

WATER USER ASSOCIATIONS - POTENTIAL AND LIMITATIONS

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Abstract

Water user associations, popularly known as Farmer Organizations, have been promoted world over and also in Sri Lanka as mechanisms for improved management of water supply for irrigation purposes, especially during the last two decades. There have been isolated success stories but in general the results have been far below the expectations. Some attribute this failure to the lack of commitment shown by the implementing agencies including the change agents, some others to the lack of commitment of the political and administrative leadership & lack of coherent Government policy while others attribute these to the inadequacies and ineffectiveness of the mechanisms adopted. However, author questions the adequacy and correctness of the concept itself. He questions whether the intrinsic characters of the farming community and the character of the farmer organisation that could emerge from such a community, had been adequately analyzed when the program was first conceptualized or reviewed thereafter. He also questions whether there was any attempt to assess the extrinsic factors, probable level of commitment of implementing agencies, administrative and political leadership, one could anticipate for this kind of a program, during its conceptualization. The need to have a realistic anticipation about the level of operation for farmer organizations, analyzing each individual case (spatial factor), in a given time (temporal factor), in irrigation water supply projects, is stressed.

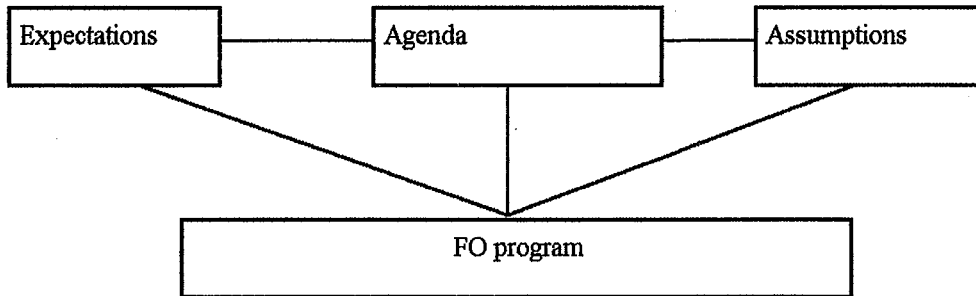
1. Introduction

Water user associations, popularly known as Farmer Organizations, have been promoted world over and also in Sri Lanka as mechanisms for improved management of irrigation water. These organizations through their involvement and participation, in operation & maintenance, water saving & water management programs and rehabilitation of their systems, were anticipated to make the necessary improvements. These organizations also have been used for various other management improvements in areas outside management of water resources, like agricultural input management, crop diversification, increase agricultural productivity, increase farmer income and redistribution of income, etc. by various agencies.

The program was launched, in Sri Lanka, in 1984 and since then lot of additions and improvements had been made to the program. Many have reviewed the success of the program and commented on certain drawbacks. However, very few have questioned the conceptual base of the program. The authors who have attempted to analyze concepts, have limited their analysis to one or few concepts. This article attempts to question the total conceptual base of water user associations.

2. Farmer Organisation Program

The program for farmer organisation derived its features from the expectations of various stakeholders (donor agencies, irrigation managers, policy planners, etc.,) and from various agendas these stakeholders had drawn up for FOs. These were formulated based on the assumptions they had regarding the farming community.



All these contributed in various ways to the culmination of the program as at today. Let us analyze each in detail.

2.1 The Expectations

FOs, initially formed to take up water management responsibilities, were later assigned with other activities. The FOs were to become mechanisms for complete revival of rural agriculture and standard living of the rural poor.

The booklet on **Guiding Principles on Farmer Organizations in Major Irrigation Systems**, published by Sheladia Associate for the Irrigation System Management Project (funded by USAID), has given a vague but sufficiently broad objectives for farmer organizations including, "encourage farmers to increase family income through self employment of family members through greater productivity and self employment projects" and "to develop self confidence and self reliance of the farming community (Ganewatta, 1990:p.4)". This throws some light about how broad the expectations were.

