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Assessment of water users associations in Spate Irrigation Systems: Case Study of Gash Delta Agricultural Corporation, Sudan

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Abstract

Purpose The purpose of this study is to assess Water Users Associations (WUAs) technically, financially and administratively as being partially responsible for spate irrigation system management in Gash Delta Agricultural Corporation in Sudan.

Methodology WUAs were assessed using questionnaire, direct observation and focus group discussion. Accordingly, WUAs were categorized into very poor, poor, average, good and very good.

Findings The results indicate that technically and financially, WUAs in Gash Delta Agricultural Corporation are poor. Administratively, WUAs classified as average. The results also indicated that WUAs located in the upper spate system perform better than that located in the middle system.

Originality/value The study was based on an innovative idea of giving stakeholders part in development of the assessment criteria as it is the first study assessing WUAs in Gash spate irrigation systems in Sudan.

Keywords WUAs, Assessment of WUAs, Spate Irrigation System, Gash Delta, Sudan

Introduction

Spate irrigation system (SIS) is a unique form of irrigation, predominantly found in arid and semi-arid regions (Food and Agricultural Organizations of the United Nation (FAO), 2010). Spate irrigation system is being practiced in various parts of the world as an indigenous irrigation method (El-Askari, 2005). It supports livelihoods of the rural population in the Middle East, West Asia and North and East Africa (van Steenbergen, 1997). Spate irrigation systems (SIS) account for approximately 2.5% in Sudan (Perry and Bucknall, 2009). More than half of this area is in Gash agricultural scheme. The scheme was set up by the government in the 1920s, to settle poor nomadic people into a cash economy growing cotton (International Fund for Agricultural Development, IFAD 2004a). Gash Delta Agricultural Corporation (GDAC) has moved from 8000 sharecroppers cultivating 33,500 ha (hectare) in Turkish and British Colonial periods to present situation involving more than 40,000 farmers cultivating an area at any given time ranging from 40,600 to 50,000 ha. Many farmers did not have ready access to irrigated areas. They lost interest in land administration which led to severe invasion of mesquite (Prosopisjuliflora DC.).In GDAC mesquite resulted from absence of permanent land ownership. In Sudan, Conflicts between government regulations and indigenous rules contribute to generating inconsistencies on who have the right to till the land and hence own it as discussed by Issam (1999). Since early 19th century, Gash resources were managed in a way to serve some objectives of producing cotton for export and sorghum for local food production. Cotton was the most important crop in the area up to 1992. Because of financial and technical problems, the scheme's irrigation infrastructure deteriorated seriously and the Gash system experienced a decline in income from a cotton exporting zone to a marginal subsistence crop producing area FAO (2010).The agricultural season in Gash is very short extending from July to December. Sorghum (local variety of sorghum known as Aklamoy) is the only crop widely grown as the main source of food and is preferred by the most population in Kassala State. The productivity of Aklamoy in recent years is very low at about 210 Kg per ha compared with 840 Kg per ha in the 1980s.

Spate management is very risk-prone (Komakech, et al. 2011) and requires high levels of cooperation between farmers to divert and distribute flood flows. Management of the spate system requires arrangements for various management functions which cannot be achieved without strong farmer organisations IFAD (2012). Over the last three decades, a large number of countries around the world have adopted programs to transfer management of irrigation systems from government agencies to water users associations (Johnson, et al., 1995). The long-term of poor and inefficient management of available resources and unfair land distribution in GDAC explain clearly the importance of farmer's participation in water management. The issue of institutional reforms was raised in an attempt to solve the problem of poor management, and historical land distribution problems by giving farmers a greater role to play in water management through WUAs and land registration process. Internationally, results of

farmers' participation are becoming increasingly viable, see (Farbrother 1991 and Meinzen-Dick and Subramanian 2002). Before the formation of WUAs, management of water and agricultural activities were carried out by the Ministry of Water Resources and Electricity (MOWE) and GDAC. WUAs in GDAC were established based on Messga as a hydraulic unit. Tribal base was also considered in establishment. By doing so decision makers tried to adopt local conditions as (Meinzen-Dick and Subramanian 2002) concluded that if WUAs adapts local conditions, it will be more effective and sustainable than those which follow a single blueprint design. Formation of WUAs, land registration, irrigation structures rehabilitation, and eradication of mesquite were planned to be implemented at the same time in GDAC. Experience shows that if these different interventions are done separately, they do not produce the expected results (Plusquellec, 1990).

