

THE WEW-SABHA AND PEOPLES PARTICIPATION IN SMALL IRRIGATION SYSTEMS

by
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Introduction

In the dry zone areas where rainfall is confined to 3-4 months between October to January in the year, people long survived by devising means for storing water for their daily domestic use as well as for agriculture. It was in this way that **wewas** (reservoirs) came to exist in village communities. Nearly 40,000 village wewas developed over the years and the communities living around them produced paddy for the entire population, and even generating surplus for occasional export.

Largely due to internal strife and external interference, disease and pestilence and later, the loss of independence and the consequent emphasis on export oriented crops, the wewas were neglected and gradually abandoned. Thereafter most farmers eked out an existence by burning the country-side for shifting cultivation. This activity upset the ecological balance of the environment and impoverished the land. What were many years ago climax forests, are now becoming unfertile near-desert areas.

The Sri Lanka Freedom From Hunger Campaign Board believes that this trend can be reversed by the farmers themselves with a little guidance, technical training, and financial assistance in matters that are beyond their present capacity. This is the background in which the Board is participating as partners with the farmer communities (Ratnatunga 1982).

The Board's program to rehabilitate the small-wewa village communities of the dry zone is therefore designed to help those living mainly on shifting cultivation in the more remote and less accessible parts of Sri Lanka. The Board has excluded from its area of activity the command areas of the major and medium irrigation schemes, since they are looked after by the Irrigation Department or the Agrarian Services Department.

The Board does not intend to implement a small wewa renovation programme of its own. Instead it enters into a partnership with the farmers living in and around the abandoned wewas by using the means of storing water as a focal point of rallying them into a wew-sabha (Reservoir Councils) and then helping these wew-sabhas to plan and implement their own development programmes. The Board set out in January 1979 to ascertain the magnitude of this programme and to build a fact-finding system which would permit people to plan such programmes and to organize the continued monitoring of their progress and achievements. As a first step the Board numbered all the wewas (reservoirs) which had been shown on the one-inch-to-one-mile (1:63,360) scale topographical map of the country.

Over 18,000 wewas have been numbered almost all of which are in the dry zone. It was noticed that many abandoned wewas had escaped the notice of the topographical surveyor because they were covered in scrub jungle and were located in country infested with wild animals. When these are included, the total number of wewas and reservoirs will exceed 30,000. Of this number about 7,000 or nearly a quarter are still in working order and supporting wewa-village communities.

Objectives

The primary objective of the Board's program is not the mere restoration or renovation of small wewas. It is to improve the quality of life of the people living in those parts of the wewa country. These people tend to be undernourished due to difficult living conditions and the inability to produce enough food which results in a severe shortage of fruit and vegetables during the long dry spell. It is futile on our part to preach to them to bestir themselves and strive for a better future. They are far too malnourished to respond to such an exhortation. Even if they do, the effort is bound to be short lived. These people have reached a rock-bottom level of contentment.

To improve the lot of these people one has to break this bottom level contentment and establish expectation at a much higher level. This happened without any planning by the Board at the Tantirimale Wewa Village Rehabilitation Project. Before the Board moved in, the average level of family income was about Rs. 2300/- per year in 1979. Thus an average family had an income of about Rs. 200/- per month. When the Board started restoring abandoned wewas in partnership with the farmers, paying for only half the value of the earth work done, the family income rose to between Rs. 600/- and Rs. 1000/- per month.

Strategy

As life in the wewa country is possible only if water is available, we use the activities associated with building storage for rain water as a means of rallying the shifting cultivation farmers into organized communities.

Restoration and *Revival*. Our strategy is not to plan the improvement and pilot projects ourselves, but to let the wewa village communities take the initiative to both plan and implement their program. The FFHC will remain their friend and partner with funds for what is beyond the means of the wew-sahha. The project begins with the restoration of the wewa. The presence of stored water in the village will result in a higher sub-soil water table. This in turn will improve the possibility of sinking shallow open wells for domestic water supply. The water situation can be improved further by developing contour bunded pasture in the lower hill slopes, and by developing forest on the high ground and along the ridges.

All this activity will, in time, restore the wewa-village into the ecologically balanced environment it used to be. The farmers will be cultivating the valley bottoms and using the lower hill slopes to feed their cattle. The forest on the high ground will provide adequate timber and fuel for the wewa-village community.

