

PROPERTY IN PRACTICE : THE CASE OF TANK AND ANICUT  
IRRIGATION SYSTEMS IN SRI LANKA

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Today, in many Asian countries, the State is increasingly involving itself in the affairs of small-scale irrigation systems. Typically through modernization or rehabilitation programmes aimed at increasing agricultural productivity and incomes of farm families coupled with post-rehabilitation organizational innovations, the State is consolidating its presence in village irrigation systems that had hitherto been designated as "traditional" and/or "communal". However these government interventions are often not successful. Not only do the rehabilitated/modernized village irrigation systems fail to perform better, but the local people are often not willing to be responsible for the upkeep and repair of the refurbished facilities. The prime reason for this is that the nature and extent of State intervention disrupts the existing structure of property rights and relations so that there is little basis for the local community to come together and mobilize resources for collective action.

This paper looks at the strategy of State intervention in village irrigation systems in Sri Lanka and its consequences for irrigation property rights. The approach is a historical one which traces those aspects of State intervention from the latter half of the last century which have been irrigation-specific, and attempts to understand their impact on the structure on property rights in village irrigation systems. In turn the consequences of these changes for mobilizing resources for collective irrigation-related tasks are examined. Both tank and anicut irrigation systems are investigated as the nature of the water supply has different implications for the structure of property rights and relations within these systems.

Using the example of the Village Irrigation Rehabilitation Programme the paper demonstrates that the style and degree of State intervention has served to consolidate the government's role in village irrigation systems and thereby to make more ambiguous the responsibility for performance of O & M tasks. Along with this, certain other processes at work in the rural areas - chief amongst them a market in land, out-migration and a diversification of the subsistence base - have been found to further blur traditional village irrigation proprietary rights. These processes have narrowed the gap between the traditional and the legal perception of village irrigation property with unanticipated consequences for participatory management of village irrigation systems.