

Institutional issues and arrangements in irrigation management (WUA)

Fitsum Hagos and Amare Hailelassie

International Water Management Institute, East Africa & Nile Basin Office, P O Box 5689, Addis
Ababa Ethiopia

Abstract

Availability of capable irrigation institution is closely linked with equitable distribution, efficient use of water and sustainable operation and maintenance (O&M) of irrigation schemes. However, the major focus in Ethiopia during the last three decades or so has been on developing irrigation infrastructures with little attention to their management, resulting in unfair distribution of water, overirrigation in the head- and water shortage in the tail-end, deteriorating infrastructures, low water use efficiency (WUE), and productivity and sustainability. Since the launch of Irrigation Water Users Association (IWUA) Proclamation in 2014, and its development in regional IWUA proclamations, defining IWUA, articulating the modalities for its organization, its services, among others, establishment and strengthening has been given attention. Although these proclamations issued a transition period of two years for the traditional and irrigation cooperatives to transfer themselves to IWUA, both institutions are still involved in the management of irrigation schemes. The objectives of this study, carried out in 9 selected schemes in four regions in Ethiopia: Amhara, Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples and Tigray regional states, were exploring the status of IWUAs, their organization, including their autonomy, water distribution, gender considerations and financial and office management. The results of the study indicated that current IWUA boundary is limited to schemes, although one of its roles is watershed management, without specifying the working relationship with watershed committees and absence of national policy framework for cost and benefit sharing arrangements between upstream and downstream users in a given watershed. The emergence of technologies (like motor pumps), individually managed but with system costs, causing, besides climate change, water shortages. Although the proclamations stipulate membership to be compulsory, there are still users who are non-members

encouraging free riding, unfair water distribution across reaches, and unfair application of rules. IWUAs are weak in O&M of irrigation infrastructures resulting in significant amount of water being lost due to leaky canals and seepage. This reduces irrigation intensity (estimated about 60-70%), resulting low WUE and land productivity. The level of equity across reaches is perceived unfair and is, in almost all schemes considered, found in favour of head-enders. Farmers' perception on the role of women in irrigation institutions is not encouraging to empower women. Finally, weak office and financial management is witnessed in many established IWUA limiting their function and financial capacity to undertake regular O&M. This is further exacerbated by the delay in implementation of water pricing and cost recovery in the country. Hence, farmers had no incentive to improve their irrigation practices and invest in water saving technologies. The implication of this study, IWUA in Ethiopia are still young, establishment and strengthening of these institutions, while maintaining their autonomy, though capacity building on financial management and research supports to enhance their financial capacity, O&M of the scheme and assessing and effective collection of water fees. This could be accompanied by policy support in issuing directives and guidelines on implementing water pricing and cost recovery.

Key words: water users associations, their organization, equitable water distribution, operation and maintenance services, sustainable irrigation development, Ethiopia