The Board realized that it was working in an area where man had successfully cultivated paddy and other food crops for well over 20 centuries by storing rain water for deferred use. The methods evolved by trial and error over this long period must have suited the soil and the climate, because nearly a quarter of the small wewas are found to be still supporting small wewa village communities despite the neglect over the last 5 centuries.

The Board therefore decided to retain and where necessary revive traditional agricultural and other cultural practices of the area before attempting to introduce modern technology. One such practice is the "three fields" system. It was the custom for the irrigated paddy land below a village-wewa to be divided into three fields. Each farmer family had a panguwa (allotment) in each of the three fields. It was decided, as an experiment, to allot wherever possible, the newly asweddumized (irrigated) paddy land with one lot in an upper field and another lot in a lower field,

Innovative action. One important fact that emerged from our work in the wewa country, was that in the restoration of an abandoned wewa and the settlements there under, in the less remote areas, it was necessary to get the cooperation of the inhabitants of the neighbouring village, already practicing irrigated agriculture under their own tank.

With this in mind, a pilot project is now being tried out in Ihala Digana village, in Adnuradhapura District. Under the Village Tank, 22 landowners cultivate about 20 acres. The plots are small and scattered. A land consolidation and reallocation was necessary to increase productivity of these lands and to augment the income of the poorest sections. The poorest farmers, some of whom did not own any land, have to be given economic holdings. It was found that after improvements, an additional 20 acres could be irrigated.

The Board initiated a dialogue with the land owners who agreed to consolidation and redistribution. One absentee owner family who owned the largest extent (4 1/2 acres) agreed to donate their share to the poorer sections. The aged owners agreed to transfer ownership to their children. They all agreed to the government acquiring the lands and then redistributing them together with the additional acreages resulting from improvements. This is not a forced acquisition exercise but a voluntary consolidation. The Board is, in fact, effecting a silent land reform, which was a much needed thing for this village.

The organisation. The Board started a program of assistance for the restoration of village wewas by participating with the village level Non-Government Organizations called the Rural Development Societies that were in existence in the area. The membership of these Societies belonged to all the people in the village which covered a large area. Invariably the office-bearers were the most influential and affluent people in the village, the majority of whom were not generally interested in the upliftment of the poorest of the poor farmers whom they exploited as cheap labour.

It was therefore, felt that it was more conducive for our organisation to participate only with the poorest of the poor farmers directly concerned with the restoration of their wewa. Accordingly, in 1980, at joint discussions with the farmers it was decided to make the wewa the focal point of activity to harness the resources of all the farmers directly benefitting from the water of the wewa, and to call this set up a "wew-sabha" or "The Reservoir Council." This council was similar to what existed from ancient times but it contains modifications to suit a more democratically elected organization.

A model draft constitution was also drawn up at this meeting which could be adopted *in toto* with modifications as decided by the majority of the members. Up to date this constitution has been taken as the model for the near 200 wew-sabhas established in the country. The constitution provides for the election of office bearers to run the affairs of the sabh a. There is provision to hold Annual General Meetings to elect new office-bearer!;.

Implementation

The Board has spelled out the following implementation guidelines.

Restoration with their own hands. The use of machinery for the restoration work is a common feature used by most organisations but in the case of wewa restoration no machinery of any type is used and no contractors are employed. All earth work is done manually by the wew-sabha members and their families. This is done with a dual purpose. On the one hand, it enables the participating persons to earn a living while doing their own development, and on the other hand, it helps to motivate the people and to prepare them to be active farmers in the management of their own lands and wewa.

To repair and maintain the irrigation system. The wew-sabha members are expected to repair and maintain the wewa and its irrigation system at all times. This is done by using funds from the Wewa Maintenance Fund or by using *shramaduna* (donation of free labour). Maintenance of working wewas in the country is the responsibility of the Department of Agrarian Services or the Irrigation Department but in the case of wewas restored with the assistance of the Board, we expect the farmers to maintain the wewa and its irrigation system by themselves, after it is restored. There are instances where the wew-sabhas have met at dead of night to decide on the course of action to be taken to save the hund after a heavy flood.

Regulation and control of issue of water. The small village wewas that irrigate about 50 acres will have a membership of about 25; it is then easily manageable for the small farming families to regulate and control the issue of water. In the small wewa system the use of stored water is only to prevent crop failure during dry spells. Wewa water is not expected to be issued from the land preparation stage to harvest time as happens in major irrigation schemes.