Farmers had the least expectations, out of all the stakeholders. Farmers mainly were cautious from the very beginning and were reluctant in shouldering the burden when they were influenced and indirectly forced (in some cases) by the so called institutional organizers who had been appointed to organize farmers. "After 5 years of intensive work by the Irrigation Management Division (which was responsible for developing farmer organizations) only 39% to 85% of the farmers were aware of the program objectives" among the schemes that were taken for an appraisal study by Agrarian Research Training Institute (ARTI, 1989: p.217).

2.2 Various Agendas

Apart from the expectations, these stakeholders also had various agendas worked out for FOs. Some wanted the farmer organisation to grow up to take over the complete management of irrigation schemes (Jayawardana, 1990:p.206). Some wanted the farmer organizations to grow up to regional fertilizer and agro-chemical dealers replacing the present traders and also become construction contractors that comes within its purview (Kuruppu, 1190:p.64). Others wanted farmer organizations to grow up to become cooperative marketing societies, to fight the middle men who normally take the bulk of the profits earned by the farmers. Some others wanted the farmers to take up the burden of planning, designing, constructing and supervising of the entire rehabilitation program (IIMI, 1993:p.II-4). Hettige summarizes these efforts, in his paper presented at the IRMU workshop on **Emerging Power Relations In Farmer Organizations** as follows.

"The advocates of the farmer participation have tended to progressively enlarge the scope of such participation".

Some of these subscribers even didn't have any doubts regarding the potential of the farmer organisation to undertake this kind of expanded agendas. They only had doubts regarding the capability of the Government machinery to cater for such a vast number of FOs. "Problem initially is one of the logistics. In the Mahaweli Project we have over 5000 turnout areas. The sustained interest and enthusiasm of all the officers at all levels, involved with farmers' organizations, are absolutely necessary to make a success of this exercise (Jayawardane, 1990, p.207)".

Here again farmers were the least prepared and were without such agendas. They kept watching what was to be unraveled by the exercise.

2.3 The Assumptions On Which The Farmer Organisation Concept Is Based.

When one looks at the original documents (like Program for integrated management of major Irrigation Schemes - INMAS - 1984, Information Booklet), though not explicitly stated, one could see what the underlying assumptions were, in the minds of the pioneers, of the FOs. Some of those major assumptions are listed below.

1. Farmers are a **homogeneous group**, they share a common destiny, objectives, resources and a livelihood and therefore will have every thing to gain from uniting with the fellow farmers (like industrial workers).
2. Farmers are strong enough to have an **independent life**. As a result they will be able to stand firm in decisions, without having to be guided by the power centers that operate in the community. It is possible to build up an alternative leadership (alien to the existing power structure, challenging it) in the rural society.

3. **Farmers would be willing to exercise their democratic rights, willing to openly express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction about their leaders in a community setting (like industrial workers). They are radical.**
4. **Farmers still are the old traditional farmers, not influenced by the present day market forces that are sweeping across the country. Farmers would be rational in sharing the common resources as they had been doing in the past. It is unlikely that there will be issues that need third party mediation to resolve, as the farmers would be treating the group goals superior to the individual goals. Therefore they still would be prepared to forego one's own benefit, in favor of equitable benefit to the group. Farmers, not only individually but also in groups, will not organize to get a lion share, depriving the other farmers or farmer groups their legitimate rights, in a crisis. The group pressure will suffice to deal with the members who violate the FO decisions and therefore any legal powers need not be assigned to the organizations. Under these circumstances the participation of all stakeholders in decision making can replace the existing regulatory (command and control) administration.**
5. **Farmers, once given the choice of managing their own resources would be more effective and efficient than the officers, because they themselves are the beneficiaries. So they could be used in rehabilitation programs as contractors or supervising units, to undertake or supervise the rehabilitation work.**
6. **Farmers, once organized will be able to manage their schemes with minimum Government intervention, to the satisfaction of the majority of farmers, at least compared to their counterparts (managers) in the Government Departments. Finally they will grow up to become organizations which could take over the schemes entirely from the Government.**
7. **Farmers have very little work outside their paddy fields and as it is their main livelihood, they could use all the balance time available (which has no value) for farmer organisation activities.**
8. **Farmers will not face any resistance, in their effort to establish themselves as a new force in the rural community, from the established power centers. The power centers will withdraw without making any noise when the farmers enter into their domains, because an united farming community will be stronger than these power centers.**
9. **There will be sufficient commitment from the implementing agencies, political leadership, etc. Those agencies do not constitute separate power groups and therefore would not see the emerging new organisation as a threat, but would look at as something they could share their power with.**

10. The technological system, used by a centrally managed bureaucracy, could be used by a democratic body, working voluntarily, without any modification.
11. The technology, adopted by learned and trained experts, could be effectively transferred to the farmer organizations.

