

# Prospects of Using Social Mobilizers in the Management of Minor Irrigation Systems in Sri Lanka

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## INTRODUCTION

**THE HYDRAULICS CIVILIZATION** of Sri Lanka which dates back to the fifth century B.C., represents a unique combination of topographical and climatic features of the country and the cultural heritage of the earliest settlers from the Indus and Ganges villages of northern India. During the period of early settlement until the twelfth century, the agricultural society of Sri Lanka was characterized by high technology based on intricate irrigation systems geared to rainwater conservation and sound water-management practices.

A minor irrigation system, also known as village irrigation, has a command area up to 200 acres (80 hectares [ha]). In Sri Lanka, it is only the minor irrigation schemes that come under the category of farmer-managed irrigation systems, since medium and major irrigation schemes are generally agency-managed systems.

The decline of traditional management practices in minor irrigation schemes is the result of 1) the abandonment of the dry-zone tank culture begun in the twelfth century, 2) the abolition of customary laws (*sirith*) of irrigation management during colonial rule, and 3) the increased intervention by government and nongovernment organizations through numerous donor-funded projects since independence. With the different intervention strategies of the latter, water-user dependence on outside assistance has increased to such an extent that established maintenance and water-management practices are being neglected. Assistance programs should look into complementary and supplementary programs of operation and maintenance and water management to remedy this situation. Various strategies are now being implemented to restore farmer participation in the management of minor irrigation schemes in Sri Lanka.

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The main purpose of this paper is to consider the prospects of engaging social mobilizers, as those now serving in rural development projects, as catalysts to improve management practices of the minor irrigation schemes in Sri Lanka.

## **THE MINOR IRRIGATION SECTOR IN SRI LANKA**

### **Distribution and Assistance Strategies**

About a third of the total irrigated area in Sri Lanka is under minor irrigation. The total number of minor irrigation schemes identified is approximately 23,000 of which 13,000 are village tanks and 10,000 are anicuts or stream diversions according to estimates made by the Ministry of Lands and Land Development. It is also estimated that over 50 percent of these schemes are in working condition. The Department of Agrarian Services which is the authority responsible for minor irrigation in Sri Lanka found that there are about 8,500 operational tanks in the dry zone.

During the past two decades, the Government of Sri Lanka has made great efforts to improve the efficiency of operational schemes and to rehabilitate those abandoned, aiming at increasing the production of rice and other crops. Several bilateral and multilateral funding agencies have assisted the government to achieve this goal through the support of development projects called Village Integrated Rehabilitation Projects and District Integrated Rural Development Programs. Apart from these government projects, several government-related organizations and nongovernment organizations such as the Freedom from Hunger Campaign, the National Development Foundation, and international organizations including PLAN International and CARE, have funded minor irrigation rehabilitation in most of the dry-zone districts.

As mentioned earlier, farmer management of these minor schemes has deteriorated for historical and project-specific reasons. The different strategies of assistance to improve or rehabilitate minor schemes cannot by themselves bring about the anticipated socioeconomic changes unless farmers are involved in the process of restoration and management. The nongovernment organizations, more than the government, have identified and implemented some programs leading to beneficiary participation to overcome this problem.

### **Traditional Water Management**

The minor irrigation schemes have been traditionally owned by the water users, and through the long history of operation customary laws were developed with respect to irrigation with necessary modifications to suit local circumstances (Gunasekara, 1981). These customary laws emphasize individual responsibility for the commonly owned resource, and require active and equal participation in maintaining and repairing channels and the dam. They specify methods to ensure equity in water distribution during periods of normal and of limited water supply and define penalties for those neglecting their duties or infringing on the rights of others.

These irrigation laws reflect sound water-management practices and were established through experience over centuries. During the colonial period the rulers tried to revive these customary laws for better irrigation management. With increased government intervention to obtain higher farm output under irrigated agriculture, enforcement of some of these laws was transferred to officers or agencies. Water users, as a result, have become more dependent on external assistance for small repairs, maintenance, and management. Although there is some degree of sustainability in small operational tanks, traditional management practices should be gradually reintroduced to “new farmers” under the various rehabilitated minor schemes by outside agencies acting as change agents.

