

EXPERIENCES FROM SINDH AND PUNJAB

SOCIAL MOBILIZATION PROCESS IN FARMER MANAGED IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE'- LESSONS LEARNT

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INTRODUCTION

The Government of Sindh has enacted a law to establish the Sindh Irrigation and Drainage Authority (SIDA). The four main objectives for the SIDA act are to: decentralize the management of the irrigation and drainage system; to establish more responsive, efficient and transparent management, to ensure equity of water distribution and effective drainage management, and to introduce participatory and financially self-supporting management. The package of institutional reforms proposed by the Government includes three components: transformation of PIDs to autonomous PIDAs; creation of AWBs; and encouraging formation of FOs at the distributary or minor level through a pilot project. The law empowers SIDA to promote the formation of Farmers Organizations around distributary and minor canals (Bandaragoda et al, 1997).



The Action Research Program of the 'Pilot Project for Farmer-Managed Irrigated Agriculture' in Sindh province of Pakistan has been undertaken by the International Irrigation Management Institute (IIMI). The program aims at enabling these Farmers' Organizations (FOs) to assume responsibilities for operation and maintenance (O&M), recover the cost through collection of water and drainage charges, and improve water management practices. Considering the complex social context a four-phase process is adopted, which includes: (1) support mobilization; (2) initial organization; (3) organization consolidation and (4) organization action.

During the first phase of the project the FOs were formed at the Bareji Distributary, Heran Distributary and Dloro Naro Minor in the districts, Mirpurkhas, Sanghar and Nawabshah, respectively by IIMI. The project expects to form farmer organizations on additional 10 distributaries at Jamrao Canal command area through National Drainage Program (NDP) Sindh.

Viability of an organization depends on its strength to make internal rules and to apply these rules effectively. Collective action enhances the effect of individual actions. However, considering that some persons' enhanced actions are likely to adversely affect the welfare of the others, the organization also has to collectively restrain individual action whenever necessary. Thus, the use of agreed rules becomes important, and an apt definition that is related to users groups is that "an institution is collective action in restraint, liberation and expansion of individual action" (Parsons 1984:28).

It has been expected that by the end of the 1990s, farmers will be able to mobilize all the resources required for operation and maintenance of the portions of irrigation systems under their management (IMPISA 1991). Upasena et. al 1996 clearly mention that the success of the

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participatory management policy requires the development of effective institutions among farmers for irrigation management.

After formation of FOs on pilot distributaries, second step is to register them with SIDA. The registration would legally empower FOs, enable them to mutually prepare and sign the irrigation transfer management document to take over the responsibility of irrigation system. This has not yet been possible, as the Government of Sindh has not approved the rules and regulations.

Lessons Learnt

The paper presents some of the lessons learned in the social mobilization process. These lessons are important for the other interested organizations, individuals and agencies to understand, and conceptualize the process of establishing farmers' organizations.

Government's Commitment

Most of the water users interviewed wished that political influence should be avoided in the formation of proposed FOs and AWBs. As the PIDA institutional reforms have a potential of bringing a significant change in the socio-economic status of the majority of the people in the area, there should be adequate safeguards against the possible obstacles that can be caused by a few who might get affected in the short term. Some argue that the sustainability of the proposed changes cannot be envisaged without a clear government commitment to devise such safeguards, including effective land reforms.

The irrigation and power department has provided essential support from the very beginning of the extended project and also support to form the farmers' organizations at the new distributaries/minors. The support from the agencies shall have to be continued, even after the irrigation management transfer is complete.

The water users were of the opinion that more than fifty percent of the members in the Area Water Boards and SIDA should be farmer representatives selected by the distributary level FOs. This strategy alone could avert any undue influence of the existing political and bureaucratic systems on the smooth functioning of the new organizations. The water users perceive that the establishment of the SIDA in this more transparent and more democratic manner will have a greater chance of improving the reliability and equitability of water distribution in the canal system. The reliable and equitable supply of the irrigation water, rather than more water, is the essential requirement for improving agriculture production.

There is a widespread belief among the water users that a more democratically constituted SIDA-AWB-FO system with adequate people's participation will improve the maintenance and operation of the canal system, which has deteriorated due to prolonged maintenance deficiencies. Consequently, the supply of water will be improved and shortages, particularly at the tail end of the system, can be overcome. Further, the performance of lower level irrigation staff will significantly improve when they are made accountable to the FOs.