3. Results

There are farmer organizations which have been dormant from the very beginning. There are others which have done successfully over a length of time and suddenly collapsed dramatically. There are still others doing a satisfactory service to the members, though they have not grown up to the expectations of the founders of the FO concept.

The most positive attribute, of the farmer organisation program, was that a formal forum had been made available for officers and farmers to communicate with each other. Whether it brought any results is debatable. "There is agreement between the farmers and officials that the Project Committee system has facilitated communication of farmers' problems to the relevant implementing agencies. It is the farmers' view however that this has not brought about concrete actions" (ARTI, 1982: p.218).

Though there had been some positive attributes, all in all, the program had not fulfill most of the expectations.

4. Factors Of Failure

Factors for failure, as often attributed by researchers, are many. Some attribute this failure to the lack of commitment shown by the implementing agencies of these programs (Irrigation Department, Agrarian Services Department, etc.), including the change agents (Institutional Organizers, Social Organizers, etc.) and the agencies responsible solely to organize farmers (Irrigation Management Division, etc.), some others to the lack of commitment of the political and administrative leadership (Ministers and the Ministries) & lack of coherent Government Policy (import policy, political interference in irrigation management, etc.) while others attribute these to the inadequacies and ineffectiveness of the mechanisms adopted (wrong change agent selection, wrong focus, weak human resource development, etc.).

There is no doubt that the above factors would have contributed to the failure. But the argument that those were the deciding factors or the major reasons, is not that convincing. To find out the fundamental problems one has to revisit the concept itself. To review the concept we need to look at how the farmer organizations develop and exist as at today.

5. Different phases in the development of a farmer organisation

Generally, a farmer organisation passes through various phases in its development.

Phase 1 - (Power centers in vigilance)

Farmer organizations are formed within a social system, where there are established power centers. Irrigation Bureaucracy, Velvidane, Grama Niladhari, the community political leadership, the traders, agrochemical agents, money lender, big land owner, encroachers, illegal water tappers are some of the power centers. FOs emerge in an environment, where relative balance of power among these various power groups exists, with already established power relationships. The relationship could be through kinship, multiple role playing or through other transactions and agreements of mutual nature. During the initial phase, these power centers watch the emerging new power, cautiously.

Phase 2 - (Realignment of forces and responding)

If the farmer organisation shows any sign of strength coupled with signs of encroachment in to the domain of existing power centers, they start reacting. The new relationships among these power centers start emerging to face such threats. (The Agro-chemical traders in a particular District gathered in a hotel to discuss how to face the impending threat of FOs, which were trying to enter the agro-chemical distribution business).

During this phase the threatened power centers make various threats. The threats can take different forms, including verbal intimidation, physical assault, ignoring or passing remarks. Most leaders cannot withstand even this initial pressure and leave the farmer organizations for good. Some other succumbs to the reality by settling for lesser objectives, by trying to come to terms with the established power structure. Through this, they unknowingly start serving the established power structure.

Phase 3 (Negotiation Stage)

If the resistance is not successful, the power centers will try to come to terms with the farmer organisation. They will approach the leaders, bribe them, guide them to their own destinations, use them, share the individual visions with them. By this they will try to dilute the net threat to their power. (Eg. One of the farmer leaders at Kaudualla scheme was given Whisky plus plus to destroy the emerging organisation, according to several farmers who were interviewed by researchers- author himself was a member of the research team).

Phase 4 (Destabilizing attempts)

If such is also not possible, they will try to plant their ploys in the organisation and disrupt the organisation work or make use it to their benefit. (Some farmers have complained to the researchers, it is the IO or Project Manager who will eventually elect the leaders. Their patronage is valued by the average farmer and very rarely it is challenged. In some cases, it had been the local politician. In one of the incidents, a powerful priest in the area had asked the appointed leader to resign and declared himself as the president of the Organisation). These power centers will also try to make use of the office of the farmer organisation as a means of promoting their power, through their installed ploys (the contractors will get the farmer organisation seal to get contracts at estimated rates).

