

VILLAGE IRRIGATION IN SRI LANKA: PROPERTY AND THE STATE

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1. Introduction

Small-scale irrigation systems are considered to be conducive for community involvement in their development, operation and maintenance. This belief is based on the fact that the simple technology which surrounds these systems makes it relatively easy for local groups to operate, maintain and even effect some design changes, while the relatively small size and substantial homogeneity of the local groups contribute to institutional structures and roles which can take over and perform irrigation-related tasks.

The underlying basis for local group or community involvement in irrigation water management under small-scale irrigation systems is thought to be typically the structure of ownership and the distribution of land and water rights that provide incentives for local group action. In other words, either because of original ownership derived from having established the water source, or because of succession or occupation, the local group is able to legitimize its claims and establish property rights in the water, the irrigated land, and the hydraulic works (physical structures). The security of these property rights in turn contributes to continuing investments of resources, primarily labour, to develop and maintain the irrigation systems (Lynch 1985).

The fact that the persistence of many traditional systems is dependent on the property-forming and property-reproducing activities of the local community is supported by several case studies from the Asian region (Coward, 1985). The *zanjeras* of the Ilocos region of the Philippines and the *attaran* system prevalent in South Sumatra, for example, demonstrate that the property factor contributes to the persistence of these communities and to incentives for involvement in system operation and maintenance (O & M) (Siy, 1982; Coward, 1985). Not only the arrangements for mobilizing resources to undertake irrigation tasks but also the basis for selecting and replacing leaders are often found to be conditioned by property relations vis-a-vis the hydraulic structures and the land that they irrigate. The case studies further show that the original property relationships are typically

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determined by who were responsible for construction of the water source so that they, and later their descendents, can lay claims to the hydraulic works, the water and the land under its command. Thereafter as co-owners of the facilities and co-shareholders of the water rights, the hydraulic group is able to determine its relationships, rights and responsibilities.

Today the literature is replete with cases where the State is involving itself in the affairs of small-scale irrigation systems leading to the demise of the hydraulic community. Typically through modernization or rehabilitation programmes aimed at increasing agricultural productivity and the 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" or "communal". However these government interventions are often found not to be 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 (Abeyratne and Perera, 1986). One of the prime reasons attributed to this is that the nature and extent of State intervention disrupt the existing structure of property rights and relations so that there is little basis for the local group of irrigators to come together and mobilize resources for collective action (Coward, 1985).

In this paper I argue that in Sri Lanka, the State has continuously played a significant role in the refurbishment, operation and maintenance of village irrigation systems,¹ though the degree and nature of this intervention may have differed at different periods, and in different areas of the country. Nevertheless State intervention has been the significant and continuing thread; and unlike examples of small-scale irrigation systems in the Asian region where local property structures have contributed to dynamic local communities with incentives to perform irrigation-related tasks, in Sri Lanka, the significant role of the State has vitiated community and individual rights to land and water with consequences for system O & M.

Unfortunately there have been no detailed studies of village irrigation systems in Sri Lanka other than for Leach's seminal study on Pul Eliya. Hence the tendency has been to accept Leach's description of

1 In this paper the terms "minor irrigation", "village irrigation" and "small-scale irrigation systems" have been used interchangeably.

tank community social organization, enmeshed as Leach has described it in a variety of institutional devices, as characteristic of small-scale irrigation systems throughout the country. The pervasive view is that village irrigation systems have remained somewhat autonomous or "closed" communities, fit into the "one tank — one village" socio-ecological pattern,² are highly socially integrated and exhibit property structures that provide for strong communal rules of water distribution, and incentives for the local community to operate and maintain the irrigation systems. Thus the Sri Lankan case is thought to fit into the genre of "farmer-managed" irrigation systems in the Asian region, where the expectation is that local community capacity exists and can be elicited for successful irrigation management.

No attempt is made in this paper to provide a comprehensive or chronological account of irrigation social history. Rather the intention is to select a few key features of State intervention in the area of land and water — which in Sri Lanka are inextricably linked — to depict the overruling role of the State in fashioning the hydraulic property structure,³ with consequence in turn for community capacity for management of village irrigation systems.