WUAs are fundamentally a participatory, bottom-up concept and therefore, they received particular attention in recent decades as a development tool. Participatory irrigation management (PIM) in Sudan has started since 1990s in the form of farmers' organizations and WUAs. Farmers organized in water users' organizations and farmers' organizations in the Northern states and in the White Nile state respectively. Recently water users' associations have been established in Gezira Scheme and in GDAC. The main purpose of these organizations is to participate in management of their irrigation systems at the local level. In Gash spate irrigation system, WUAs were established and supported by IFAD since 2004 under the institutional reform of Gash Sustainable Livelihoods Regeneration Project (GSLRP). WUAs in GDAC are legal entities recognized under the Kassala State legislation on Community Organization Act which was approved in 2004.

A workshop including all stakeholders was conducted in Kassala to negotiate the formation of WUAs in June 2004. The workshop recommended formation of WUAs in GDAC. Generally, the workshop confirmed that the involvement of farmers leads to –improvement ofthe spate system in GDAC. WUAs were formed based on the number of paired Messgas-(pieces of land of a large basin of an area ranging from 210 to 1,000 ha)-in each Block. Degain Block was chosen as first to form WUAs. In GDAC there are 92 WUAs, each WUA elects two representatives to the overarching WUA organisation at the Scheme level, 361 members of WUAs were trained during 2006 to 2008. The land is distributed to farmers on lottery bases. Farmers prefer the middle of Messga rather than the head and the tail. Lottery system is applied each season to avoid conflicts over land distribution. Any WUA has its specified land in Messga to distribute it over the members based on lottery system. Internationally, mixed results are found in studies on participatory irrigation managements' (Vermillion, 1997; Zekria and Easter, 2007 and Sonal, 2003). In GDAC successes observed because of WUAs consensus of decisions increased farm holding size from a 0.25 to 1.25 ha. Moreover, conflicts between farmers have been resolved by WUA and collective action in flood distribution is practiced. These initial successes constitutesufficient incentives for farmers to participate. However, there are technical, financial, and administration limitations facing spate irrigation in Gash (IFAD,2003a). Scientists agree that there is lack of proper annual evaluation of the WUA. WUAs in GDAC are considered new and authority was partially transferred to them therefore, assessment is needed so that corrective actions can be taken in due time.

Study area

GDAC is located in Kassala state (figure 1), east of the Republic of the Sudan between latitudes 150 30" and 160 04" N and longitude 360 05" and 360 05" E (Abualgasim et al., 2011). The Delta stretches to about 110 km. North-East of Kassala town (Kamal, 2003). The climate is semi-arid to arid. It is hot throughout the year with maximum temperature ranging from 420C in May to 340C in August. Minimum temperature ranges from 250C in May to 160C in January. The average annual rainfall ranges from 260 mm in the southeast to less than 100 mm in the northwest (IFAD, 2003b). The population is estimated at 87, 000 households comprising around 500,000 people. The majority of people in the Gash are poor, living in larger villages of mud brick housing and in smaller settlements of traditional tenting. They depend on subsistence farming of very small holdings, traditional agro-pastoralist, and marginal income generating from free work like charcoal business. Poverty in the study area estimated to be 89%. Sorghum, Aklamoyis the dominant crop in Gash. Some people are practicing agriculture as sharecroppers, have a few livestock, firewood collection and sale, as well as charcoal making and marketing. Annual discharge of GR varies between 600 Mm3 and 1.2 Bm3. This makes it one of the most important spate irrigation areas in Sudan. The agricultural land is divided into 213 Messgas. Each Messga is irrigated by a Messga canal taking off from the main canal through brickwork off take opened and closed by stop logs. In the past, GDAC was irrigated using three years rotation, in which 33,600 ha are irrigated each year, but the GSLRP altered this to two year rotation in which 50,000 ha are irrigated each year.

