



## **FLOATING DOWNSTREAM – WATER USERS, PARTICIPATORY MANAGEMENT AND SECTORAL REFORM – WHAT ARE THE MINIMUM CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS?**

**Hugh Turrall<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

In practice, the rhetoric of participatory management in irrigation only becomes reality in programmes to form water user associations. There is clear global evidence that water user associations in medium and large scale surface irrigation systems struggle to be effective and survive, even in countries with strong cultures of collective action.

A number of different approaches have been taken to try to avoid stranding water user associations and other local participatory initiatives, in order to strengthen their governing institutional, regulatory and economic environment. Thus we see efforts to build federations of water user associations and representative apex bodies at main canal and even system levels.

A key process in establishing a more favourable environment for participatory management, or other forms of devolved responsibility and empowerment (franchising, privatisation, joint management) is the sectoral reform of irrigation agencies.

However, irrigation agencies often resist sectoral reform, the empowerment of WUAs and the attendant discipline of evolving a service culture. There are many reasons, including professional pride, the perceived importance of new construction and rent seeking activities in contract management and in the supply of irrigation water.

Thus, irrigation agency reform often considerably lags behind efforts to establish and sustain water user associations and their umbrella organizations. At the same time, higher level water sector reforms are implied in the re-structuring of irrigation agencies. Apart from internal budgetary pressure, and changes from a construction agenda to service orientation, irrigation agencies face a number of external pressures arising from the importance of agricultural water use as a major share of abstraction for human needs, including:

- 1) Water management and allocation at basin scale – including managing water allocation between:

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1 - Dr. Hugh Turrall, Theme Leader on Basin Water Management, International Water Management Institute, IWMI. Email: H.TURRAL@cgiar.org

- a) Multiple and sometimes nested irrigation systems; and
  - b) Inter-sectoral allocation and competition (cities, industry, power and environment); and
- 2) The emergence of large scale, atomistic private groundwater developments, posing new challenges in groundwater governance and conjunctive use management.

The paper draws on examples from China, Pakistan, Central Asia and India, and contrasts their experience with the far reaching changes in the supervising institutional and economic environment that has guided irrigation and water sector reform in Australia in the past 15 years.