

IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT TRANSFER IN NEPAL: OUTLINES OF A NEW POLICY

To date, it is believed in Nepal that many systems that were built by the government some time ago, have in fact been "turned over" to the irrigators by default due to lack of resources channeled to these systems by the government. On the other hand, the government would like initially to turn over management for small government irrigation systems that are 200 ha or less in area in the hills and 2,000 ha in the plains of the Terai region.

In 1989, The government initiated an action plan for the turnover program. In 1992, a revised irrigation policy was formulated to have the Irrigation Department implement turnover. The policy has the following provisions:

- ❑ The government shall not collect irrigation fees from systems after their turnover. The Water Users' Associations (WUAs) can themselves determine the rate of irrigation fees, collect them, and use them for operation, maintenance, and renovation of their own systems.
- ❑ In systems to be turned over, programs are to be developed to draft association constitutions and strengthen WUAs. Rehabilitation work is to be carried out only with the consent of the WUAs and with an agreement that future operation and maintenance will be carried out by them.
- ❑ In cases where the WUA of a given system is not willing to participate in the turnover program, the government shall discontinue all future maintenance and operation activities in that particular system.
- ❑ Full ownership of the irrigation system and related structures will rest with the WUA and be registered with the government.

- ❑ Both the government and the WUA may enter into an agreement related to the proper use and development of the irrigation system and its facilities.
- ❑ The two parties also share the cost of rehabilitation of the turnover system (with at least 5% provided by the users and the rest by the government). In addition to this, rights-of-way and land needed for the rehabilitation must be provided freely by the users themselves.

The budget speech for the 1992 Parliament and the Economic Survey for the fiscal year 1991 – 1992 (produced by the Ministry of Finance, His Majesty's Government of Nepal) states that though there has been heavy investment in the irrigation sector and substantial expansion of irrigable land, these have not contributed to the expected level of increase in agricultural productivity. According to the economic survey, this is due to: a) lack of timely repair and maintenance of canals, b) lack of proper water management at the farmers' fields, and c) untimely and inadequate water supply during the planting season. The survey also notes that there is a need for a more concerted effort to ensure local people's participation in the expansion, preservation, repair, maintenance and operation of irrigation facilities.

Furthermore, the proposed Water Resources Act that has recently been tabled and discussed in the 1992 Parliament session (August 11) stipulates that the WUAs shall have full ownership over the projects handed over to them by the government.

The Western Regional Irrigation Directorate of Nepal has already undertaken activities to turn over two pilot irrigation systems in 1992. The water users of one pilot "turnover" system located in the hills have already issued a letter of commendation to the District Irrigation Office (the office through which the activities were channeled). The WUA indicated that all terms and conditions that were jointly agreed upon by the WUA and District Irrigation Office have been fulfilled and water has been satisfactorily delivered. The farmers are now willing to "take over" the system.

The other system in the plains of the Terai had a very small level of resources invested in the system after its initial construction some thirty years ago under the government's minor irrigation program. Since then,



Heavy investments are required to maintain Nepal's irrigation systems.



Will the benefits of turnover exceed the costs to farmers?

the farmers have been effectually “managing” the system. An agreement was made with the farmers to do certain rehabilitation work at the

intake and share costs for these activities. By August 1992, these activities were completed and the system was ready for turnover.

Though this was not an agency-managed system, the turnover program in a way precluded the possibility of it becoming agency-managed. During the rehabilitation process, the district office insisted that a management committee be formed, representing the various sub-commands. Rehabilitation facilitated farmers with different interests to come together and decide on a water allocation system for the various sub-commands. The agreement was not easy to achieve. In the negotiation, one such group which did not have water rights was even given a new minimal water share. A representative from that area was also included in

the water users’ committee, to ensure that his group’s members did not violate the newly agreed-upon water allocation. Farmers contributed 25

percent of the cost in the form of labour. Farmers complained that not every one contributed his fair share of the workload.

Some irrigation officials are of the opinion that farmers will be unwilling to take over systems that still need structural improvements and rehabilitation. However, some irrigation officials who are highly supportive of turnover tend to think that there is a danger of the turnover program being used as yet another opportunity for construction. Early experience indicates that farmers are willing to organize themselves for the turnover program and for operation and management of their system — if they see the government genuinely assisting them, not only in infrastructural rehabilitation, but also in the institutional aspects of water allocation and conflict resolution.

In Nepal, much about turnover has been discussed and debated, a policy has been adopted, but the actual results for the farmers, the government and the environment are yet to be seen. (Ujjwal Pradhan, IIMI)