Phase 5 (Restoration of a power balance)

If every thing fails they will seek combined administrative, political and social power to control the leaders, not amenable. (Eg: Certain Institutional Organizers, who were behind success of some farmer organizations, had to leave the schemes because the administration authority was forced to do so by this combine power of the established power centers. There had been occasions where the farmer organizations have been dissolved by officials to satisfy certain power centers). In rare cases there had been compromises in power sharing too, especially the farmer organizations have been strong and other power centers relatively weak.

However all farmer organizations doesn't go through all these stages. Some FOs, having representatives of various power centers within its office would not face any threat. Actually these power centers will be using these organizations as extended arms of their power bases. (Eg: Irrigation Bureaucracy use them as information collectors, ditch riders, etc.,). Their existence will never be threatened.

In some occasions, farmer organizations have been used by some power centers against others in their power struggle, from the very beginning. There also had been occasions where farmer organizations had been used by individuals to get individual privileges from the very beginning. (Eg: Some Institutional Organizers to safeguard their casual employment, some officers to claim for foreign scholarships over their colleagues, some researchers to get research assignments and grants).

In all these instances, a FO will not go through most of the phases described above, but through a different course, something nurtured carefully by external factors. If somebody says that these individuals often become responsible in pumping life blood to the otherwise dying organizations, they are not very far from the truth.

Having gone through the process of growth of the farmer organizations among existing power blocks, we are now in a position to revisit the assumptions and concepts behind the FO program.

6. Assumptions And Concepts Revisited

Most of the assumptions made are not correct, at least for most of the schemes. Some would stand only to some degree that also under certain conditions.

1. Farmers are not a homogeneous group. They constitute a stratified community. Stratified into diverse classes which have conflicting interests. They do not share a common destiny, objectives or even resources. Some are very affluent and they have their destiny beyond the boundaries of the scheme. Destiny of others who are less affluent will be confined within the scheme for many more years. Some have very large land holdings while others have to depend entirely on the mercy of the land owners for cultivation. Their livelihood vary greatly. While some are wage earners who live on a daily income, others enjoy various incomes generated outside agriculture.

The rich, privilege farmers, who have wider objectives and destiny beyond the horizons of the village community and having comparable resources at their disposal, therefore will have most of the things to loose from uniting with the 'fellow' farmers who have a restricted destiny, objectives and resources. Some of the interests of these privileged farmers will therefore antagonize that of the common farmer.

"Politicians, researchers, irrigation system managers and other Government officials speak in many instances of farmers as a homogeneous group, but, as this paper shows, it is clear that farmers are not a homogeneous category. In the Kirindi Oya case, water users strive with or against their fellow farmers for their own benefits. This raises important questions about or for themselves in the struggle for water allocations (Somarathne and Gosslink, 1996:p.74)".

2. Average farmer is very weak and has to depend on one another and specially on the rich and privilege sections of his/her own community for money, resources and even sometimes for livelihood. As a result, he/she will not be able to stand firm in decision making, having to get guided by the power centers that operate in the community. Therefore it is difficult to build up an alternative leadership (alien to the existing power structure, challenging it) in the rural society.

Average farmer would not be willing to exercise his/her democratic rights nor would be willing to openly express his/her satisfaction or dissatisfaction about the leaders in a community setting (meeting), like industrial workers. They are not as radical as urban workers. Kind of serfdom in subtle form exist in the rural society.

3. Farmers are no longer the old traditional farmers with inherited sacred cultural values, but influenced by the present day market forces. They are not immune to those as some would like to think. The rate at which they are exposed to this 'wind' would depend on various factors. But it is only the time delay that would need everybody to expose to these ideals and values. Farmers who are influenced by the individualistic culture would be rational in maximizing their individual output than sharing the common resources as they had been doing in the past. These conflicts will require third party mediation.

