

BENEFICIARY PARTICIPATION IN IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT IS IT A REALITY ?

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Introduction

Irrigation plays the main role in agricultural development in arid and semi arid region and it has been singled out as a priority sector in many Third World Nations as it assures diverse development objectives, first being the production of food, a basic human requirement. Rapid increases in world's population have made the efficient use of irrigation water vitally important, particularly in poor countries. Concentrating on this point, Governments and donor agencies have heavily invested in rehabilitating and modernising existing schemes and constructing new schemes, with an anticipation of high returns and sustainability, but the results have been often disappointing, indicating poor performance as the main cause.

System managers have been very often blamed for this situation but this generalisation has not helped in any way to clarify the shortcoming or to rectify the situation. However, poor performance is a consequence of technical deficiencies in the design process (perhaps an important factor) and weaknesses in the management procedure. The means commonly recommended to remedy this situation seem to be complicated, indicating the need for detailed and systematic analysis of the issues concerned. This situation has created a challenge to the designers and the managers to evolve methods and lead the way to improve the performance. If this is achieved then it will rebuild confidence in irrigation engineering as a fruitful venture. Therefore, good management of irrigation systems is becoming increasingly recognised as an essential means to successful irrigated agriculture.

The problem of irrigation management is viewed at two levels, one at a very high level - National level - and the other one being at farm level or within the tertiary level of a scheme. About a decade ago, attention paid to tertiary level irrigation management was very scant, but presently

many international organisations and professionals are mainly concerned with this.

Management of an Irrigation System

An irrigation system includes both physical infrastructure - canals, hydraulic structures, control structures etc. - as well as management infrastructure - people who operate the system and the beneficiaries. Physical and managerial aspects are interdependent, but each has its own peculiarities. Technical knowledge and management skills of the operators and the beneficiaries will define the kind of physical system which is feasible. But, on the other hand, a feasible system depends on the type of technology chosen.

However, it is the responsibility of the manager to maintain the system in a desirable manner so that assured irrigation water could be delivered, adequately, timely and reliably. This needs mobilising resources - physical and human - with a proper planning for the period concerned. Apart from the physical resources, efficient utilisation of human resources involved in irrigation management is an important factor. Therefore the farmers, who are the direct beneficiaries of the irrigation development should be treated as the partners in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating irrigation development programme.

History of Beneficiary Participation

Beneficiary participation in the management of Irrigation system is one of the oldest methods established by man and still continues to be a useful means of developing and managing irrigation schemes. Ruins all over the world bear testimony to this, but very little literature is available today, describing the organisational arrangement under which these were carried out. Sri Lankan history too holds evidence of this fact but no literature can be quoted on this. Ruins of large ancient irrigation schemes in the dry

zone of Sri Lanka indicate the existence of irrigation schemes which fell in to disuse after foreign invasion. Thousands of minor irrigation schemes functioning even today in the dry zone of Sri Lanka could not have been managed by the Government or Kings but by the farmers or the beneficiaries. In the recent past ie. up to 1958, operation and maintenance of minor irrigation were carried out by farmers under the leadership of Vel Vidanes (Farmer leaders). Works included in operation and maintenance were desilting of tank bed and canals, filling the scours along the bund, strengthening the canal bunds, delivering water to farms etc. Unfortunately at some point, farmers ceased to continue doing operation and maintenance, creating a gap in this process, leading to the deterioration of the systems, and expecting the government to attend to these.

A new era in beneficiary participation commenced in 1978 at Minipe scheme and in 1979/80 at Kimbulwana Oya scheme in an organised manner with no additional financial support. Since then due attention has been paid by the authorities concerned to this and action has been taken to introduce this vital component of beneficiary participation in project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluating the process of rehabilitating / modernising schemes and in normal O & M activities. Gal Oya rehabilitation project launched under USAID programme demonstrated this very clearly.