### **Problems in Minor Irrigation Management**

Because the aforementioned management practices have fallen into disuse the following problems have emerged, particularly in minor irrigation schemes:

1. Most farmers in recently refurbished minor schemes believe that the government owns the irrigation system and is responsible for ensuring its proper operation and maintenance.
2. Village-level irrigation leadership deteriorated due to the appointment of cultivation committee members on a political basis during the post-1970s.
3. Many minor schemes have been selected for refurbishment without consulting the existing or prospective water users, resulting in reduced efficiency of the system (i.e., more tanks in one catchment area results in less water in all tanks).
4. With the abolition of the *Vel-vidane* (Irrigation Headman) position and increased state intervention, farmers' participation in beneficiary meetings, operation and maintenance work, and timely cultivation has been reduced.

## **ROLE OF SOCIAL MOBILIZERS**

### **Change-Agent Program**

In the late 1970s, the Ministry of Rural Development implemented a development program for the rural poor, using volunteer change agents. The procedure of the Change-Agent Program is as follows: A group of rural development volunteers is selected and intensive training is given to the group in mobilizing rural people for problem identification and seeking solutions requiring only locally available resources. A trained officer is assigned to a village and he lives among the villagers. He starts by organizing small groups of people and mobilizing them to identify their problems along with their causes and possible solutions. In this process, the change agent uses his skills to help the deprived groups to think and act positively, and to obtain the fullest benefits from government and nongovernment assistance.

This is, however, a long and slow process. Several years are required for the change agent to win the confidence of the target groups and to change a negative-oriented group into a positive oriented one. Learning from this program, in **1985**, the Ministry of Plan Implementation adopted a different strategy for its District Integrated Rural Development Programs under the title of Social Mobilizer.

## **Social-Mobilizer Program**

Some of the activities of the Ministry of Rural Development were transferred to the Ministry of Plan Implementation in the early 1980s. The latter made use of the Rural Development Training and Research Institute in Colombo, to formulate the concept of a village-level catalyst termed social mobilizer, with the sole objective of channeling the development benefits of the District Integrated Rural Development Program to the rural poor. In transforming the change agents to social mobilizers the Ministry of Plan Implementation eliminated the **time-consuming** elements of the earlier Change-Agent Program. The changes made were as follows:

1. The social mobilizers are selected from within the area (same Grama-Sevaka division [village-administrative division] or adjoining division) to avoid the “outsider” feeling and **to assure** that he would be accepted by the communities concerned.
2. The social mobilizers are selected from voluntary organizations which have experience in rural and community development.
3. Insofar as it is possible, more women were selected. They made better contacts with beneficiary families, as woman-to-woman communication generally moves far and fast.
4. The social mobilizers were given initial training for one-to-two weeks and periodic on-the-job training in the form of one-day workshops each month at the District Integrated Rural Development Programs’ head office.
5. **Work** progress was reviewed every month at the office of the Assistant Government Agent **so** that social mobilizers were motivated to produce visible results.
6. Community-development programs identified by **social** mobilizers and in which the beneficiaries were involved were incorporated into a subproject of the District **Integrated Rural** Development Program so that funding and project implementation were not delayed.
7. Beneficiaries saw the results of the program within a short time resulting in a high degree of participation.

The social-mobilizer program focuses heavily on active participation of beneficiaries throughout the cycle of activities. The main elements of the program are: high confidence in the social mobilizer, self-reliance, active participation of all, a **positive** group attitude, sharing of experiences, and leadership building.

## Present Use of Social Mobilizers

The social-mobilizer program was first introduced to the Hambantota District Integrated Rural Development Program in 1985 and following this, to the Monaragala District Integrated Rural Development Program, under the Norwegian Agency for International Development funding. The purpose of the social-mobilizer program is to improve participation for local-level development, particularly among the poorer households.