4. Farmer leaders, once given the choice of managing their own resources would (in most cases) use them to their personal advantage like the officers themselves, if not checked by others (fellow farmers or officers). This is something inherent in humans as revealed by the sociology research.

Therefore they could even be less effective and efficient than the officers (not knowing how to do the wrong things, effectively). So when they are used in rehabilitation programs as contractors or supervising groups, they prove that they are to an extent guided by the personal motive than common motives. The extent to which they are guided by the personal motives, will depend more on the checks and balances available and used, and not necessarily by any inner restraint. The pilferation changes hand and more often is shared.

5. Farmer Organizations have been very rarely successful in managing their own affairs and often called for Government intervention. There are complains of favourations and deprivations, by fellow farmers. Finally they demand that Government should intervene to correct such malpractice.

"The conflict over seasonal allocation decisions among sub-system farmers and their leaders often bring opportunities to politicians to intervene (Somaratne & Gosslink, 1996:p.25)

6. Farmers no longer considers farming as their main lively-hood and therefore engage in work outside their paddy fields whenever possible and majority of them have very little balance time available for farmer organisation activities. There is a value for the time in rural society unlike in the past.

On the other hand, there is also a cost associate with the activities of the farmer organisation. Especially for a leadership role this cost would be substantial. "Most of the regular settlers in the Mahaweli and other irrigated settlement schemes are at the subsistence level of day-to-day existence and relative poverty, though a relatively few are at abject poverty levels in comparison to mass absolute poverty that prevails elsewhere...Where more youthful members who have the personality drive to assume leadership positions in farmer organizations...are precluded from doing so on account of their realization of the costs associated with assumption of leadership" (Wanigarathne, 1996:p.104).

7. Farmers have faced severe resistance wherever they have put an effort to establish themselves as a new force in the rural community from the established power centers.
8. There had not been sufficient (to the extent anticipated by the original promoters) commitment from the implementing agencies, political leadership, etc. In fact they have seen the emerging new organisation as a threat wherever successful organizations have come up.

One reason was that the new organizations had to challenge the power concentrated in these implementing agencies if the FOs were to do some useful contribution to its members, which of course will rarely get a favorable response from the agencies that enjoy power.

The other important reason is that these organisation never had a culture of participatory management in their own organizations. These organizations had very authoritarian and hierarchical structures that never promoted any participatory culture. It was too much to expect from them, to exercise that on others when they did not have the opportunity of "consuming" such a "luxury".

9. It is difficult (not impossible) to use the same technological system, used by a centrally managed bureaucracy, by a democratically elected farmer organisation which function on a voluntary basis.
10. It is difficult (not impossible) to transfer the technology, adopted by learned and trained experts, to the farmer organizations.

In most cases the reality lies in between the original assumptions and the assumptions as revisited. Each scheme is different and each situation is different. There had been some leaders within the community who could steer the organisation through all rough seas and developed them to fine organizations, sometime proving the original assumptions. But those had been very rare. In majority of the cases, the results had been very disappointing and those prove the assumptions as revisited. In the next section, the critical factors for success is reviewed, using the modified assumptions.

7. Critical Factors Reviewed

The critical factors can be classified into intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The factors, that are internal to and inherent in, the farming community, is considered intrinsic. Factors, that are external and influences on the farming community, is considered extrinsic. If farmer organisation is compared to a plant, intrinsic factors would resemble the quality and variety of the seed, natural fertility of the soil, climate, etc., which are difficult to change and extrinsic factors would resemble fertilizers, agro-chemicals, labor inputs, etc., which can be regulated by external forces outside the plant. Most reviews on the farmer organizations have failed to identify the important difference between the two factors and often put emphasize on extrinsic factors, as a result.

The spatial and temporal effects on both these intrinsic and extrinsic factors, have to be reckoned by the promoters of the farmer organizations. They should not try to have a fixed model for the farmer organizations, where one nice formulae could be applied to make it work, everywhere any time.

7.1 Intrinsic Factors

1. Strength of the leadership

This could be the most important factor in deciding the strength of the farmer organisation. The rural societies have lot of cultural constraints which restrict building up an alternative leadership against the traditional leadership. Traditional leadership in the village, being mostly conservative, cannot challenge the established power centers. They sometimes have become the new power centers themselves in the new society or have very close relationships with those power centers. Existence of this traditional leadership viz. a viz. the power centers and potential for an alternative leadership that could come up in between these two camps, will decide strength of the new organisation. Unfortunately alternative leadership is a rare thing to find.