Plan and regulate cultivation. The farmers of the wew-sabha will meet prior to the main cultivation season and monthly thereafter to plan the cultivation under the wewa, expecting the rains to come as usual. They will decide dates for clearing channels and spills and also fix tentative dates for land preparation using the early rains. The variety of paddy would be decided as well as the dates for fencing the perimeter.

Plan and participate in the agricultural development. The farmers will plan and participate in the other types of agricultural development in their homestead and market-gardens and also will decide on the heads of cattle that each farm family should maintain according to the extent of the communal pasture available. In this case there would be no control by the wew-sabha as to the types and ages of crops grown by the individual farmers. But there would be rigid control on the movement of cattle till all the harvests are gathered and there would be fencing on the perimeter to prevent stray animals from destroying crops.

Plan and participate in community development and social welfare. People who had lived in dispersed individual units up to the time of the formation of wew-sabhas depending only on chena cultivation will now decide as a group on their community development needs and plan and execute such development. These items are village roadways, play grounds, children's parks, literary activities, and social welfare activities for the common benefit of the families.

Organize inputs and marketing facilities. The wew-sabhas are initially provided with interest free loans by the Board to obtain their agricultural inputs. All wew-sabhas cultivating paddy have been supplied with a free sprayer. Already over 40 sprayers have been issued. wew-sabhas in the Waguruwela Project in Moneragala District have been assisted with interest free loans to purchase a pair of buffaloes for each farmer family. Later the wew-sabha is expected to organize the procurement and timely supply of all necessary agricultural inputs with their own funds or with bank loans. The wew-sabha building is provided with a room to store these inputs for the use of the farmers.

Initially the produce from the farm would be just sufficient to meet the farmers' requirements of food like rice, cereals, pulses, fruits, vegetables, and dairy produce, but with proper land development, water facilities and improvement of the environment, production of both paddy and other agricultural produce would exceed the requirements of a family of about six to eight members. Then the wew-sabha can organize marketing facilities for the benefit of the members. However we are hoping to get all farmers to do on-farm storage in traditional ways for deferred use by the families.

Participating in religious and cultural development. The wewa village communities have a very old cultural and religious history. Every encouragement is given to the wew-sabha, to revive this old heritage.

Funds. Initially when a wewa-sabha is formed the wewa-sabha members decide on a nominal membership fee which varies from Rs. 3/- to Rs. 10/- per month. This membership fee is utilized to meet petty expenses like postage, stationery, hooks, registers, etc. When the wewa is developed and irrigated farming begins, it is obligatory on the part of the members to pay two bushels (about 42 kilos) of paddy for every harvested acre under the command of the wewa. It is hoped that the fund will build up over the years and if the farmers build up a fixed deposit account with the contributions, they would be able to do the wewa maintenance with the accruing interest without utilizing the capital which would keep growing yearly. It is felt that if the farmers maintain this fund properly it should be possible for them not only to maintain the wewa but also to finance soft loans, arrange and supply inputs and even make provision for payment of old age pensions to their members.

Wew-sabha buildings. In each Project the wew-sabha is provided a grant between Rs. 62,000 to Rs. 65,000/- for the construction of a permanent building. The bare-minimum furniture and equipment will be supplied. The wew-sabha could utilize this building as a meeting hall, pre-school for village children, a community center, cultural center and also as a place for training farmers and their children in agriculture and handicraft. In addition there is a room to store inputs like seed paddy, fertilizer, and agro-chemicals. There is another room for a care-taker who is normally a wew-sabha member nominated by the sabha to regulate water issues, obtain and supply inputs on time, supervise credit, recover loans, and look after and maintain the building, equipment, and the children's park situated in a 2 acre plot of land on which the wew-sabha building stands.

Farmer Training

Non-formal education and training for the farming population and their children, are organized by the Board. The training includes:

- ☐ The office-bearers training in managing meetings, correspondence, accounts, etc;
- ☐ community development;
- ☐ wewa restoration works and water management;
- ☐ agricultural planning and plan implementation;

- ❑ use of cheap and simple agricultural equipment like ploughs, sprayers and weeding equipment;
- ❑ modern methods of farming, homestead management, and home gardening;
- ❑ obtaining services of governmental and non-governmental organisations.
- ❑ the development of the environment and its proper maintenance;
- ❑ training in social, cultural, and religious activities.

Training programs for women includes:

- ❑ keeping a clean house and environment;
- ❑ home gardening, better cooking, food preservation;
- ❑ family and environmental health, nutrition and child care;
- ❑ animal husbandry;
- ❑ simple household sewing and handicraft;
- ❑ pre-school work, thrift, and savings;
- ❑ wew-sabha work and leadership training.

