

Role of the Irrigation Community Organizers: The Siwaragan Experience

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INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER **DESCRIBES** the experiences gained in the process of organizing the Siwaragan communal irrigation project in the Philippines. It focuses mainly on the process and the strategies employed in developing a farmers' association, the extent of farmers' involvement in project activities, and the roles and functions performed by the irrigation community organizers and provides some insights and concerns drawn from such experience. The implementation of the Siwaragan Communal Irrigation Project was lodged under the direct responsibility of the Iloilo Provincial Office which was headed by a Provincial Irrigation Engineer.

PROFILE OF THE SIWARAGAN COMMUNAL IRRIGATION PROJECT

The Siwaragan Communal Irrigation Project is situated approximately **56 kilometers (34.8 miles) northwest of Iloilo City**, and it lies along the route to Antique. Its water source is the Siwaragan River. There are six barangays (smallest administrative units) covered by the Siwaragan Project. The potential irrigable areas of these barangays, with one exception, are located on the left bank of the Siwaragan River. The **total** potential irrigable **area** of the project is 300 hectares (ha) with **262** potential farmer beneficiaries.

Two irrigation community organizers (1 male and 1 female) were fielded in **May 1980** to assist the Siwaragan farmers to form an Irrigators' Association. After eleven months of organizational

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work with the farmers, project construction was begun. Originally it was planned to complete the Siwaragan Communal Irrigation Project in two years. However, because the terrain required the construction of numerous structures and a 7.9-kilometer (4.91-mile) main canal, project construction was extended to Phase III, planned to be completed in 1983.

The project covered 37 ha of its upstream command area in 1983 and a total of 144 ha by 1986. The entire command area was first served in July 1988. The system was turned over to the farmers during the first quarter of 1989.

ORGANIZING EXPERIENCE

The following discussion describes the process of organizing the farmers; events that occurred as the irrigation community organizers assisted the Siwaragan farmers to achieve the different milestones of organizational development, the extent of the association's participation in the planning, construction, and operation and maintenance of the system, and the irrigation community organizers' roles and organizing strategies.

FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SIWARAGAN IRRIGATORS' ASSOCIATION

Sector Formation and Firming Up of Potential Members

The two irrigation community organizers started the organizing work in the Siwaragan Communal Irrigation Project on 2 May 1980. The immediate priority activities based on their assessment of the project situation were:

1. Further validation of profile data and information gathering.
2. Establishing rapport with all the people in the community.
3. Dissemination of information to the farmers concerning the proposed irrigation project and the roles of the National Irrigation Administration and the irrigation community organizers in the area.
4. Initial identification of contact leaders and potential core-group members.

The geographically rolling terrain of the project and the absence of detailed survey data on potential irrigable land and proposed canal locations made the initial organizing work difficult as potential beneficiaries could not be accurately identified. Farmer-group meetings for project information dissemination were done through barangays.

The first sector meeting through the barangay was held at Barangay Igburi on 5 June 1980. It was attended by 29 farmers. Subsequently, there were a total of seven barangay meetings conducted for project-information dissemination. In these initial meetings the contact persons were the barangay officials and identified community leaders. The main point raised by the irrigation community organizers was that the farmers should actively participate in all the technical activities of the project. The National Irrigation Administration's timetable for survey activities was at hand. Thanks to the irrigation community organizer's recommendations, farmers of different sectors agreed to form two working committees: the survey committee and the membership committee, the former to assist and coordinate with the National Irrigation Administration survey team in the survey activities and the latter to identify and begin firming up the list of potential beneficiaries within the sectors. When the topographic survey was conducted from July to December 1980, the actual potential irrigable area was determined to be about 300 ha. While this survey was going on, the irrigation community organizers assisted the leaders to review the status of existing sectors. The canal-location survey in October 1980 further facilitated the firming up of potential membership and the final revision of the sector coverage. Farmers themselves suggested that sectoring should be revised based on canal layout.

Identification and Development of Potential Irrigators' Association Leaders

Soon after their entry into the area the irrigation community organizers started to identify potential leaders whom they could ask to assist in disseminating project information to farmers. They tapped existing community leaders who helped them to inform farmers about the project and to call meetings. A core group composed of at least one member from each of these seven barangays was organized. The members of the core group did much to stimulate other farmers to attend meetings and clarified their questions regarding the proposed project. By 5 August 1980, all sectors had elected their officers and committee members and were simultaneously given orientation on their specific tasks and functions by the irrigation community organizers. Thus, before the final organizational election of the Siwaragan Irrigators' Association, several strong leaders had begun to emerge as a result of activities which were undertaken at the sector level. The irrigation community organizers continued to try to identify potential leaders who could occupy higher leadership positions. The National Irrigation Administration conducted leadership training in December 1988 in two groups attended by a total of 49 farmer leaders.