Spatial effect

This situation is more critical in traditional village schemes in remote Sri Lanka and less so in settlement schemes and schemes close to urban areas.

Temporal effect

The situation is also not static. The information technology and other changes around the world, would be influencing the rural societies to a great degree in time to come.

2. Strength of the average farmer

This provides the strength to the leader and also check him from doing wrong things. It gives aspiration to march ahead and at the same time direct the leader in to the correct path whenever he sides-track. Unfortunately this is very weak in most schemes. Either average farmer is very poor and dependent, he is unable to inspire or challenge the leader or he has no time, knowledge or the capability of doing it.

Spatial effect

This situation is more critical in traditional village schemes in remote Sri Lanka and less so in settlement schemes and schemes close to urban areas.

Temporal effect

This situation too is also not static. There had been few schemes where farmers have taken their destiny to their hands inspiring their own leaders and challenging the others.

3. Strength and weakness of the other power centers

When the other power cents wields only a single power source (economic, social, political or administrative) they normally tend to be weak. But generally it is not the case. A person having economic power either has accrued other sources of power or is already in the process of accruing. A person enjoying political power will also command

sufficient financial power and he will continue to accrue those using his present power. On the other hand most of the power centers have strong inter-relationships among them through kinship or otherwise. There could be rivalries also among the power centers and such could weaken their total and individual power. The rival power centers might use farmer organizations to outsmart their rivals. All these taken together will decide how they will be able to meet the challenges made by the farmer organizations. Same spatial and temporal consideration should apply to this factor too.

4. Strengths of the friends and well-wishers

Farmer organizations will not only have enemies but also friends and well-wishers. The village priest may support such organisation as it is accordance with the traditional values. Some NGOs will help the farmers to organize and mobilize them for collective activity, for a social purpose. Their strength will have positive effects on the farmer organisation. Same spatial and temporal consideration should apply to this factor too.

7.2 Extrinsic Factors

Extrinsic factors are many. Government policies and programs, change agents (institutional organizers), Government agencies, the particular officers working in the scheme, infrastructure facilities available, land tenure patterns, market structure and market changes are some of them. Those (both in spatial and temporal forms) will have an influence over the development of the farmer organizations.

When the average land holding size is less, there would be little interest in the community in irrigation management and therefore in the farmer organisation. When the land tenure patterns are complicated and ownership is not very clear, again there would be less interest. If the system is not operating well due to deterioration, there will be less interest in managing the system because of the sheer impossibility. These indicate that extrinsic factors, like land tenure and infrastructure, also influence the so called intrinsic factors and though can be classified separately, would have an equally greater impact on the strength of the organisation.

8. Conclusions

Unfortunately, the total picture of an irrigation scheme has not been identified with all its intricacies and ramifications as explained above, by the promoters of the farmer organisation. They also have seen the requirement and potential of farmer organisation as same for all schemes, at all times. Therefore not only there assumptions had been wrong, they also have failed to realize the broad variation of irrigation schemes across the country (and time).

Influenced also by the same reasons, the promoters of farmer organizations had higher expectations of the farmer organizations. They thought farmer organizations could undertake

virtually every activity in the irrigation scheme and finally to their dismay, had to accept that the organizations have rarely achieve any satisfactory results even in any single activity. The farmer organizations are considered the medicine for all the ills in an irrigation scheme, miracle solution for all the problems, and finally ended up in delivering very little. At least now we should take a good look at the socio-economic-political structure of the rural society that encompasses irrigation schemes and assess the actual potential the farmer organizations have in this setting.

The farmer organizations should be considered as another tool and not the only tool available for irrigation managers. The irrigation managers should not be dictated from a central office as to what he should do with the farmer organizations. The farmer organizations should not replace what is available today but supplement it. What farmer organizations cannot do in a given scheme, in a given time, should be matched by managers with other possible tools and means available and the situation should be continuously reviewed.

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