WATER USERS ASSOCIATIONS: EXPERIENCES IN ALBANIA

YLLI DEDE (*)

ABSTRACT

The paper outlines the physical situation and the events which immediately preceded the beginning of the Irrigation Rehabilitation Project, touches on the methodology chosen for the project, and describes the organisation put in place to implement an important objective of the project, namely "to ensure the long-term sustainability of irrigation and drainage investments through farmer participation in operation and maintenance, efficient system management and adequate cost recovery". The form of the resulting Water Users Associations (WUAs) is then described, some problems are discussed, and finally some thoughts are given as to the possible future developments in WUAs.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce travail décrit la situation physiqye et les événements qui ont immédiatement précédé le lancement du Projet de Réhabilitation te l'Irrigation. Il illustre la méthologie choisie pour le projet et décrit l'organisation mise en place pour réaliser un objectif important du projet, à savoir "assurer la durabilité à long terme des investissements de l'irrigation et du drainage à travers la participation à l'exploitation et à la maintenance, une gestion efficace du système et le recouvrement adéquat des coûts". On passe ensuite à la description de la forme des Associations des Utilisateurs de l'Eau, à la discussion de quelques problèmes et enfin à quelques réflexions sur les développements futurs des Associations des Utilisateurs de l'Eau.

My name is Ylli Dede and I am Director of the Project Management Unit, based in Tirana, Albania, for the World Bank funded Irrigation Rehabilitation Project. The project covers 73,000 ha of irrigation and 93,000 ha of drainage.

Although this paper is primarily about Water Users Associations, it is important first to outline the situation before the start of the project, because it affects profoundly the resulting course of the project.

BACKGROUND

During the Communist regime, many irrigation projects were implemented, and the resulting schemes were operated under the state controlled economy as state farms. Control of the irrigation and drainage functions, indeed of all the necessary functions of production, was therefore in only a few hands. Each District had (and still has) a department called the Water Enterprise, which had responsibility for operating and maintaining the systems. State farms could be as large as 14,000 ha, sometimes embracing more than one supply source.

Following the demise of the Communist regime, the state farms went into decline as the command economy was overtaken by an emerging free market economy, although this process took a few years.

In the meantime the local population ransacked the farm buildings in their search for anything useful, and also the gat es and other facilities on the irrigation schemes. As a mark of democracy the new government divided the land of the old state farms among the former employees, each family receiving about 1.5 ha.

As part of the reconstruction of the country, the World Bank in 1994 provided $ 44 M for a crash programme to rehabilitate the most cost effective schemes in 7 districts on the fertile coastal plains.

The design of the rehabilitation works was to be carried out by local consultants (who were generally those who had been working in the old state hydraulics design institute), and the civil work was to be carried out by local private contracting firms. Since there had been no recent experience of contracting, all such firms were very young and inexperienced in the commercial sense, and a limit was set on the maximum value of individual contracts, in order to encourage growth in the contracting sector, and to confine bidding to Albanian or Albanian-based contractors. As a result the PMU has had to administer a large number of individual contracts (about 140 civil contracts to date, and a proportional number of design contracts, and some international contracts for the supply of pumps etc.). So far we are ahead of schedule on the civil side, and hope to complete the project by the end of 1997. However, it is the corresponding operation and management of the schemes which is the main subject of this paper.

METHODOLOGY

One of the objectives for the project set out by the World Bank was:

"to ensure the long-term sustainability of irrigation and drainage investments through farmer participation in operation and maintenance, efficient system management and adequate cost recovery".

There are significant differences in operation between the old system and the new. The decision to rehabilitate it, exactly as it was before, for example, did not take in-

(*) Director of the Project Manage ment Unit for the Irrigation Rehabilitation Project - Tirana (Albania).

