

FARMER-MANAGED OR STATE-MANAGED: THE CASE OF VILLAGE  
IRRIGATION SYSTEMS IN SRI LANKA

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The label of 'farmer-managed' in terms of irrigation systems is typically applied to small-scale irrigation systems which are considered to have certain inherent advantages - a manageable size, readily accessible technologies, homogeneous communities - for eliciting community involvement in their management. Such 'farmer-managed' irrigation systems are significant in many tropical countries, and exceeds the land area that is irrigated by agency-managed systems.

This paper makes a case that the term 'farmer-managed' irrigation system though applied to village irrigation systems in Sri Lanka is really a misnomer. It is argued that starting from the latter half of the nineteenth century, a process of State penetration into the rural areas in general and into the irrigation -cum-agricultural sector in particular, has resulted in village irrigation systems becoming primarily state-managed, with perhaps a token gesture to farmer management, as typified perhaps in the Kanna(seasonal cultivation) meeting. Hence unlike in many other countries where large-scale irrigation projects are generally agency-managed while small-scale irrigation systems tend to be autonomous and have elements that earn them the title of "communal" and even "traditional", village irrigation systems in Sri Lanka have been incorporated into the wider socio-economic environment so that there is little difference in the two.

The paper points out by using examples of current programmes, that sometimes it is convenient for policy makers to view small-scale irrigation systems as having the social and organizational basis necessary for irrigation management and that therefore irrigation-related tasks can be performed by farmers under the guise of being 'farmer-managed'.

But in reality while irrigation-related tasks such as maintenance are conducted by farmers, few management decisions are within the farmers' ambit, while the basis for prosecution remains external to them. Hence policy makers should take cognizance of the process of State penetration into the rural areas and the consequences of this process for village irrigation communities before accepting the 'farmer-managed' label for describing village irrigation systems in Sri Lanka.