Legal Empowerment to the FOs

One of the major activities in the organizational consolidation phase is to obtain the necessary support for the fledgling farmer organizations to be institutionalized within the broader socio-economic environment. This support has to be solicited from the government, which is the appropriate authority to provide an enabling environment for social organization as one of its prime responsibilities in institutional development. The Government's demonstrated willingness to accept

these new organizations on the basis of a legal framework, including a mechanism for their registration, would greatly facilitate the process of FOs gaining wide recognition as an institution, or as a useful formal group (Bandaragoda et al, 1997).

Transparency

The transparency in accounts is important in a farmers' organization to gain the trust among their members. The record of the funds generated by the FO in the shape of membership fee and donations from the members has been properly maintained by the FO Treasurer and was audited by the Chartered Accountant during the month of July 1999. The members also present their financial position in the general meeting. It has been declared that every member has a right to check the accounts any time. It is observed that the selection for the position of treasurers of watercourse association and farmers organization is based on honesty and most of the treasurers are selected on their previous record of honesty.

Politics are not involved

Almost all the water users who have been selected as office bearers and the management committee members are associated with one of the political parties of the country. It is worth mentioning that these members have never used their political platform to get these positions.

Bringing the Line Agencies Closer

Successful implementation and the sustenance of participatory irrigation management depend upon the roles effectively played by the farmers and various government agencies responsible to ensure inputs and extension services. The services of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) are also essential to bridge the service gaps between the farmers and the various government agencies. (Elumalai, 1997).

The actual responsibility for organizing water users lay with the operating agencies and the water users themselves, while IIMI's field teams played a catalyst's role in social organization activities. To give effect to this "ownership" concept, the strategy was to introduce a mechanism to have the participation of a number of selected representatives from field level agency staff (Irrigation, On-Farm Water Management, Agriculture Extension, Agriculture Bank, Agriculture Development Authority, etc.). This arrangement was called the Field Implementation Coordination Committee (FICC), which was meant to help the catalyst, as well as the participating agency field staff and water users to collaborate with one another closely on a regular basis

It was observed that soon after the introduction of FICC, all the related government agencies and farmer representatives, formed a convenient platform to discuss farmers' common problems related to irrigation services and agricultural production. The most important aspect of the FICC's success was that the discussions on problems were soon followed by some actions to bring the relevant services to the field. With the support of various FICC members, the identified activities were carried out at the farm level for the socio-economic benefit of the farmers.

Involvement of Social Volunteers Organizers

The concept of involving community-based local volunteers in the social organisation work was introduced with the purpose to use them as a bridge between the small field team and the community. Selecting some suitable persons from the local community as volunteers was an important strategy in the social organization process. The volunteers identified were named as "Social Organisation Volunteers" (SOVs).

Members of the community, who were adequately informed about the community and its needs, and prepared to assist the action research process, were selected. The methodology of using local volunteers had the following advantages:

- Interventions could be routed through local people, causing little room for mistrust;
- The SOVs could reach the community in the pilot distributary command area fairly quickly, partially meeting the projects time constraint; and
- As SOVs were deployed on a voluntary basis, the method was cost-effective and could easily be applied on a wider scale.

Capacity Building of the Water Users

The experiences gained through the pilot project show that water users are instrumental in mobilizing local resources (human and financial) as they are contributing in cash, kind/ labor to the cost of developing operating and maintaining the tertiary unit. Farmers can contribute to system's improvement through financial and human resources and have an impressive capacity to articulate their problems.

An organisation can eventually grow into an institution when it establishes persistent patterns of norms and behaviour commonly accepted as valuable and useful to the membership. By then, it will have established accepted sets of rules and procedures for various functions of collective action. Such a system of rules cannot just happen, or spring up on administrative fiat, but it has to evolve over time. Only at this mature stage can a water users' organisation exercise successful collective action to both liberate and restraint individual water user's actions for the benefit of the group as a whole. The acceptability of the organisation by a substantial majority of its membership is an essential characteristic that determines its effectiveness in undertaking continuing tasks of water resources management, such as canal maintenance, water distribution, fee collection, conflict resolution and imposition of sanctions.

Willingness and Ability

The experience of mobilizing users for participatory water management gained by the action research program that the users are willing and capable to assume the new responsibility, but that the Government is not yet fully prepared for this change, as the bylaws have not yet been finalized. This sometimes makes it difficult even in the context of pilot projects to achieve significant progress in participatory water management.

Conclusion

The pilot projects have proved that farmer organizations (FOs) are socially viable and the members are ready to take the responsibilities of operation and maintenance of distributaries in addition to assessing and collecting abiyana (water charges). However the financial viability and sustainability of these FOs need to be tested.

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