The State and Village Irrigation in Sri Lanka

1. The Early Role of the State

Large-scale water projects and accompanying socio-political forms have tended to feature prominently in anthropological and historical literature. Major irrigation works in Sri Lanka have enjoyed the same kind of attention, being described as examples of the archetypical "Indian hydraulic civilization" as opposed to Wittfogel's description of China as the Asian archetype. Documentation on small-scale irrigation works and on the social organization that surrounds them however has not been as prolific, even though several thousand village irrigation systems, both tanks and anicuts, existed and continue to be in use today.

The origins of village irrigation works are sketchy. Inscriptions confirm the impression that a vast multitude of small village reservoirs existed simultaneously, independent of the two main complexes,⁴ and

2. There have been no studies of the many hundreds of anicut or small weirs that exist in the intermediate and wet zones of the country.

3. By hydraulic property is meant land, water and the physical irrigation works.

4. By the end of the fifth century, there were two major complexes of irrigation works — one based on the Mahaweli and its tributaries and the other drawing on the waters of the Malvatu and Kala (Gunawardena, 1971).

conserved the water from the seasonal rains for agricultural use (Gunawardana, 1971). While State enterprise was attributed responsibility for construction of major irrigation works, it appears that non-governmental initiative was active in the construction of smaller reservoirs. Whether this was communal labour leading to the tank becoming communal property, or on the other hand, whether individuals constructed and owned the irrigation works, is less clear as inscriptions have been found in support of each. In addition there is evidence that hired labour, that is labour of tenant cultivators in the case of monasteries and landlords, and to some extent slave labour, may have been used for private irrigation enterprise.

Parnavitana (1958) is the most explicit. He describes two types of initial proprietary rights in relation to village irrigation works. The first was derived when an individual supplied the labour and finances for construction of the works, which then conferred on him an individual proprietary right which was exercised by the levying of water rates on the fields irrigated by the reservoir, and inherited by the descendants of the original founder. The second type of proprietary right evolved if the irrigation work was a cooperative endeavour undertaken by a number of people. Then their descendants were entitled to stipulated shares in the income from the tank and gradually formed themselves into a village community, with rules and regulations to govern the relationships between them as proprietors of the reservoir, and the farmers who cultivated the fields irrigated by the reservoir.

It is thus evident that the State was not the sole entrepreneur in irrigation activity. In this regard the literature is consistent on two factors; the first is the crucial role played by the larger irrigation works sponsored by the State in the agricultural economy and the indirect result of this for the village irrigation economy,⁵ and the second, is that the State (the King⁶) exercised authority over the land, enabling to make large grants of land and irrigation works to the monastic institu-

5 R. A. L. H. Gunawardene makes a convincing case that despite the traditional concepts of "stasis" and "absence of change" in hydraulic society, major-scale hydraulic society in Ceylon was in itself a factor which by altering the ecological pattern, induced social change (1971:27)

6 The king was characteristically described as *bbupati* or "lord of the soil" or "lord (*adhipati*) of the fields of all". This has been interpreted to mean not necessarily a right over the land in the judicial sense but that the King required revenue and the cultivation of land to supply his needs might be regarded as a duty and might in some cases be enforced by certain penalties.

tions and officials of the State administration.⁷ Within this land-service social structure, land was held under one form or another of service tenure that explicitly detailed the obligations owing to the State.

“The chain of duties and services which was there established, binding every class, every individual, from the highest to the lowest rank was the great moving machine, applied to enforce the civil and judicial administration of government, to regulate the pursuits of agriculture and to carry on an offensive or defensive war” (Bertolacci, 1817: 279).

Even *praveni* rights to land which conferred heritable title in perpetuity was subject to some service associated with the lands, either personal service, or a payment in money or in kind (Peiris, 1956:44). This was known as *rajakariya* or literally “king’s work”, and was attached to the land and not the person. Failure to perform the latter rendered the land *purappadu* which could result in forfeiture by the Overlord/Crown. Likewise irrigation system maintenance came under the rubric of *rajakariya* with precise obligations attached to each *pangu* holding with regard to maintenance of the tank bund, field fencing, clearing of channels, etc. Thus land tenure, especially in the Kandyan districts but to varying extents in other areas too (related no doubt to the distance from the center), was geared to the State administration, and the concept of property in land always assumed that title was contingent on the performance of service to the king or his representative in the vertical hierarchy.