The youth of the wew-sabha members are also trained to take up responsibilities and to appreciate the rural way of life.

Performance

During the past six years the Board has participated in renovating 196 Wewas, the particulars of which are below.

TABLE 1. Renovated Wewas

District	N ^o . of Wewas
Anuradhapura	75
Monaragala	53
Trincomalee	33
Matale	02
Puttalam	04
Scattered Projects	29
Total	196

Of this number, 39 wewas were from *Purana* (old) villages where they were in a had state of disrepair. The balance of 157 wewas taken up for restoration were abandoned ones, where farmers had been eking out an existence by shifting cultivation. By and large, the Board has been able to achieve notable success, as confirmed by recent, independent evaluations (Richards 1983; Howes 1984)

Problems

Some of the problems that were encountered can best be illustrated by a few case stories. Waguruwela was an area well known for growing narcotics. Narcotic dealers influenced the poor farmers to grow cannabis for a living. They were not happy about the wew-sabhas as they were losing cheap labour. In addition they disliked the movement of jeeps belonging to the Board in these areas. For similar reasons the illicit timber merchants were unhappy and attempted to bring disunity and disillusionment among the people saying that these sabhas are doomed to fail sooner or later. Initially there were a number of drop-outs on account of these pressure groups, but by and large, with regular participation, the wew-sabhas have become successful and strong.

In Mergaswewa, near Tanamalwila, the members of the wew-sabhas were farmers who had been living in the area for generations. These farmers were heavily indebted to the businessmen who exploited the poor farmers by utilizing their cheap labour for large-scale illicit chena cultivation and for the extraction of illicit timber. These businessmen too objected when the farmers gave up working for them and started working on their own development under the wewas. Here too, the majority of the farmer; stayed on in spite of the pressure brought to bear on them by the businessmen. On account of their unity, they were able to surmount and withstand the pressure of the affluent people.

In Tantirimale, in the Anuradhapura District, almost all the people were interrelated and had migrated from Vavuniya and Medawachchiya areas about 10 to 15 years ago. The setting up of wew-sahas in this area did not pose much problems except for the fact that their literacy rate was low.

Today in almost all the areas where the Board has its projects the wew-sabha system has been readily accepted and is working satisfactorily. At present all wew-sahas are registered with the Sri Lanka National Freedom From Hunger Campaign Board. It is felt that State recognition, especially by the Department of Agrarian Services under whose purview the small village tanks come, would provide a still greater incentive to these organisations.

Conclusions

The Board was more anxious to ensure that any improvement it generates will be sustained and would result in a spiralling growth of the economy in these communities. The Board therefore pays more attention to the organisation that would maintain the improvements than to the improvements themselves. In reviving the traditional wew-sahas, the Board felt that the responsibility for planning and implementing the plan must remain with the farmers and the wew-sabha.

To ensure that this was possible it was necessary to attend to two matters. One was to ensure that the wew-sabha was capable of generating sufficient funds to pay for repair and maintenance of the wewa and its irrigation system. This could be done by cultivators contributing the equivalent of seed paddy at harvest time to the sabha's maintenance fund. Another matter was that the wew-sabha should have farmers with sufficient technical knowledge to ensure that the repair and maintenance was effectively and economically performed. This could be achieved by farmer training programs and on the job training. The last matter was that the farmers should co-operate in the matter of organizing repair and maintenance and in the problems associated with water management. As wew-sahas are composed of 20 to 30 families who have control of a single wewa, this co-operation has not been difficult to achieve.

The Board does not seek out wewas to restore but instead enters into partnership with farmer communities to renovate existing wewas or to restore abandoned ones. In either case there is no lack of manpower for doing the earth work. Very often men, women, children, and even old people participate in doing earth work. This activity brings the community together, and also generates a feeling that the wewa belongs to them. Thereafter it becomes natural for these people to assume responsibility for the wewa through their wew-sabha.

The Board's program includes, in areas where abandoned wewas are being restored, the developing of terraced market gardens, contour bunded pastures, forest plantations, and a homestead garden for each farmer family, in addition to the irrigated paddy areas.

Thus with the assistance, guidance, and the partnership of the Board, through the wew-sahhas in the remote parts of the country, we expect the poorest of the poor to raise their standard of living by wisely utilizing the lands that lie idle, water that went to waste, and human resources that were under-utilized.