After the formation of preconstruction working committees and sectoral organizations, a committee on election composed of seven members chosen by the Board of Directors from each sector was formed to act as an independent body to implement policies and to oversee the overall conduct of the election of Irrigators' Association Officers. This general election, held on 27 September 1980, proved quite successful. Out of 270 potential beneficiaries, 193 attended. With the new set of officers, the general assembly proceeded with the formation of its standing committees; the Finance and Development Committee, the Audit and Inventory Committee, and the Education and Training Committee. All were chaired by Irrigators' Association Officers. The remaining three committees -- the Grievance and Complaints Committee, the Agricultural Supervisory Committee, and the Irrigation Management Committee -- were chaired by members chosen by the general assembly.

Formation of Working Committees

The Siwaragan Irrigators' Association was able to make its participation operational during the preconstruction and construction phases through its working committees. These were the committees on Survey, Membership Recruitment, Right of Way, By-Laws, Group Dynamics, Securities and Exchange, Water Permit, Equity Participation, and System Design. Membership in most of these sector committees ranged from three to four, headed by a chairman who was an ex-officio member of the same committee in the entire Irrigators' Association. All preconstruction committees accomplished their tasks satisfactorily. The construction working committees were created in November 1980 when plans were finalized for construction to commence during the first quarter of 1981. These were the Manpower, Inventory, Cost Control, Materials Control, and Canvass and Bidding Committees.

Completion of Legal Requirements

Foremost among the tasks accomplished during the preconstruction phase were the registration with the Securities and Exchange Commission, obtaining of the water permit, signing of the Memorandum of Agreement and the Right-of-way negotiations. Most of these activities were undertaken through the working committees. The Irrigators' Association and the National Irrigation Administration undertook the preconstruction conferences during which each party formulated its own policies and systems that served as guides for construction implementation. The Memorandum of Agreement between the Siwaragan Irrigators' Association and the National Irrigation Administration was signed in March 1981, signaling the readiness of both parties to start project construction.

FARMERS' PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING, CONSTRUCTION, AND OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Farmers' Involvement in Project Planning and Design

During the information-dissemination phase the attitude of the farmers in the three downstream sectors was negative towards the project because they did not believe that the Siwaragan River could be tapped to irrigate their farmlands. However, the differential-leveling survey conducted on 20 May 1980 showed that their lands could benefit from the scheme.

There was close coordination between the irrigation community organizers and the technical staff involved in the Siwaragan project through the monthly coordination meetings at the provincial office together with the Provincial Irrigation Engineer. The irrigation community organizers were given complete information on the program of technical activities and the

technical staff on irrigation committee activities. Thus, the organizational work undertaken by the irrigation community organizers was always in harmony with the technical activities.

In accordance with the Provincial Irrigation Engineer's commitment, on 15 February 1981, the preliminary system design was presented to hear farmers' suggestions or recommendations, if any. In March 1981, the Irrigators' Association, the Project Engineer and the irrigation-community organizers conducted a walk-through and a plan-in-hand inspection of the main proposed project facilities. The Irrigators' Association Leaders were clearly aware of and identified all the major structures and facilities of the project. Frequent National Irrigation Administrations · Irrigators' Association dialogues were conducted while design preparation was in progress at the regional office.

The Irrigators' Association Leaders invested considerable time and effort in right-of-way negotiations with landowners and many changes in conveyance structures were made by the farmers to help ensure the functionality of the system.

Farmers' Involvement in Project Construction

As had been planned in the preconstruction phase the Siwaragan farmers were fully mobilized during the construction period. All the construction working committees functioned as promised with corresponding monitoring and follow-up from the Irrigators' Association Officers and irrigation community organizers. Even during Phase I construction of the dam farmers in the downstream sectors would hike more than seven kilometers to the construction site in the morning and then back again in the evening. With their scheme of manpower supplied proportionately by each sector the association provided almost all the labor requirements of the project save those works which required skilled labor. To strengthen the coordination mechanism between the National Irrigation Administration and the Irrigators' Association Leaders, meetings were conducted every 15 days at the project level. Cost reconciliation and equity generation were intensively monitored by the Irrigators' Association Leaders with the assistance of the irrigation community organizers. Most of the farmers' equity contribution came from their wages in construction work while a few contributed local materials for the *bodega* (warehouse). As of March 1984, the association had well exceeded its equity requirement based on the P300 (US\$14.00) per ha.

A unique feature of the Siwaragan project was the long duration of its construction. While there was a partial turnover of completed facilities to the farmers in 1986, construction activities continued up to 1988. The delay was attributed to the technically complex nature of the project requiring additional structures and facilities for adjustment, and budgetary constraints. The farmers, surprisingly, remained actively involved in construction throughout the seven years and remained undeterred in spite of the long wait.

Farmers' Activities in Operation and Maintenance

The Siwaragan Irrigators' Association at this time had relatively little experience in operation and maintenance since the works were only recently turned over to them. During the partial operation and maintenance stage the irrigation community organizers began coordinating with the Irrigation Technician to assist the farmers to firm up their operations and maintenance plans and activities. In 1983, the National Irrigation Administration conducted two System Management Training **Courses** for the Siwaragan farmers in anticipation of its full operation that year.

