

Role of Social Organizers in Improving Irrigation Management: The Experience in Nepal

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INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER ATTEMPTS to highlight the role of social organizers in the process of improving irrigation-systemmanagement. The association organizer is employed in the Irrigation-Management Project to identify the organizational dynamics and to act as a catalyst in promoting farmers' participation in irrigation management.

THE ASSOCIATION ORGANIZER AS A COMPONENT OF THE IRRIGATION-MANAGEMENT PROJECT

One of the major objectives of the Irrigation-Management Project and its System-Management Division is "to develop and strengthen the capability of Water Users' Organizations to assume greater responsibility and authority for operation and maintenance of the irrigation system." The Irrigation-Management Project considers that new water user' organizations are not self-generating. Therefore a catalyst agent is required to help farmers organize their OWN water users' organization. In the Irrigation-ManagementProject this catalyst agent is called the association organizer. The Irrigation-ManagementProject has deployed association organizers for the last two years.

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An association organizer is a trained field worker who lives in the user community and assists the users to organize themselves on the basis of their felt irrigation needs and in accordance with objectives set by an irrigation-development program. **An** association organizer does not replace any technical staff of the Department of Irrigation but rather helps them to be more effective and to improve irrigation-management performance.

THE ASSOCIATION ORGANIZER'S RESPONSIBILITY IN RELATION TO MANAGEMENT TYPE

The duties of an association organizer depend very much on the specific management **type** targeted by the irrigation-development agency for an implementation site. **For** example: **for** the type designated "autonomous-management by user," the association organizer's duty would be to develop the capacity and confidence of the user organization to the point that users should, after a reasonable period of time, be willing and able to take complete responsibility for the management of their system. For joint-management type, the association organizer's duty would be to develop the capacity of the user organization and of the agency to an extent that both should be willing to jointly delineate and share management responsibilities and to mutually recognize the primary roles that each has to play in response to system needs (system operation and maintenance, etc.). This type of management objective is represented by the Sirsia-Dudhaura Irrigation System, the first implementation site of the Irrigation-Management Project/System-Management Division.

The Sirsia-Dudhaura Irrigation System was built in the mid-1950s in Parwanipur, Bara District of Nepal. It was designed to supplement rain-fed agricultural needs and presently commands 1,152 ha in summer and 807 ha in winter.

Before the Irrigation-Management Project the Sirsia-Dudhaura Irrigation System was **typical of Terai public-irrigation systems in Nepal which generally suffer from the following problems:** 1) deferred maintenance, 2) unpredictable operation and maintenance management, 3) antagonistic relations and lack of communication between agency staff and users, 4) rampant lack of discipline on the part of users reflected in the numerous breaches in the system networks, inter-user conflicts, and might-is-right practices, 5) inequitable water distribution, and 6) nonparticipation of users in any system-management activities.

The Irrigation-Management Project fielded association organizers in this system on 8 April 1987 with the purpose of strengthening the water users' organization and enabling it to resolve and overcome the above problems.

RECRUITMENT OF ASSOCIATION ORGANIZERS

To expedite the process of strengthening the water users' organization the Technical Assistance Team decided to recruit association organizers from outside the Department of Irrigation. This became imperative because the Irrigation-Management Project/the Department of Irrigation had no experience or know-how regarding the programs and personnel management of association organizers. Thus association organizers were contractually employed by the Technical Assistant in March 1987.

ASSOCIATION ORGANIZER ROLES

Organizing

For the first six months the association organizers were engaged in preorganizing activities which included their selection, training, and establishment in the field. The association organizers carried out a sequence of activities: building up rapport with the users, convening a sensitization workshop for fanner representatives and local staff, collecting and documenting information reflecting the relationship between the user and the irrigation system, and preparing lists of users. After these steps were completed association organizers initiated the process of forming a water users' organization.

The association organizers helped to organize the sensitization workshop by identifying fanner participants and ensuring their participation in the workshop. The objective of the workshop was to introduce the participants to Irrigation-Management Project objectives and to the water users' organization process, and to bring to the surface the main issues in local-irrigation system management. This helped both the water users and the agency staff to plan subsequent assistance activities.

The association organizers helped the water users to form a two-tiered water users' organization; 15 user *tolis* (groups) at the branch/village level and 1 system-level user *sangh* (association). The dominant mode used by the association organizers in forming *tolis* was mass assembly. Patterns of *toli* formation differed. In one area a *toli* was formed by consensus. In another area *toli* formation was accompanied by full-scale electioneering. In one tail-end area it was very difficult to form *tolis* as feudal polarization was sharp. Farmers were not convinced that a water users' organization could cut across this polarization and facilitate distribution of irrigation water. In another area users were afraid of governmentalizing their own adjacent irrigation system and thus did not want to join the *toli*. To promote user organizations in this difficult situation association organizers selectively approached local influential persons including politicians to make positive contributions to the organization process. At a later stage association organizers helped form a water-user *sangh* at the system level.

