Irrigation projects of the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (PMKSY) may have taken the spotlight in the Prime Minister’s speech during Friday’s no-confidence motion debate in the Lok Sabha. However, a less well-known but vital component of that scheme is watershed development, which is lagging behind badly, according to a Parliamentary Standing Committee (PSC) report.

When the report was first tabled last July, not a single one of the 8,214 projects sanctioned between 2009 and 2015 at a cost of ₹ 50,740 crore had been completed, said the Standing Committee on Rural Development. In its response, the Department of Land Resources (DoLR) had updated that 849 projects in 11 States were completed by October 2017, but admitted that 1,257 projects had not even completed the initial step of preparing detailed project reports (DPRs) at that point, although no new projects were sanctioned after 2015-2016.

‘Lethargic’

Having taken into account the government’s response and action-taken report, the Committee submitted its final report to Parliament last week. Terming the pace of development of the scheme as “lethargic”, the Committee urged the DoLR to “go all out on a war footing scale for the expeditious completion of the remaining projects.”

What exactly is watershed development? “It’s all about making running water to stop and standing water to sink inside,” was the succinct definition offered by Dr. Ch Radhika Rani, who heads the Centre for Agrarian Studies at the National Institute for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR), an autonomous institution under the Ministry of Rural Development. “It is the only option for rainfed areas... for water conservation and recharge, and to prevent soil degradation.” Within the site of a watershed development project, a ridge is identified and structures such as check dams, percolation dams, ponds and channels are built from the ridge to the valley.

Projects take four to seven years to complete, according to the scheme’s guidelines. In the long-term, results are impressive, said a senior official of the Rural Development Ministry, pointing to a May 2018 evaluation study of MGNREGA’s (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) water and land management projects, a chunk of which are implemented in convergence with the PMKSY’s watershed component. About 78% of beneficiaries saw an increase in the water table, while 66% also reported benefiting from better availability of fodder, thanks to such water conservation works.
Unfortunately, such long-term results are “not immediately visible,” says Siraj Hussain, a former Agriculture Secretary and current fellow at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, explaining what he feels could be one reason for the slow pace of the PMKSY’s watershed management schemes. “You may not see a lot of concrete permanent structures. It’s not easy for States to claim visible success and impact, so there is a reluctance to provide resources.” He added that the 2016 change in funding patterns from a 90:10 Centre-State ratio to 60:40 had also contributed to a slowdown.

**Delays in coordination**

K. Krishna Reddy, Associate Professor, Centre for Natural Resource Management at the NIRD&PR, is responsible for training many of the State-level watershed development coordinators. “From 2015 onwards, this programme has been in convergence mode and that is the challenge on the ground,” he says, explaining the lag in implementation. Apart from DoLR and NREGA, the Ministries of Water Resources and Agriculture, including the Animal Husbandry and Fisheries departments, all play a role, and coordination on the ground takes time, he says.

“The idea of convergence is good but, in practice, government departments work in separate silos,” agrees Dr. Ch Radhika Rani. “Despite huge government investments, watershed development benefits are not becoming sustainable in the long-term because, while the physical structures may get built, the governance structures are missing.”

She explains that when the groundwater table increases as a result of watershed management projects, farmers in the area go for water-intensive crops like paddy and sugarcane and drain it again. “The government can implement a project through its agencies or through an NGO, but once they finish, who remains to sustain it?” If local Panchayati Raj leadership and watershed user associations are not strengthened and empowered, any benefits will be cyclical and short-term only, she warns.