The Siwaragan Irrigators' Association revised its organizational structure as early as 1984 to respond to operation and maintenance responsibilities. It hired paid operation and maintenance personnel such as gatekeepers, bill collectors, and water tenders. The Irrigators' Association collected two cavans of palay (unhusked rice) or P350 (US\$16.40) per ha per cropping season in irrigation fees to cover the expenses of operation and maintenance and for amortization. The new amortization fee rate, which is 1.71 cavans or P299.25 (US\$13.95) per ha per cropping had just been finalized.

IRRIGATION COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS' ROLES AND ORGANIZING STRATEGIES

In the course of their organizing work at Siwaragan all the irrigation community organizers had to perform other roles such as researcher, guide, adviser, trainer, mediator and facilitator, expert, catalyst, or agitator. These varied roles were determined or dictated by the needs and issues identified in the area and the resultant organizing strategies applied to enable farmers to develop a functioning Irrigators' Association.

Monthly coordination meetings at the Iloilo Provincial Office and the biweekly National Irrigation Administration-Irrigators' Association project-site meetings during construction were effective mechanisms not only for periodic review of program implementation but also for providing continuous orientation of the National Irrigation Administration's engineers and organizers on the technical and institutional features of the program. The strategy resulted in the smooth and effective integration of technical and institutional field activities. In dealing with the issues the irrigation community organizers immersed themselves in the community. The groundwork, numerous meetings, and mobilizations of farmers required for collective decision making and implementation of Irrigators' Association activities were done at the sector and Irrigators' Association levels. The irrigation community organizer mediated and coordinated National Irrigation Administration-Irrigators' Association activities related to planning and project construction. They acted as trainers, consultants, and facilitators during committee orientation, group-dynamics training, and National Irrigation Administration-Irrigators' Association dialogues. In the process, the irrigation community organizers and the developed Irrigators' Association Leaders did much discussing, arguing, persuading, and agitating to raise the level of awareness of farmers, to enable them to make decisions, and to implement them.

The following are examples of the issues and problems encountered and the strategies employed to resolve them:

1. The incumbent municipal councilor whose district included **sector 1** wanted to oust the member representing sector 1 on the Board of Directors, due to political conflicts. **The** irrigation community organizers met to discuss strategy with the **sector** officers and the working-committee members. Most of them expressed apprehension concerning resistance to the move of the municipal councilor. The Board of Directors member himself offered to resign if necessary. Sensing the submissive attitude and helplessness of the group the irrigation community organizers **tried** to persuade the sector officers to stand up to the municipal councilor. The irrigation community organizers expounded on the negative consequences to themselves and the association if they did not resist this move stating that they could generate support from other sectors if they stood up to the municipal councilor. After some discussion the sector officers decided to confront the municipal councilor and resolved to support their Board of Directors. They **set** a meeting and sent a verbal invitation to the municipal councilor, but he never showed up.
2. The Provincial Irrigation Engineer proposed a route for the main canal which farmers perceived as more expensive and difficult to construct **than** an alternative route. **On** the advice of the irrigation community organizers, the Irrigators' Association Officers asked their survey committee to recheck their proposed route with that of the Provincial Irrigation Engineers, to further evaluate and strengthen their own proposal. They also identified a spokesman to articulate their views at the general meeting to be held with the Provincial Irrigation Engineer. In the resultant dialogue, the Irrigators' Association requested the Provincial Irrigation **Engineer** to present a comparative cost of the two **routes**. It turned out that the cost of the canal route proposed by the Irrigators' Association was lower. The Provincial Irrigation Engineer conceded to the Irrigators' Association.

INSIGHTS AND PROGRAM CONCERNS

The following **are** a few important lessons learnt **from** the Siwaragan experience:

1. There is a need for adequate lead time in organizing to prepare the farmers to actively participate. The organizer needs time to contend with the geographical conditions of the project, **to** establish rapport with and trust among farmers, and to allow for the gradual development of their leadership skills.
2. Intensive farmer involvement in all project activities **serves** to develop a strong **association** and a functional irrigation system.
3. Even during the preconstruction stage, the National Irrigation Administration should **discuss** with the farmers the possible operation and maintenance issues and implications with regard to the proposed structures and facilities to be constructed. Had the farmers been deeply aware

of this in Siwaragan they could have contributed more to the betterment of the **operation** and maintenance of their system.

4. A well-developed Irrigators' Association **can sustain** the travails of a prolonged construction period without the interest of farmers waning.

The following are considered important program concerns, mostly **as** a result of the Siwaragan experience:

1. The National Irrigation Administration should develop an instrument or process **to** indicate Irrigators' Association functionality status prior **to** partial or full irrigation community organizer manpower pullout from the project.
2. The National Irrigation Administration should formulate plans **to** develop the capability of line units for efficient and effective program management and implementation.
3. The National Irrigation Administration should pay more attention **to** improving the **operation** and maintenance intervention for communal irrigation systems.
4. The National Irrigation Administration should make long-term plans to ascertain the nature and status of irrigation community organizer employment with the agency.

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