Objectives of Beneficiary Participation

Due to the complicated tasks involved in managing an irrigation system by its multi disciplinary nature, no manager can undertake the responsibility of delivering the guaranteed amount of water to the farm or mobilise the resources to maintain the system down to the farm ditch level. Sharing the responsibility of operating and maintaining the system equally by the managers as well as the beneficiaries will be more effective and lead to better performance. Overall objectives of beneficiary participation is to assure a sustainable irrigation system with high performance which is not hindered by

- Low water use efficiency
- Inequity in water distribution among the plots as well as among the control units
- High cost of O & M
- Difficulty in organising inputs in time
- Technical deficiencies in the system
- Ineffective communication between the operators and the beneficiaries

Beneficiary participation is suggested as a remedial measure in order to realise a higher level of performance through minimising the deficiencies and maximising the outputs of a system.

Pre-requisites for Beneficiary Participation

Poor performance in a system is mainly due to lack of definition of management and beneficiary responsibilities apart from the technical deficiencies in the system. It is very important to enlist the involvement of beneficiaries with an appropriate legal framework, right from the beginning to enable them to participate effectively. Planning process should be one of working together rather than one of patronising or confronting. All the services provided to them should be comprehensive and within their capacity to participate actively in managing the system. In the same way strong participation could be achieved if there is an integrated participation and coordination among the beneficiaries and officials.

Since this kind of beneficiary participation is at its introductory level in Sri Lanka first step in this process is to demonstrate the need for it. Beneficiaries should be made aware clearly that the scheme belongs to them, and the government and the officials are only facilitating them to carry out a successful cultivation. Managers too must be made aware of this concept and clear definitions of responsibilities should be established. As a starting point, beneficiaries should be persuaded to participate at tertiary level, vesting the responsibility of distributing water and operation and maintenance of the system on them. Most of the identified wastage of water and conflicts are at this level, indicating the greatest need to solve this problem. This is an area where most agencies have found difficulty to discharge the tasks involved, leading to poor performance. This procedure may be extended to secondary level at a latter stage, depending on the success at tertiary level. Another important factor in persuading the farmers to accept these new tasks in managing the system is that the farmers also will seek new rights and returns. There has to be some kind of deal that gives them perceptive benefits, if a durable and meaningful beneficiary participation system is to be expected.

Further, special attention should be paid in deciding the optimum size and composition of the beneficiary group to handle the wide range of functions. Hydrological boundaries, social relations, crop types, cultural practices, management possibilities, type of soils etc. are some of the governing factors in deciding the size and composition of beneficiary groups.

Conclusions

It is a growing concern of all the professionals involved in irrigation management that the irrigation schemes should be designed for effective management and the beneficiaries should be consulted from the beginning. There is no one other than the farmers of an irrigation system who should participate in the day to day management because they know their system well and they are the direct beneficiaries. On the other hand every government is finding difficulty to allocate budgetary provision to meet overall cost of management due to various reasons. Properly constituted beneficiary participation organisations can reduce the cost and increase the effectiveness of management, resulting in sustainability of the scheme.

History holds evidence to the existence and functioning of beneficiary organisation successfully in managing irrigation systems, backed by a strong administrative structure under the direction and guidance of the kings. Under the present democratic set up one should seriously think as to how these beneficiary participation could be organised and developed effectively. As a concept, beneficiary participation is already in the policies and many high ranking officials advocate this, but one has to investigate to see how deep this concept has infiltrated into the agency personal in the line down. Beneficiaries as well as the

operators should be persuaded to understand and accept the need for beneficiary participation and directed to act accordingly, while the politicians and the other social workers are induced to cooperate. A rigid legal framework coupled with deep commitment of all parties involved, taking enormous effort towards the common goal will definitely pave the way for development of a strong, sustainable beneficiary participation system which will be a reality in Irrigation Management.

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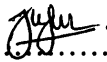
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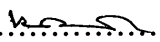
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