2. British Village Irrigation Policy

With the advent of the British, certain key features affecting property in land and water were formalized, while at the same time the State consolidated its role in village irrigation management. First, with the Crown Lands Encroachment Ordinance of 1840 (commonly known as the Waste Lands Ordinance), the ambiguities surrounding land and water rights were dispelled by declaring to be Crown property all land not permanently cultivated or demonstrably under private ownership. Most village irrigation water sources likewise became Crown property, thus formally establishing villagers as tenants of the Crown with respect to their water supplies. This latter fact escaped attention in the ensuing dispute over the extent to which this and succeeding ordinances were implemented to deprive village populations of “communal” land for shifting cultivation, grazing and other productive purposes. While the extent of this deprivation is a matter of considerable importance, an

⁷ According to Codrington (1938) early grants by the King were of revenue and rights and not of land and this seems to have continued until the influence of European law made itself felt.

issue of greater significance was that by appropriating to itself most village irrigation sources, the Crown was with one stroke establishing its claims over hydraulic property, and asserting that obligations related to irrigation practices were owed directly to the State.⁸

What is instructive is that despite this and later Ordinances, the British themselves laboured under the assumption that there existed cohesive village tank communities which were self-sufficient village republics à la Henry Maine,⁹ and that somehow they must be preserved. This was evident in the concerns raised after the British themselves abolished *rajakariya* in 1832. According to some, the demise of community and agricultural cooperation could be traced to the abolition of *rajakariya* as it

“destroyed the power of cooperation among people by which alone irrigation work could be kept in working order, it abolished the power to compel the owner of a share in communal property to contribute his quota of work for the maintenance and protection of that property. Thus what was everybody’s business became nobody’s business, and the industrious majority were placed at the mercy of the indolent few” (Keane, 1905).

Thus one of the major thrusts of British irrigation policy was to find ways and means to revive and enforce “ancient customs regarding irrigation”, in the belief that this would resuscitate “community” and thereby facilitate village irrigation upkeep. Accordingly, the Irrigation Ordinance of 1856 was passed. This Ordinance formally recognized the rights of proprietors of paddy lands and made provision for them to appoint a committee to draw up rules that would reflect the customs of each Korale. What is striking is that despite the rhetoric to uphold the particular customs of the people, the officers of State administration ultimately made into law what they believed to be the indigenous customs. Eventually a working compromise was suggested of a “judicious intermingling of European with Native Agency” and *Gansabhas* were resuscitated in partial form, but under the chairmanship of the Government Agent.

In 1867, a Sub-Committee of the Legislative Council was appointed to look into the workings of the 1856 Irrigation Ordinance. In their report they suggested small “grants-in-aid” to be allowed to villagers who were willing to contribute money or labour towards the

8 With time however one or two concessions were made and shareholders under a tank were given the right of pre-emption over lands rendered irrigable by their own efforts.

9 Belief in the unique importance of the village unit was probably an outcome of the central role of land revenue in British colonial administration.

repair of irrigation works as, "it has the moral advantage of exciting the energy of all persons connected with the land to be improved and of fostering habits of self-help and of self-government by inducing them to take the initiative in work for their own benefit" (AGA Sabaragamuwa to Irrigation Committee 1866)

The above statement is revealing. Though hardly reflective of a robust local community advocating refurbishment of its own hydraulic works, it was reflective of British policy that thought it fit and necessary to "foster" and "induce" initiative on the part of villagers. In fact from the latter part of the nineteenth Century, the British were explicit in stating that it was justifiable for the government "to combine and direct the efforts of the people" and that "State-aided self-help" was the best path to pursue as it "impressed upon the people the value and necessity for their own exertion and prevented the demoralization that would certainly ensue if everything was done for the people and they did nothing for themselves". That the colonial government was conscious of the need to promote the involvement of the village community is to their credit. Officers like Bailey seem to have been cognizant of its advantages as evident in the statement that, "native municipal institutions, which have been instrumental in the successful development of irrigation in India, do not exist in Ceylon, but we cannot say that the elements for the formation of something more nearly approaching a corporate body . . . do not exist which may form the nucleus of a system of association".

But what is clear is that the policy of "State-aided self-help" was pursued on the basis that the State intervened in communal irrigation property only as a facilitator, viz. to provide capital and technical skills to impoverished villagers who lacked these ingredients. This was altered thereafter to a principle of "pay-its-way" where villagers were expected to repay the government's investments in ten annual instalments through what was labelled a "water-rate". Later this was changed again to a rupee one per acre annual tax in perpetuity.

