

The Role for Social Sciences in IIMI's Mandate to Strengthen Institutions and Link Research to Policy

Douglas Merrey and Tissa Bandaragoda, IIMI

IIMI's mission is "to strengthen national efforts to improve and sustain the performance of irrigation systems through the development and dissemination of management innovations." Its main goals are to produce research results of regional or global significance, to strengthen national research capacities in irrigation management, and to strengthen national management organizations' capacity to improve performance through the adoption of research-based improvements. The social sciences are central to achieving IIMI's mandate: more than 40 percent of its internationally recruited staff members are social scientists.

IIMI's first strategy, published in 1988, emphasized the institution-building aspects of its work. This was consistent with the imperatives of IIMI's inception stage. Because roughly 80 percent of its funds were obtained through restricted projects, mostly bilateral sources in specific countries, much work was driven by donor and host country priorities, mediated and shaped by IIMI's own interests and capabilities. Dependence on this mode of

funding was an important factor in IIMI's inability to develop a longer-term research agenda of its own that transcended individual countries' interests.

Most of IIMI's work has addressed issues at the "main system level" of irrigation systems, not the on-farm level. Much of that work is focused on questions of canal water delivery performance; institutional and managerial factors affecting the planning and implementation of these deliveries; and farmer organizations and their relationship with external agencies, on both farmer-managed and government-managed systems. Most NARS do not address the kinds of management and institutional issues central to IIMI's program. In general, IIMI's research addresses farm-level water management. In most countries few, if any, national research organizations address multidisciplinary irrigation management issues above the farm level.

IIMI identified the irrigation management agencies, in whose systems it does research, as its primary clients. It measured its success in terms of its *impact* on these client agencies, many of whom have no history of research. IIMI has no laboratory or experimental facilities and therefore cannot be effective without full collaboration from partner agencies and farmers. Despite this, an important lesson has been that the research process is itself a powerful institution-building methodology. Through their active participation in research, management staff learn new methodologies and approaches. IIMI is experimenting with using applied research itself as an institution-building methodology that agency staff can continue to use after IIMI's withdrawal.

Initially, IIMI had explicitly excluded policy research. Early experiences, however, demonstrated the interdependence of management and policy, and it is now approached by IIMI in three ways: directly, through local operational issues, and by assisting in developing more effective processes for linking research and policy.

In Sri Lanka this process of linking research and policies has been carried further through a unique irrigation management policy support activity. Through this highly participatory project, IIMI assisted Sri Lankans to develop, elaborate, and make operational its participatory management policy for irrigation management. A decade of experimentation and research by various organizations in Sri Lanka provided a basis for these procedures.

For a two-year period, IIMI worked with its Sri Lankan colleagues to develop ten policy papers, combining the analysis of results of past research, discussions of the lessons learned, and options for the future. This approach led to consensus and confirmation of the recommendations by senior policymakers. This participatory method of policy development has potential for other countries.

IIMI has concluded that sustainable institutions are as important to development as sustaining natural resources. A prerequisite for this is organizational and institutional strengthening and reform. This requires putting appropriate policies in place and gaining a

commitment to their implementation. Policies too often reflect a balance among various vested interests, with the establishment seeking the status quo.