

Women in Irrigation Management: Case Study in South India

This case study describes the important role of voluntary cooperative efforts of women in irrigation management in a village in Madurai District, Tamil Nadu.

The cultivators of the village are predominantly Muslim women whose husbands are working overseas or are employed in various local businesses. Women play primary and dominant roles in all aspects of rice cultivation, including crop and water management.

The Women Cultivators' Association was formed in 1978 with about 50 active members. Initially, the association mainly focused on self-employment activities, primarily related to crafts and small cottage industries. This enhanced communal cooperation and unity in the village. Gradually, the activities shifted more to agricultural operations.

The village land is irrigated by a tank system, which serves an area of 300 hectares. The tank is supplied by two major sources, one of which is a barrage. This barrage provides water regulated by six sluices, three of which are for the village and the other three for a neighboring village. The regulation of water supplies is not reliable, mainly because sometimes the sluice gates are not closed. As a result, there are often water disputes between the two villages. Irrigation water is available only for one season of the year. During the other seasons water is pumped from shallow wells.

The members of the Women Cultivators' Association are actively involved in tank irrigation operations, management, maintenance and regular monitoring and improvement of the system. As a group, they make and enforce regulations and are involved in conflict resolution using discussions, negotiations and decision-making methods.

There are a number of reasons which explain the success of this association:

- 1) The association is small, which provides for face to face interactions and effective interpersonal relationships;
- 2) Members share a common hydrological interest in obtaining reliable supplies of water for rice production;
- 3) The association is voluntary and has a clear purpose of providing visible benefits to members unlike other water associations which are regulated by legislative acts, civil laws or water codes; and
- 4) The leader and the secretary of the association have much credibility among the members.

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