These changes in irrigation policy financing at village level are reflective of changing assumptions vis-a-vis the hydraulic property. The first policy displayed a belief that the hydraulic property remained vested with the village community and that the State had an obligation to assist their efforts for particular items of refurbishment. The second policy still reiterated the village community's responsibility for looking after the irrigation works by obtaining State finances on a repayable basis, if it deemed it necessary. The third policy was the real transi-

tion; cultivators now operationally became tenants of the State vis-a-vis the water source by paying a standard levy for the use of the water. This re-affirmed the provisions of the Crown Lands Ordinance and aligned the de-facto situation with the de-jure.

In 1867 the first Paddy Cultivation Ordinance was amended in order to extend its operation, and followed by the "Ordinance relating to the Irrigation and Cultivation of Paddy, No. 23 of 1889". This Ordinance laid down and expanded the role of the State by: (i) creating an Irrigation Board and Irrigation Fund (ii) demarcating Irrigation Districts and drawing up Irrigation Rules (iii) appointing Irrigation Headmen and detailing their powers and duties (iv) establishing Village Councils to enforce irrigation rules (v) laying down the procedure for construction, repair and improvement of irrigation work and for recovering of costs for such expenditure (vi) empowering the Government Agent to implement the law relating to obstruction of channels, water courses, ponds and tanks (vii) empowering the Government Agent to seize and sell land, crops, produce and movables in case of default. Subsequent amendments to this Ordinance merely elaborated these provisions, which above all sought to provide an elaborate administrative framework for irrigation system operation and management within which the Government was to play a large and decisive role.

This was no more evident than in the elaborate supervisory structure of Irrigation Engineers, Surveyors, Guardians, Chief Irrigation Inspectors, Inspectors, Sub-Inspectors and Overseers under the Director of Irrigation, and Chief Irrigation Headmen and Minor Irrigation Headmen and others under the GA's authority, and all in varying degrees overseeing minor irrigation.

The role of the Irrigation Headmen (Vel Vidane) deserves special mention. It was a position introduced by the British on the basis that he would represent the proprietors of the village irrigation community and thereby facilitate State administration of village irrigation works. He was to be the king-pin in village irrigation management, but his powers and duties were clearly laid down by law and he could be punished or removed by the G.A. for any omissions on his part. In time even his selection came to be done by the G.A. without reference to the proprietors (Weerawardene, 1986:11). Hence while nominally to be elected by the people, he was in fact the last link in the government bureaucracy and therefore accountable to the latter in the colonial politico-administrative hierarchy. Leach describes the Vel Vidane's role

well: "he was the local embodiment of government authority to his fellow villagers" and often his position could be "dictatorial"(1961:121)

The turn of the century also saw cadastral surveys being done, ostensibly to demarcate Crown land from private (*praveni*) land but with significant impact for village irrigation systems when the Crown began to sell these lands in the periphery of irrigation systems, at public auctions. By selling and permitting the asweddumisation of these *akkara* lands, the State contributed to changes in the hydraulic community boundaries, as these new entrants began to make claims on the existing irrigation water supplies. Consequently the State had to intervene in the area of water management to share the water between those with prior water rights and those accorded rights by virtue of cultivating State-developed new lands (*akkara wela*). It is plausible that the system of *bethma*¹⁰ had its origins in this period to accommodate the new claimants to irrigation water.

The cadastral surveys and the emergence of *sinakkara* lands as a category competing for water rights, had further repercussions. *Puranawela land* holdings began to be registered at the Kachcheri, frequently so as to guarantee individual access to irrigation water. This contributed further to undermining the communal nature of hydraulic property as now the sanction which preserved the rights of one owner against another was the appeal to government authority. In addition land registration allowed village land to enter the market. Villagers were now able to transfer their land rights to outsiders while ignoring village community traditions that had earlier militated against such practices (Perera, 1985). As village irrigation communities began to disintegrate both for reasons of State penetration and for socio-economic changes within them, the government had to take on more and more responsibilities for village irrigation management.

3. Post-Independence Irrigation Policy

The paternalistic concern for the peasantry was never more evident than in land and irrigation policy in the Post-Independence era, "where the issues were contended very much on behalf of the peasantry than by the peasantry" (Moore 1986:35). Vast areas of land were transferred in this period to large numbers of small holders through the mediation of the State and within a relatively elaborate and planned

10 Farmer (1957) describes *bethma* as a system under which "if the whole extent of the paddy field cannot be cultivated for lack of water, as many tracts as can be irrigated are divided, regardless of their ownership between the peasants in proportion to their several holdings, and thus cultivated as a compact block with minimum waste of water."

legal and institutional framework. Mention must be made of the continuing thread of concern that the peasant needed State protection and supervision and that accordingly prescriptive conditions be attached to land tenure so that he may not dispose of his land "improvidently".