Under the Hambantota District Integrated Rural Development Program, trained social mobilizers were appointed to a few villages (on a Grama-Sevaka-Division basis, to work with 100 to 150 families). They were entrusted with the functions and responsibilities listed below (Hewage and Karunaratne, 1987).

1. Establish close links with existing development-oriented, village-level organizations and officials.
2. **Carry** out socioeconomic surveys in the selected areas to identify locally available resources.
3. **Find ways and means of improving the productivity of the available** resources in project areas.
4. Identify services available from government and nongovernment organizations and improve the delivery system.
5. Pay special attention to deprived poorer groups in the development efforts.
6. Assist the Hambantota District Integrated **Rural** Development Program to implement its projects and encourage the members of target groups to form organizations to enhance institution-building capacity based on self-reliance.

After a review of the performance of the first social mobilizer program by the Norwegian Agency for International Development, in 1989, the expansion of the project into all areas of Hambantota district under the Hambantota District Integrated Rural Development Program was recommended. The review team was impressed with achievements in the main objective, i.e., mobilization of target groups for increased participation, with special attention to deprived poorer groups. The best performance was found in small farmers' groups, in women's groups, and in groups without income.

Although social mobilizers are not directly engaged in projects with rice farmers, they have helped in some places to organize small farmers to deal with their problems. For example, in Suriyawewa (North Hambantota) small groups of *chena* (slash-and-bum) farmers have been organized to rehabilitate tanks and to adopt improved farming practices. The social mobilizer program has recently been expanded to include other District Integrated Rural Development Program districts for organizing both lowland and upland small farmers.

## HOW TO USE SOCIAL MOBILIZERS IN MINOR-IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT

The social-mobilizer program has focused on rural development in general and on deprived social groups in particular. In this process some small farmers have also been organized. It would be possible to utilize social mobilizers as catalysts to reorganize farmers into coherent groups on the basis of minor irrigation schemes. The introduction of social mobilizers on a broad scale to deal with refurbished but poorly managed minor irrigation schemes would present the best alternative for dealing with the problems in this sector, with the following key points:

1. The social mobilizers should be selected from within fanner groups on a democratic basis in order to achieve a high degree of farmer participation. The selected social mobilizer should be a young farmer, or the son or daughter of a fanner, who is acceptable to all.
2. The social mobilizers should hold frequent meetings with fanners for awareness-raising, education, and for mobilization, to alter their attitudes of dependence on outside agencies and to increase their self-reliance.
3. The social mobilizers' mobilization of farmers and increased participation would lead to improved access to the services of government agencies.
4. With the systematic organization of fanner groups the efficiency and effectiveness of the farmer-managed irrigation systems would increase confidence in the social mobilizer and in the group and would lead to greater self-reliance.
5. The minor irrigation schemes in need of repairs or rehabilitation should be selected by farmers on a priority basis in order to exclude nonviable systems and to ensure sufficient water in the remaining tanks in a given catchment area.
6. The increased levels of participation would lead to timely operation and maintenance and to timely cultivation, resulting in proper water management and improved yields.
7. Paricipatory farmer organization would be reestablished as a result of the application of this approach resulting both in improved management and in the ability to channel outside assistance effectively without becoming dependent on such assistance.

## CONCLUSION

Owing to the disintegration of farmer organizations, the customary arrangements falling into disuse, and the increased dependence on outside agencies for management, the minor irrigation schemes can now rarely be called farmer-managed irrigation systems. To reverse this negative tendency, a social-mobilizer program such as the one described above which has had good results in the field of rural development could prove effective in catalyzing farmers to become organized. Using local youths trained as social mobilizers would permit implementation on a broad scale. With supplemental training in farmer-managed irrigation social mobilizers could assist farmers to develop sustainable management and to revitalize the concept of fanner-managed irrigation systems in minor irrigation in Sri Lanka.

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