to account the fact that the original design was for the main canals to run full, whereas now, the same canals are required to convey only that water required by the farmers, which could be half the quantity. At this flow rate in the main canals, the offtakes are sometimes at too high a level to function. At such places it may be necessary to construct a structure in the main canal to raise the water level to serve the offtake, whilst at the same time interferring as little as possible with the capacity of the canal to pass the design discharge. The other main difference is in the organisation required to operate and maintain the system. With the old state systems gone, a way had to be found to communicate the farmers' requirements for water, while at the same time to collect the water charges which had been introduced by the new government to reduce state control or subsidy. The Water Enterprise (WE) in each district remained responsible for O&M of the source and the principal canals (although, as we shall see, their role is in th e process of change). Clearly some form of grouping of the farmers was needed, which would also help to achieve the World Bank objective already stated. Water Users Associations were already in existence in the neighbouring countries of Turkey and Italy, and it was decided to mirror the system in Albania, adapting it to suit the Albanian level of infrastructural, social and technical development. Since the start of the project in 1994 we have been setting up Water Users Associations (WUAs). The organisation chosen to carry out this task consists of a small unit in the PMU (one expatriate and one counterpart) controlling 7 coordinators (one in each district), who in turn each control a number of promoters (about 50 in total) who are in contact with each of the created WUAs and who are responsible for helping to set up and train further WUAs. The law regulating the setting up and the running of these WUAs was drafted, and passed through Parliament. By June 1994, 128 WUAs, with a combined area of 75,800 ha, had been set up and registered. These first WUAs were units formed of farmers from the same village. Initially this was the easiest way to approach the large number of landowners, as we could use the existing civil administration, through the village council. However it was soon realised that such units would be more robust and easier to operate, if they were centred around farmers supplied from the same irrigation water source, ie. if they were based on hydraulic units. Therefore, in April 1996 the decision was taken to re-form all the existing WUAs on these lines; the law regulating the WUAs was changed and the process of change started. We expect this process to be completed in April 1997. Furthermore these WUAs are used as models for setting up WUAs in those districts not covered by the project. Each WUA covers a secondary block, that is, all the land served by a secondary gate. The number of members in a WUA varies around an average of about 500, although currently there are still some very small ones. Each one has an elected Administrative Council, comprising elected representatives from the villages within the WUA area. A Chairman is democratically elected for two years from among the members of the Council. The President then nominates an Executive Council, which consists of a Financial Controller, an O&M Supervisor, and some temporarily employed Watermasters. The Administrative Council approves the nominations and oversees the Executive Council. There is a small annual membership fee, and at the beginning of the irrigation s eason the members each make a contract with the WUA for the supply of their requirements. Payment for this water is by instalments, 20% being paid to the WUA at the beginning of the season. Non-members can also purchase water through the WUA but the cost is 50% higher. Of the money thus collected, 500 Leks/irrigated hectare ($ 5/ha) is paid to the WE for operating and maintaining the irrigation system upstream of the secondary gate, and the main drainage downstream of the WUA. The remainder is used for payment of staff of the WUA and administration, and for O&M within the WUA area. Members can also contribute their own labour, in particular for the maintenance of the tertiary channels, which in most areas are unlined, and thus prone to weed growth. The result is therefore that the role of the WEs is much diminished, and their organisation, which used to receive a heavy subsidy from the government, is being pruned considerably. The intention is that many of the staff will transfer to become employees of the WUAs, although there is understandably some resistance to this, especially as they would become more immediately answerable to the membership. Although the supply of water is the prime task of the WEs, arrangements are being made to allow them to enter into other activities to raise money, such as excavating and selling gravel from the river beds. Eventually the government hopes to reduce the subsidy to zero.

Discussion of some issues

Landowners

As was pointed out earlier, the land was divided between the former employees of the state farms. We refer to them as farmers, but it will clearly take a few years to change their mentality from one of employee to one of entrepreneur, one of the necessary characteristics of a farmer. At present there are in some districts not a few who leave their land fallow and take other employment, either within the country, or abroad in Greece or Italy. In a few years the situation will stabilise, and the provision of irrigation will allow the landowners either to farm themselves, or to lease out

their land to others, or indeed even to sell. In this way it is foreseen that larger units will emerge, with the consequent improvement in efficiency and viability. The situation is complicated by the fact that at the time of the division, the area given to each landowner was divided in plots which were very often not adjacent, small and sometimes very narrow, making distribution of irrigation water difficult.

Handover to end users following completion of rehabilitation

As has been said earlier, the design of the rehabilitation works is being carried out by local consultants, according to general criteria laid down by the PMU. Contractors are appointed by the PMU (as client), and the work supervised by another local firm of engineering consultants, who also ensure that the the work is completed according to the contract. The rehabilitated schemes are then handed back to the WEs, who in turn hand over parts of the system to the respective WUAs. So far, of the 196 WUAs set u p in the project area, 80 are now responsible for the systems in their own areas. In some cases, the WUA was unwilling to accept the handover until certain parts, not included in the civil contract, had been put right. To avoid this happening in the future, the PMU has instructed the designers to liaise with the relevant WUA and to agree the scope of works of the contract, within the general cost parameters set by the PMU.

Access

At the time of the division no allowance was made for the provision of land for access to each plot. Clearly, with only a total of 1.5 ha, landowners are reluctant to give up land for even the smallest track at the side of their plot. As a consequence, access to some plots is only achieved with difficulty, often with damage to a crop.

Confidence in supply

All rural populations are by nature conservative, and farmers only started to prepare their fields for an irrigated crop after they had seen the water actually flowing in the canals. It will take a few years for farmers to develop sufficient confidence in the supply of water to take the "risk" of cultivating a high value crop which is not tolerant to water stress. Only then will the real benefits of the improved irrigation supply be realised to the country.

Monitoring and Evaluation

An important function in any development project is that of monitoring the effect of the development. As with any rural community the information which the project received from the WUAs was of questionable quality: sometimes their data was adjusted in order (as they thought) to reduce their water charges; and sometimes the questionnaires were not completely understood. With experience and training, this important aspect can only improve.

Training

The process of forming WUAs included the production of training material by the unit in the PMU, for training the coordinators and promoters. In all 34 modules are planned, of which 20 have been written and distributed, on subjects including O&M, the role of the WUA president, distribution of water, how to run a meeting, collection of data, importance of drainage, etc. As time goes on requirements for further training will no doubt come to light.

The future

All papers such as this should have a heading like this, to demonstrate to an audience that we do not think that time stands still!
We are looking now to a period of consolidation of the WUAs. We were pleased that a recent survey of farmers, taken at random in the seven districts, showed that 99% of those questioned had at least heard of WUAs, and knew something of their purpose and fu nction. However, as organisations they are still fragile, and it will take a few years for them to be thoroughly grafted into the fabric of the rural society. When they have become more mature, it is possible for WUAs to consider taking on extra roles on behalf of their members. Such roles could include the wholesale purchase of seeds and other inputs, providing transport and marketing, making available machinery for members, even the provision of credit facilities. Who knows? But it is certain that both now and in the future, further training in a number of key areas will still be required. ●