This alienation of Crown lands was politically the least contentious but the Paddy Lands Act of 1958 represented a major and uncharacteristic attempt to intervene in socio-economic relationships within the peasant sector. It has been said of the PLA of 1958 that it "represented a moral attack on the prerogatives of property" (Moore 1986:51). Be that as it may, it was the first time that the village was not seen as an organic entity for purposes of policy formulation. Also by providing security of tenure it suddenly made paddy cultivation a more lucrative operation, especially in districts where the incidence of *ande* tenancy was high. Usufruct rights to land and water became legitimated and it became binding on cultivators (whether tenants or owners) to clean field channels and otherwise contribute to irrigation system maintenance.

This switch to an emphasis on use rights is clearly evident in subsequent Acts of Parliament which substituted the term "proprietor" with "owner-cultivator" and "occupier". The change in terminology has to be viewed in the larger context of the State's concern for better management of irrigated agriculture, which brought with it a further fiat of compulsion on the part of the State: the cultivator's legal obligation to make effective use of his land, and not cultivate crops other than paddy on paddy land without express permission. In addition the Department of Agrarian Services and the Cultivation Committees were given the authority to determine cultivation practices on privately owned land. The Agrarian Laws that followed in 1972, 1973 and 1979 elaborated these provisions further, thus legally and symbolically subordinating the cultivators to the public threat of administrative action. What is particularly interesting is that "standards of good management" were no longer decreed applicable for village boundaries but that a "owner cultivator" or "occupier" had obligations in respect of maintaining the productivity of the "agricultural land of the area, tract or group of holdings within which his land is located".

The 1958 Act was remarkable for its lack of an irrigation focus even though the boundaries of the newly constituted Cultivation Committee area were to be aligned to the irrigated paddy *yaya*. Behind the phrase in the preamble which read: "to abolish the liability of

proprietors within the meaning of the Irrigation Ordinance, No. 32 of 1946, to pay remuneration to irrigation headmen", lay what was probably one of the least contentious elements in the 1958 Act: the abolition of the Vel Vidanes (Moore 1968:51). That the Cultivation Committees, (with village irrigation representatives known as Irrigation Agents) could not perform the relatively non-controversial service function of irrigation while trying to implement a controversial tenurial law was not surprising. What is relevant here is that the vacuum in irrigation management at village level was never filled by local leadership or organization, which no doubt can be traced to the fact that villagers were by now used to regarding the irrigation system as something outside their own responsibility. In any event, the newly established Agrarian Services Department was formally entrusted with the responsibility of looking after minor irrigation works.

In the meantime the Irrigation Ordinance of 1856 had to be amended to conform to the provisions of the Paddy Lands Act. One of the main changes under the new Irrigation Act of 1968 was the power given to the Commissioner of Agrarian Services to supervise and control Government Agents in the exercise and discharge of their powers and duties under the Irrigation Ordinance. Thus a further layer of control was interspersed in the already elaborate administrative framework for the management of village irrigation systems.

Continuing State Involvement in Village Irrigation Systems in the Present Context

In the preceding discussion an attempt was made to show how the continuing involvement of the State in the affairs of small-scale irrigation systems, especially in the realm of land and water property structures, has vitiated the local hydraulic community. And that almost by default, the State has had to assume an ever increasing role in the operation and maintenance of these irrigation systems.

Irrigation policy and implementation today merely corroborate this trend. To demonstrate this, two examples are given below, one in the area of administration and the other in the area of rehabilitation, showing the expanding and decisive role played by the State in village irrigation.

First in the area of administration, the *kanna* (seasonal cultivation) meeting as it is conducted today is an excellent example of how government administration extends down to the village irrigation

system level. Initially the private tenure of paddy land, but the common interests in the village irrigation system and close cooperation required for paddy cultivation, saw the institutionalisation of the *kanna* meeting as a seasonal forum for the proprietors of paddy land. Today the *kanna* meeting functions primarily as a vehicle by which the Government conveys its prescriptions for cultivation, water issues, inputs use and so on. In fact government officers when calling for a meeting have already made a prior decision as to the availability of water and the *yaya* to be irrigated that season. Therefore only those cultivators being supplied with irrigation water will be invited to the *kanna* meeting.

