

# TURNOVER: THE COLOMBIAN EXPERIENCE

Colombia is a country of 30 million people with an area of 1.1 million sq. km. The country is blessed with abundant water resources represented by more than 1,000 perennial rivers. Of the 6.6 million ha identified as having high irrigated agriculture potential (through provision of irrigation, drainage and/or flood control), only 11.4 percent or 750,473 ha have been developed. This consists of 525,869 ha under irrigation and 224,604 ha with drainage and/or flood protection facilities.

155,454 ha of land are irrigated by the public sector (including 22,652 ha developed for farmer management) while 370,415 ha are completely under private sector management.

The institutions of the public sector dealing with land development have been numerous and their achievements have been modest at best. To date, a total of 30 irrigation districts\* have been built by the public sector. In the late 1970s, it became evident that the irrigation districts were facing serious difficulties. A lack of resources prevented the various institutions from

bringing these projects to completion. This was aggravated when the water users refused to pay for the inefficient services provided, which led to further deterioration of project facilities.

In 1976, the government decided to establish a new institute, the Colombian Institute for Hydrology, Meteorology and Land Development (HIMAT) which would be responsible for overall land development activities. HIMAT was instructed to supervise the transfer of the management responsibilities of the Coello District (44,100 ha) to its water users' association, ASOCOELLO. This was the first case of irrigation system turnover in Colombia, and one of the earliest in South America.

The turnover of the Coello District is generally viewed today as a success story, a rare early example in developing countries. Collection rates on water charges are at 100 percent and the district gets no help in financing its annual O & M expenses. Turnover has succeeded for several reasons: highly motivated and trained personnel, good management, regular

maintenance, adequate transportation and communication facilities, and the dynamism of the private farming sector and support services in Colombia.

Despite these good results, the turnover program came practically to a standstill in 1980. Colombia, like other countries of the region, was facing a deep recession and went through what was to be called the "lost decade." In many countries, severe financial pressures are driving turnover as a rapid adjustment. Contrastingly in Colombia, severe lack of resources actually prevented the agency from taking any new initiatives — because of the Colombian position that physical and institutional development should precede management transfer. Such development was temporarily unaffordable.

In early 1990, with the economic crisis receding, the RUT District (9,500 ha) was transferred to the water users' association, ASORUT. Since then, three more large districts have joined the turnover process: Saldana

*\*In Colombia, the terminology "irrigation districts" applies to areas provided with irrigation, drainage and flood protection works, either individually or in combinations thereof.*

(14,049 ha), Rio Recio (10,374 ha) and Samaca (1,533 ha). Irrigation fees are generally based on actual system-level costs. The turnover program involves a strong emphasis on training water users' association leaders in technical, financial, and other managerial aspects of irrigation.

Preliminary assessment of the impact of the turnover process in the RUT system points towards similar positive achievements as experienced by Coello. Water distribution, maintenance, and crop production have all shown improvements since turnover took place. The present rate of water charges recovery stands at 100 percent, although this amount covers only 80 percent of the total O & M expenses. The RUT pumps its water from the Cauca River. At present, the pumping cost represents 25 percent of total expenses. This figure has been increasing yearly and projections put the percentage at 33 percent by the year 1997. The cost of pumping is now ASORUT's main

concern, since it could affect system performance in the long run. Other large-scale systems given over to farmers' associations have not been in their hands long enough to make any significant evaluation of their experiences.

Another turnover approach that the government is currently undertaking is the so-called "mini-districts" program. This program develops farmer-managed irrigation systems which have an average area of 70 ha. The projects are designed, built and implemented jointly by newly created associations and government agencies (which expect to recover up to 50% of the investment costs). The subsidies are justified on the basis of the small farm size of the intended beneficiaries. Some 20,000 ha under this new program are now developed. No evaluation of performance has yet taken place. Up to 80,000 ha represented by 850 "mini-districts" have been targeted for development over the next six years.

For the remainder of the century, the government is contemplating an aggressive land development program in which farmer self-management stands as a major component of the strategy. Both, HIMAT and existing Regional Development Authorities will be turning over irrigation districts to water users. A federation of water users' associations, Colombian Federation of Irrigation Districts (FEDERIEGOS), is already in place to act as a coordinator of turnover activities. A new Land Development Law has already been enacted by the government to guarantee funding of the program and provide legal support for enforcement of rules and regulations.

Turnover in Colombia can be considered relatively successful so far, and will be a major government policy for the foreseeable future in the context of irrigation development of the country. (Carlos Garces, IIMI)