

C-07: Water user associations – potential and limitations

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Water user associations, popularly known as farmer organisations, have been promoted world over and also in Sri Lanka, as mechanisms for improved management of water supply for irrigation purposes, especially during the last 2 decades.

These organisations through their involvement and participation in operation and maintenance, water saving and water management programmes and rehabilitation of their systems, were anticipated to make the improvements.

These organisations have also been used for various other management improvements in areas outside management of water resources, like agricultural

input management, crop diversification, increasing agricultural productivity, increasing farmer income and redistribution of income. etc. by various agencies.

These have shown mixed results. There have been isolated (and partial) success stories but in general the results have been far below expectations.

Some attribute this failure to the lack of commitment shown by the implementors of these programmes including the change agents and the agencies responsible, some others to the lack of commitment of the political and administrative leadership and lack of coherent government policy while others attribute these to the inadequacies and ineffectiveness of the mechanisms adopted. However the study revealed that though these extrinsic factors have also contributed to the failure of the programme, the reason lies more in the concept itself and the assumptions that lead to the concept.

Hence the study attempted analysing the intrinsic features of farmer community, that could assess the correctness of the concepts. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the farmer organisations were analysed and the results were used subsequently to assess the potential of the farmer organisations and their limitations. The conceptual framework on which the concepts of the farmer organisation have been based, is then analysed for inadequacies and errors. The assumptions on which a new conceptual framework could be built are proposed. The issues that should be addressed in such an exercise are also listed.

The need to have a realistic anticipation about the level of operation for farmer organisations in irrigation water supply projects is stressed.