in the Colombo district causing no cost to the local authorities or the government.

In addition, in the Puttalam District which is in the dry zone and affected by the tsunami, women were confronted with acute shortage of water. The National Women's Coop intervened and provided initial capital to construct a common well and handed over to the newly organized Women's Coop branch with proper guidance as well as training. Women headed water users' understanding; training and education through constant dialogue with active participation have been the tools for the successful water resource management.

(National Women's Coop, 2010)

### 5.3.2 What are the Lessons Learned?

- \* The lessons learned are the benefits of practicing the principles of cooperative and good governance through participatory approach
- \* Economically and socially handicapped women should be empowered not only by financial capital but also with continuous guidance and education

- through an institutional net work starting from the grassroots level , involving them as owners and doers.
- \* The Women's Coop has been able to show the world that it is possible to make economic stability and partake many other benefits, even with a very small amount of saving under proper guidance.
  - \* Due to cooperative way of living, women members get together every occasion in a family both auspicious and inauspicious, to share their sorrow and happiness, leading to carefree lives.
  - \* Although the poor people are often distressed economically, educationally, hygienically, socially and culturally, poor women members of the Women's Coop have been compelled to take responsibilities of their organization and fulfill them under guidance, resulting social recognition.
  - \* Participation in decision making and implementation, correct guidance with proper training, democratic institutional support, mutual trust and confidence, transparency and accountability have proved to be effective tools in solving the socio-economic problems of the poor.
  - \* As water is an essential resource for the human existence and its limitations demand efficient system of management. Women as an influential end users of water, they can play a vital role as guardians of water if necessary facilities are given with correct guidance through democratic institutional support following the principles of good governance.
  - \* Cooperative system has been proved as democratic institutions engulfed with good governance principles, much suitable for the socio-economic development of the down trodden poor segment of the community. In this context, Women's Coop has set an example in demonstrating the strength determination, commitment and capacity of women in undertaking challenges of day to day living, successfully with minimum financial capital. Therefore, the water resources management which has become a global issue needs to be addressed properly considering these practical and successful experiences.

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