

Smallholder Irrigation Water for Poverty Alleviation

Challenges for Community-Based Management in South Africa

Smallholder irrigation schemes in South Africa's former homelands exhibit a glaring legacy of dependency on state support which hindered development of basic entrepreneurial skills – farm operations, water management and marketing were all in the hands of parastatals. The recent state withdrawal from the schemes and subsequent irrigation management transfer (IMT) coincide with the challenges of implementing the National Water Act, which among others, pledges to redress inequity in access to water.

For smallholder irrigation communities however, realizing this goal seems a long way off, and the success of irrigation management transfer remains a huge challenge especially in the Northern Province portion of the water-scarce Olifants river basin.



Vegetable gardening
(Photo: Abdul Kamara, IWMI-SA)

The Project

The DFID-supported Project, 'Achieving Sustainable Local Management of Irrigation Water in Water-Short Basins: South Africa Case Study' was implemented as part of IWMI's Benchmark Basin approach to poverty reduction through increasing the productivity of agricultural water use, and particularly seeking institutional alternatives for raising the productivity of small-scale irrigation systems. A parallel project implemented by the University of the North with support from the Water Research Commission enabled university professors and students to work with IWMI. The project focused on

identifying practical strategies for equitable and sustainable management of smallholder irrigation systems in the Basin. Field research was combined with capacity building through student support and targeted community training specially for strategic women farmers and rural groups.



Women farmers on the Arabie Scheme
(Photo: Abdul Kamara, IWMI-SA)

Research Issues

The success of IMT and the potential of irrigation to contribute to poverty alleviation were investigated with a focus on the *transfer process* and how it is accomplished, *internal conditions* of the schemes being transferred, and the presence of *institutional support services*. The research addressed key hypotheses about the success of IMT:

- that IMT must have a potential to significantly improve the livelihoods of the people involved,
- that irrigation must contribute a large proportion of the income of the irrigation farmers to be sustainable,
- that the cost of self-management must be a relatively low proportion of the improved income, and
- that the transaction costs for the proposed organization must be relatively low.

Findings

The findings demonstrate a dramatic decline in operation on the schemes since state withdrawal. Most of the producers are elderly women, who lack working capital and entrepreneurial skills. Potential entrepreneurs pursue other opportunities for the following reasons:

- marketing constraints offer little potential for profitable production,
- land tenure arrangements, based on 'permission to occupy' certificates constrain access to credit,
- lack of clarity about the ownership of irrigation assets.

Policy Implications

Clear definition of the legal status of irrigation assets and infrastructure is crucial for the formation of water user associations. Land tenure reform (including land reallocation) and better access to credit and markets is needed. Improved profitability would attract the interest of the unemployed young generation in farming. Recognition of opportunities for beneficial use of irrigation water off-scheme (for food security, e.g., food plots) could increase the benefits of the schemes to the broader community and would better respond to the needs of the current producers.

These and other findings are reflected in the draft policy document, "Mainstreaming the Marginalised through Agricultural Water Use," which is being considered by Government at present.

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