Resource Mobilization

The association organizers motivated users to develop cleaning and maintenance practices for field channels, sub-field channels and at certain points for branch canals. In some places tolis built new field channels. For these activities tolis mobilized user resources in kind, cash, and labor. Establishing rules and applying them institutionally promoted equity in resource mobilization as well as in water distribution.

The association organizers helped user tolis first to identify essential structural improvements needed in their respective areas and then to prioritize them. They facilitated agreement between the agency and tolis on essential structural improvement works. The essential structural improvements agreement entitled tolisto appoint contractors for works of less than approximately US\$513 (NRs 10,000).

The association organizers then assisted tolis to open bank accounts for the organized and accountable management of toli resources gained from contractual works, from fines, and from other types of mobilization. Toli-appointed contractors, as per their commitment to contribute 10 percent, deposited 60 percent of the amount of essential structural improvement works payment owed to the toli fund.

The association organizers made efforts to channel users' ideas into the process of watercess (water tax) assessment by the land surveyor, as this mechanism was an essential element in the accuracy of watercess records. In April 1987 when the association organizers were first fielded, farmers' complaints against wrong and arbitrary assessment of watercess were very common. A sample survey done by association organizers in January 1989 (the second year of the Irrigation-Management Project assistance in the Sirsia-Dudhaura Irrigation System) showed that an overwhelming majority of water users paid their watercess for 1987 while only a small percentage was dissatisfied with the assessment work.

Organization Development

The association organizers assisted in identifying fanner trainees for Irrigation Management Centre-sponsored farmer-to-farmer training. They then helped organize user-community meetings to disseminate the lessons learned by those users who had participated in the training sessions. The association organizers also provided support in knowledge-building and sharing through inter-toli mobilization. In this process, they mobilized members of better performing tolis to assist those less effective.

Those user-toli representatives who received training began to gain an appreciation of the benefits which an effective user organization could bring to them, such as equitable distribution of scarce irrigation resources and a cost-effective system.

Communication

The **association** organizers helped in promoting organizational communication. Individual **users** have started airing their grievances related to their access to water, through **tolis**. This kind of communication has promoted equity in system-resource distribution. The agency has also made it a point to entertain only those petitions for water access that come through the **tolis**. Thus, **concerned association** organizers have facilitated the development of a **system** whereby **representatives** of **areas** formally outside the command **area**, but who previously received water, may **request** water when it does not **jeopardize** **tolis** members' legitimate interests. Besides this kind of agency user communication, user **tolis** have been using traditional village **chowkidars** (watchmen) to communicate **tolis** messages to the general user-members.

Through **regular** monthly meetings of the **sangh**, association organizers have helped user representatives and field-agency staff to start a dialogue **on operation** and maintenance issues at the system level itself. For instance, during the water-stress period the **sangh** may decide in favor of a rotational water-distribution system and ask the field agency to cooperate. The **sangh** may question the appropriateness of the field-agency decision regarding stoppage of water delivery **on a date unilaterally fixed**. The field agency might want to stop water delivery for some construction works. **The** **sangh** would consider this point and finally a date for stopping water delivery would be mutually **agreed upon**.

Conflict Resolution

The **association** organizers have facilitated development of **norms** to resolve conflicts resulting from undisciplined behavior of **user** members. For instance, "Khotuwa-toli" reported that they **penalized** a member who while irrigating his field had flooded his fellow user's crop field. The wrong-doer paid compensation to the user whom he had harmed at the rate fixed by the **tolis**.

Water Distribution

The **association** organizer helped **tolis** to understand the importance of water-measuring devices and the **need** for **tolis** to protect them. It has **been** noted that where this **has been** promoted water-use efficiency has increased. In the **Harpur area** at the head of **Dudhaura** system users now irrigate their land in a shorter time. Users at the tail end now receive water **earlier** and more reliably. Similarly, tail enders of **Bahuwary** in the **Sirsia** command **area** state that **after** several years of suffering from insufficient quantities they now receive a satisfactory water supply. This is probably **one** of the most visible impacts of fieldchannel cleaning and maintenance **by the users**. **Users** have **been** able to **see** a **direct** relationship between **their actions** in maintaining field channels, in more efficient water **use**, and in the greater equity in water distribution.

The effectiveness of user organizations in mobilizing resources for channel maintenance has resulted in expanded coverage of wheat crop in the command area. The user tols of Tajpur, Ramur, and Mushahari joined hands to clean and maintain field channels as well as certain portions of the branch canals from the Sirsia Trifurcation, a point which was considered the most critically chaotic in the diagnostic analysis made by the Colorado State University (1985). in terms of water allocation and distribution.

