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The Role of the Individual Agency in Participatory Irrigation Management: Lessons from India

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Abstract

The devolution of authority for natural resource management to local user groups has been an important approach to overcome the long-standing challenges of centralised state bureaucracies. In India, this approach was implemented in irrigation management through the creation of Water Users' Associations (WUAs), following the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Water Resources in 1987 that aimed to enhance the farmer participation in irrigation management. WUAs are also expected to facilitate local adaptation to climate change through improved irrigation management. The literature on common-pool resources following the seminal work of Elinor Ostrom has identified important design principles that can enhance the efficiency, equity and sustainability of local user groups. However, in spite of intensive research on this issue, knowledge gaps still remain regarding the question as to why some local user groups are able to overcome governance challenges such as elite capture, while others, which work under the same design principles, are not. The paper addresses this knowledge gap by conducting a qualitative case study, using the Grounded Theory approach. This methodology was selected to be able to identify in an inductive way from empirical cases those factors that may have been neglected in the literature on common-pool resources. Following a comparative approach, four villages were selected, two each in the states of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. In these villages, it was found that inspite of certain governance challenges such as elite capture, rent seeking and patronage, two villages have been able to minimise them to a large extent and have enabled water distribution to become a community activity. The other two villages have, despite local governance guidelines and incentives, failed to live up to the participatory approach and are dealing with challenges such as lack of collective action, accountability and exclusion. The Grounded Theory approach identified individual agency as a major factor that plays a significant role in success of participatory irrigation management, which has been neglected in the current literature on common pool resources. The paper draws conclusions on how local leadership can be promoted to facilitate climate change adaptation in irrigation management.

Keywords: Climate change adaptation, individual agency, participatory irrigation management