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“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

Is Devolution Sufficient for Effective Institutional Performance of Participatory Irrigation Management? A Closer Look at Water Users' Groups in Tanks Irrigation in South India

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Abstract

Tanks are earthen dams that were built centuries ago to cater the water requirement of a village community i.e. for irrigation and domestic requirement. Their management is deeply ingrained in the social structure and traditions of village life even today. The institutions shaping the management have been influenced by power structure at village level and policies at state level from colonial India to contemporary India. In recent decades, with more studies emphasising participatory irrigation management, state government lead the management of these tanks to water user groups, created among the beneficiaries. The existing physical infrastructure was restored e.g., feeder-canal, tank-bund, sluice, catchment treatment, de-silting and a democratically elected governing body was established with institutional support and legal recognition to take up their responsibilities. The question is how far these de jure democratic governing bodies function democratically in reality? So a comparative study between formal community-based tank management institution and informal community-based tank management institution was conducted to find out effectiveness of institutional performance in participatory tank irrigation management. This was evaluated by eliciting stakeholders rating on modified Likert's scale for participation in 'collective action' and 'decision making' for operation and maintenance of the tank system. Similarly, 'equity in sharing', 'well defined water rights', 'monitoring and enforcement' and 'conflict resolution' as measure for perception about performance of the tank management institutions was looked at. All six parameters were selected based on Ostrom's design principle illustrated by long enduring common property resources. It is quite surprising to know even though stakeholders' rating for participation in collective action and decision making is higher in formal tank management institution, their perception on institutional performance is low with respect to the parameters equity, water rights, monitoring and enforcement and conflict resolution. This indicates that the devolution of responsibilities by the state itself is not the end, policies should also stress on processes of democratic developmental in institutions so that they can come over traditional power structures to endure in future.

Keywords: Devolution, institutional performance, tank irrigation