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The Success of the WUA of Pauwa Sartap Irrigation System: Strong Leadership and External Funds

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Introduction

The objective of the current Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) model in Nepal is that Water User Associations (WUA) must generate sufficient funds to maintain the canal infrastructure after a rehabilitation project. In this model, a WUA is considered a failure when the irrigation system continues to rely on external funds. However, the example of Pauwa Sartap irrigation system in the Mechi hills shows that the capacity of a WUA to attract external funds is actually a success and not a failure.

Pauwa Sartap irrigation project

The irrigation system is located in Pauwa Sartap Village Development Committee (VDC), Ilam district. It is a typical hill irrigation system of approximately 100 ha (monsoon and winter), serving about 400 households (Tamang, Limbu and some Dalits). The length of the *kulo* is 3,5 km, and requires a lot of maintenance, in terms of labour (yearly cleaning) and funds (repair and reconstruction). The system was built in 1988-1990 under the “Mechi program”, hence the name “Mechi *kulo*”. The earthwork, stone cutting, stone masonry and building of gabions was done by the users, under supervision of engineers of the government and SNV. Also a WUA and maintenance fund was established under the Mechi program.

Leadership and good governance in the WUA

A strong leader in the WUA who was able to unite the farmers, was the reason of the success of the construction of the system. The *pradhan panch* (village mayor) was the driving force in the project (see photo 1). He was a charismatic man with good political connections, who had studied political science in Darjeeling. He had chosen to develop his village rather than pursuing a career in government service³. Sadly, this man passed away a couple of years ago, but we learned during our field visit in November 2010 that the WUA continued to build on his leadership.

Maintenance fund

The maintenance fund (established in 1990) was spent within 3 years on the salary of the maintenance worker who had been trained by the Mechi program. Once the money was spent, the farmers started to think how to raise new funds. Nowadays, the WUA selects a maintenance worker for 6 months per year (mainly the winter season), and the WUA collects a fee of Nrs. 60-100 among its members (depending on water

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³ Information based on interview with former SNV engineer.

use). The salary of the worker is Nrs. 4000 per month and allows for operation of the canal twice a day. The WUA has been successful in generating sufficient funds among its members for canal operation and minor maintenance works. The WUA has also been successful in the mobilization of farm households for the yearly canal cleaning.



Photo 1: The *pradhan panch* and a Dutch engineer of SNV

System decline

Despite these achievements, the WUA continued to face bigger repair works and the gradual deterioration of the intake and the main canal. We saw during our inspection that the condition of the system was still okay, particularly the stone masonry and gabion structures were in good condition (after 20 years!), but seepage losses had become a serious concern. Photo 2 and 3 show the same structure in the main canal. Apart from the slaps on top of the canal, the structure was still in place.

External funds

The WUA soon figured out it had to raise external funds if it wanted to continue operating the irrigation system. Matters had become more urgent in the last 5 years, as seepage problems in the main canal really started to compromise water supply. Fortunately, the WUA successfully secured external funds throughout the years. In the 1990s, during two five-year periods, the WUA got small funds for maintenance from the VDC. Two years ago (2007/2008), the WUA received Nrs 30.000 for maintenance from the VDC, and one year ago (2008/2009), the WUA obtained another Nrs 20.000 from the VDC. The (former) *pradhan panch* had already passed away, but the WUA continued to use the visions and presumably the political connections of his leadership.

Farmers had a good feeling about getting assistance from the VDC, even though they considered the funds insufficient for proper canal repair. The WUA sees approaching different funding organizations as a promising strategy to cover big maintenance expenses in the future.



Photo 2: Crossing land slide (1990)

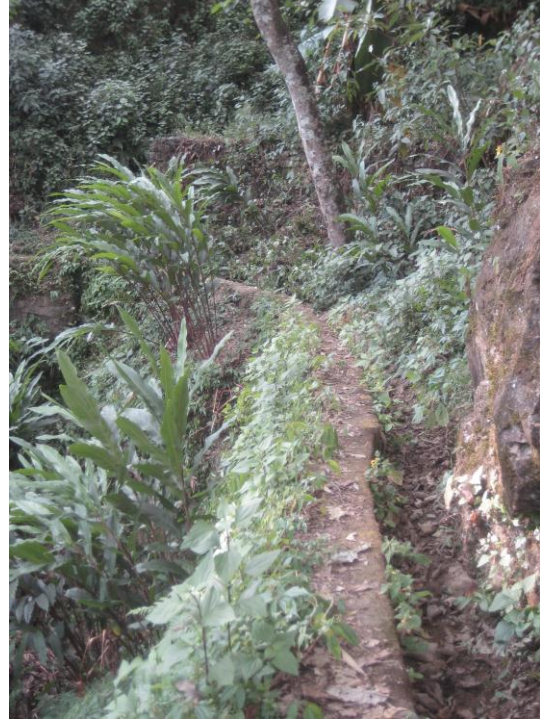


Photo 3: Crossing land slide (2010)

Lessons of the WUA of Pauwa Sartap

We can learn 4 lessons from the example of the WUA of Pauwa Sartap:

1. Additional external funding after a rehabilitation project is not necessarily a failure as perceived in contemporary PIM models. External funding may safeguard a system from further collapse.
2. Only few WUAs in Nepal secure external funds at regular intervals. Strong leadership, good governance and political connections make the difference, and are best considered in any model of PIM.
3. Once a WUA has been exposed to a strong and knowledgeable leader, it is possible that visions and knowledge of 'leadership' remain, even when the leader is removed.
4. The importance of strong leadership and political connections challenges ideas of equitable participation of *all* users which is key to current PIM models and gender quota for WUAs. A strong and well-connected leader (often a senior man) makes it happen, rather than having everybody equally involved in decision making.