The decisions taken (for which under the most recent stipulation no quorum is required) in turn are entered on a prescribed form by the Cultivation Officer and maintained at the local Agrarian Services Centre in its files. If the requisite Government Officers do not turn up, the *kanna* meeting is not held; in all ways it is government-initiated and sponsored. Failure to comply to *kanna* meeting decisions are likewise mediated by government officials.

Today refurbishment of minor tanks and anicuts also falls exclusively within the ambit of the government's responsibility. One of the major programmes for rehabilitation of minor works is the Village Irrigation Rehabilitation Programme (VIRP) under which several hundred systems in different districts are being rehabilitated over a period of 8 years. The Irrigation Department is responsible for identifying and selecting the items for refurbishment¹¹ and for seeing to physical rehabilitation. Local involvement in providing finances or labour is not required; but an attempt is made to keep villagers informed of the components of refurbishment. After completion of the physical works, the refurbished tank/anicut is "handed over" to the Agrarian Services Department which is then responsible for formulating a suitable water management package. The latter is also responsible for setting up a Tank Committee (Wew Sabha) with representatives from different irrigated tracts, to ensure adherence to the prescribed water management programme.

The Tank Committee is supposed to be the main forum for farmer participation. But the composition of the Tank Committee with a pronounced government officer presence shows that the basis for organization is not to empower the farmers to be the key figures in irrigation management decisions or to enable them to bargain collec-

11. With ratification by the National Steering Committee on Minor Irrigation.

tively for their rights as a hydraulic community. Rather farmers are encouraged to come together primarily for purposes of undertaking agricultural and irrigation-related tasks set out in the water management package (Abeyratne, 1986).

The VIRP is thus one more example of deliberate and focused State intervention that has served to consolidate the government's role in irrigation water management under village irrigation systems. In doing so it has once and for all established the Government's position vis-a-vis village irrigation. But it gets the job done; physical rehabilitation of the system is undertaken, maintenance work is ensured and water management is done. Indeed this matches the people's feelings that because the State owns the irrigation system, it is also responsible for ensuring its upkeep. The problem arises however when in the interests of "participatory management" or because the government cannot continue to shoulder the administrative and financial burden of numerous small-scale irrigation works, it tries to elicit community capacity to take over O & M activities. Obviously the chances of motivating farmers to participate in sustained local group action at this stage poses a problem (Abeyratne, 1986).

Conclusion

Coward (1983) has pointed out that "ownership of and responsibility for irrigation works invariably coincide". Available literature supports this statement.¹² In many Asian countries there exist dynamic local irrigation groups whose collective social action for the performance of irrigation tasks is based on property relations vis-a-vis the hydraulic works. It is this relationship of co-property holders that legitimizes and activates their solidarity (Coward, 1985).

In this paper I have made a case that continuing and increasing State intervention in the area of land and irrigation in Sri Lanka, has precluded local involvement in village irrigation systems in any sustained way. With legal enactments, refurbishment programs and institutional innovations that have cut through village irrigation property structures, the State has firmly established its lead role in village irrigation management. As a result, cultivators within village irrigation systems in Sri Lanka today tend to resemble individual water users who act independently of each other and fall back on the government administration to mediate even in matters internal to the

12 See for example E. Walter Coward Jr., "The State and Locality in Asian Irrigation Development: The Property Factor", 1985.

reproduction of the system.

Unfortunately there has been general acceptance — little informed by current or historical research — that village irrigation systems in Sri Lanka fall into the genre of farmer-managed irrigation systems where cohesive community exists around the water source and can be called upon for substantial community contributions. It is evident that government-sponsored programmes like the VIRP and even those promoted by NGOs like the Freedom From Hunger Campaign (FFHC)¹³ are premised on eliciting these community contributions for the post-construction/rehabilitation phases.

From the government's point of view there are several advantages in trying to promote community involvement in irrigation system O & M. However the ability and willingness of the community to take on these responsibilities depend on a series of factors including clear-cut property rights in land, water and the irrigation works that bind the community together and provide incentives to undertake irrigation-related tasks.

13 The FFHC has a programme to rehabilitate small-tank communities in the remote and less accessible parts of the Dry Zone "in partnership with farmers".