

Participatory Approach — A Proposal for Gal-Oya

Laksman Wickramasinghe
Agricultural Research and Training Institute

A Gal-Oya Water Management Project plans to rehabilitate a deteriorated physical distribution system on the Left Bank and attempts to initiate and develop appropriate institutional forms and processes with a view to improving the organizational capabilities of both the farmer-colonists and the irrigation administration. Aspects of the proposed participatory approach to water management are discussed here.

In the ancient village-tank systems of Sri Lanka, farmer involvement in water distribution and system maintenance was more the norm than the exception. Certain roles like that of Gamarala were well defined vis-a-vis the system and fellow farmers. He was responsible for water distribution and maintenance of the system; he was also a farmer who owned land in the same tract. The land-tenure system was essentially based on the philosophy of equal access to water to all allotments. It had certain built-in safety mechanisms to off-set disparities in access to water, especially during periods of droughts and water stress. The spirit of co-operation which prevailed among the farmers was reinforced by close kinship and marriage ties. In effect there developed a social organization and a tenurial pattern which admirably matched the needs of irrigated agriculture.

Though the modern brethren of the ancient farmer are placed in an admirable position, insofar as they are assured of a good supply of water through modern engineering means, the situation of the modern farmer is more complex and difficult. In most large-scale gravity flow systems, the social and the physical relationships are very different to those of the traditional irrigation societies.

Gal Oya is one such scheme. Settlers were given uniform allotments of land, uniform types of houses, and in many instances the families to be settled in one colony unit were also drawn from the same district, with a view to starting them off on an equal base. The operation and management of the system was the responsibility of the Gal Oya-Development Board. Later this responsibility was transferred to the Irrigation Department.

The early settlers in Gal Oya had not only to adjust to a new and harsh environment, strange and constricting structures but also had to develop social bonds among themselves, while attempting to come to terms with the indigenous population. Simultaneously they had to relate to the irrigation bureaucracy. A truly collaborative relationship between the farmers and the irrigation bureaucracy is essential for implementing an effective schedule for distributing irrigation water to the farmers' fields, especially in major schemes. However, since the two groups belong to separate organizations having different sets of values and norms, the tendency for the farmers and the irrigation bureaucracy to forge any collaborative relationship is very low indeed. The elitist background and attitudes of the irrigation personnel do not help either in this respect.

Peasant groups in attempting to mitigate some of the more adverse effects of this unequal exchange, develop various mechanisms to meet this challenge. Some attempt to develop new social organizations, others modify the existing traditional institutions to suit the new situation, while some may opt for a more individualistic mode of interaction.

In Gal Oya farmer interaction with the irrigation bureaucracy is done more on an individual basis. Those colonists who have access to social, financial and political resources have established dyadic (independent) contacts with the irrigation bureaucracy. In some units inhabited by Tamil speaking people of indigenous origins, a traditional system known as the 'vatte vidane' is still being continued to allocate water to the fields. The vatte vidane is a representative of the farmers who usually has executive responsibility. 'Vatte vidane' is the spokesman for the group.

It is clear that there is no formal or informal organization in the Gal Oya scheme barring perhaps the traditional vatte vidane system (in some units) which could be a mechanism through which the irrigation bureaucracy and the farmers could interact in a constructive manner. The only available formal institutional mechanism is the Rasveema, the cultivation meeting which is held before each cultivation season supposedly to obtain the ideas of the proprietors in deciding upon a cultivation calendar for the season. Today it has become a forum through which a pre-planned cultivation calendar is foisted on the farmers. And for their part, the farmers have no qualms about disregarding decisions, arrived at in such meetings.

In the absence of formal institutions and the difficulty of using informal local groups to improve the articulation between the farmers and the irrigation bureaucracy, the philosophy behind this participatory approach is the notion that people are not passive objects who should be subjected to manipulation, but are subjects who possess the capacity to think and act in a rational way. Therefore, we argue that if peoples' lives and livelihood are to be affected by some development plan, they should be given the real opportunity to influence that programme in a manner that is constructive and beneficial.

It is intended to give effect to farmer participation through initiation and development of water-user associations at the field channel level which could be federated upto the Tank-Level Committee. The proposal is to use a community-based approach through which an attempt will be made to raise the consciousness of the farmers about the importance of such associations.

The Participatory Approach to promoting institutional development in water management in Gal Oya can be best described as a learning-process approach, as opposed to the model concept.

Therefore, the project has not developed a blue-print for action as it were, but only a number of guidelines for action.