The agency and the sangh have decided in favor of a rotational water-distribution system for the wheat crop on an experimental basis. This experimental rotational water schedule was first introduced in the Sirsia-Dudhaura Irrigation System where it was monitored by the association organizers who provided suggestions to both the agency and the sangh on how to improve on it

Agriculture

The association organizers have assisted in introducing the Block Production Program using mini-kit demonstrations with a view to integrating this program with tasks such as water scheduling. They have also assisted in identifying, locating, and interviewing farmers for crop-cutting surveys. The association organizers and farmers have estimated that after the Irrigation-Management Project, crop production in the Sirsia-Dudhaura Irrigation System area increased by 25 percent.

ASSOCIATION-ORGANIZER TRAINING

There are various types of association-organizer training which are differentiated according to job experience, job position (supervisory or regular), transfer from one irrigation system to another, and the management objectives to be achieved. The association organizers' training can be divided into three broad categories: pre-job training, on-the-job refresher training, and on-the-job transition training. Besides this training, eligible association-organizer candidates receive supervisory training. To be eligible, an association-organizer candidate for supervisory training should 1) have worked at least six months in the field as an association organizer, and 2) demonstrate certain managerial qualities.

Apart from the formal training provided to association organizers under the Irrigation Management Centre auspices, field-refresher sessions of a few hours duration each are regularly conducted. In these sessions, association organizers raise issues and problems which they have encountered in the course of implementing the monthly tasks assigned to them, plus the ongoing programs in the field. A resource person, usually a member of the water users' organization development staff, conducts these sessions.

FIELD SUPERVISION AND FOLLOW-UP

To continuously gear association organizers towards achieving the set management objectives intensive supervision and field follow-up mechanisms **are** necessary. The water **users' organization section** staff supervises and maintains this system in active cooperation with the field-agency **staff**.

For this purpose a task-oriented approach has been adopted. Under this approach, association organizers **are** assigned certain **tasks** each month. These tasks **are** defined after monitoring the monthly field activities through association organizers' reports, monthly meetings, **internal** weekly meetings, and refresher sessions. This approach enables identification of emerging system-management **needs**. The task-oriented approach helps concrete the association-organizer responsibilities and roles in a practical manner. Each association organizer must report **on** progress in implementing the tasks assigned to him each month. **In** this report he describes how he interacted with the users, the user organizations, and the agency-field office as per the **tasks**, what constraints he faced in implementing the tasks, how the **constraints** were or could be resolved, and what was achieved in each **task**.

INDICATORS OF ACHIEVEMENT

The association organizers have helped the Irrigation-Management **Project** to accomplish the following:

- * **User** resources have been institutionally mobilized for system maintenance.
- * Communication between agency-field offices and users has improved and is being formalized. This is reflected in the preparation of water schedules and in increased responsiveness in the dealings between agency and user organizations.
- * User-organized participation in system improvement, in identification of needs, and in the construction process were initiated with essential structural improvements assistance.
- * Water-use efficiency in the system has increased. The area planted to wheat in the winter season has increased over the previous year and the potential area has expanded to include the tail-end area.
- * Breaches in the system have been reduced.
- * The number of inter-user water conflicts has decreased **as** **to** **is** have undertaken management of water distribution.
- * The number of petitions complaining against "wrong" assessment of watercess has decreased.
- * The **ratio** of user representation in water users' organization in the Sirsia-Dudhaura Irrigation System is **I** representative to 11 water users for a total of 197 user representatives. This is about one person per six hectares. The water users' organization has intensified supervision **as** well.

IMPROVING IMPLEMENTATION

Lessons from the Sirsia-Dudhaura Irrigation System show that association organizers can play their role more effectively if the following issues are given adequate attention:

- * Setting more practical construction targets which take into consideration the institutional-development needs and the management capacity of the users and agency **staff**.
- * Recognizing the construction process as an opportunity for developing **operation** and maintenance processes and planning accordingly.
- * Initiating interunit coordination between the water users' **organization** operation and maintenance, and monitoring, evaluation, and feedback **sections**.
- * Expediting collection of systematic information about water measurement so **that** the necessary information is in place to develop an operational plan.
- * Achieving balance between project agency and field office by delegating adequate authority and resources to the field.
- * Training association organizers in courses **on** bureaucratic behavior and agency staff in interdisciplinary courses to facilitate their progressive reorientation from the purely technical to include social issues in irrigation management.
- * Determining the hydrological boundaries of each **section** of the command **area** prior to organizing activities **to** satisfy the **needs** of both operation and maintenance and water users' organization.
- * Staffing the System-Management Division with a director who is **trained** to apply an integrated system-management approach to the System-Management Division **operations** rather than a single-sector orientation such as construction, monitoring, evaluation, and feedback, or water users' organization.
- * Not awarding contracts for construction to the farmers of public-irrigation systems while they are at the stage of getting organized. Contract awards at that point tend **to** transfer the agency-construction bias to the farmer community. This **distorts** the integrity of the farmer-organizing process.

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