The principal water source is the Gash River (GR) which rises in the Eritrean highlands and extending over an effective period of 60 to 70 days from July to September with high sand and silt loads. GR dissipates in the terminal fan some 100 km north of Kassala town where it provides moisture for natural forests, pasture and seasonal wetlands for crop production. It also recharges the aquifers. Downstream from Kassala town, some of its flood water is diverted into canals which divert water into Messga. Each Messga is 500 metre wide and from few km to 20 km long. Floods in the GR usually come in two early and late flushes. The early flush starts in first July and ends towards mid-August. The late flush extends from mid-August to mid-September. The first flush is used to cover about two-thirds of the targeted cultivated area. The remaining area is irrigated in the second rotation of flush.

Figure 1. *Study area: Gash Delta Agricultural Corporation, Sudan*

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Filed work started with the meeting with the agriculture and irrigation officials, and farmers who are members of WUAs. Research work, data required and criteria used were addressed and discussed. Personal visits and field work were conducted during the period from January to April 2013. This included personal interviews with executive members of the WUA utilising structured questionnaire. In addition, focus group discussions were held separately with members representing the two blocks. The study was based on innovative idea.

Table 1. *Criteria identified and used for assessment of WUAs*

Category	Criteria
Technical capacity	Training of WUAs Crop choice Technical advises Operation and Maintenance (O&M)plan Agricultural assets and equipments
Financial capacity	Finance source Expenditure on O&M Expenditure on transportation and labour work Budget discussion meeting Cash crops
Administrative capacity	Record books WUA meetings Agricultural plan Relation with related institutions Cooperation with field inspectors

The study linked poor small farmers with other decision makers in one meeting to investigate real problems. Local micro level problems of WUAs were also considered. Kassala and Degain blocks were selected to represent different locations of the system. The criteria were addressed in the form of questionnaire. The questionnaire covered all 31 WUAs executive committees in Kassala and Degain blocks. The questionnaire was followed by two focus group discussion in both locations. WUAs in GDAC were assessed in categories of financial, technical, and administrative capacities. Each category was detailed in several criteria of equal weight. For each criterion the answers were weighted by 1 and 0 for yes and no answers respectively. Then the total scores for each category was summed and divided by the total number of respondents. The scores were classified to very poor, poor, average, good and very good as shown in table 2. Then WUAs for each block were assessed separately to identify the location impact on technical, financial and administrative capacities of WUAs.

Table 2. *Criteria identified and used for assessment of WUAs*

Score range	Classification
Less than 0.30	Very poor
0.30 – 0.49	Poor
0.50 – 0.69	Average
0.70 – 0.89	Good
Greater than 0.89	Very good

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Technical capacity of WUAs

The results show that WUAs in GDAC are technically and financially poor as presented in table 3. Training of WUAs score is 67.74% and classified as average. There is a gap in the technical knowledge of WUAs because the trained members constitute only 0.7% of the total number of farmers. The trained farmers didn't reflect what they know to the farmers as planned through training of trainers. Improvement of training alone cannot sustain WUAs without the proper functioning of the other items. For illiterate farmers in GDAC training is important, however it is not a sufficient condition for successful management of spate system.

Table 3. *Assessment of WUAs in GDAC*

Category	Criteria	Score	Classification
Technical Capacity	Training of WUAs	67.74	Average
	Crop choice	41.94	Poor
	Technical advice	3.23	Very poor
	O &M Plan	74.19	Good
	Agricultural assets and equipments	6.45	Very poor
	Average	38.71	Poor
Financial Capacity	Finance source	0.00	Very poor
	Expenditure on O & M	0.00	Very poor
	Expenditure on transportation and labour	67.74	Poor
	Budget discussion meeting	70.97	Good
	Cash crops	41.94	Average
	Average	36.13	Poor
Administrative Capacity	Record books	87.10	Good
	WUAs meetings	55.16	Average
	Agricultural plan	90.32	Very good
	Relation with related institutions	0.00	Very poor
	Cooperation with inspector	74.19	Good
	Average	61.35	Average

Sonal (2003) mentioned that the importance of capacity building of farmers during the inception of the WUA cannot be overemphasized, because it gives the required confidence to irrigation unit members and encourages farmers to support the WUA. The results indicate that WUAs lack agricultural assets and equipments. Only 6.45% of WUAs have agricultural assets and equipments. Therefore the associations are unable to implement their activities effectively. This is because they lack financial resources to purchase or rent such expensive agricultural machines. In Sudan low technical efficiency is behind low crop productivity (Siddig and Babiker, 2011). Crop choice is rarely practiced in GDAC and therefore, it is assessed as poor. Farmers are used to cultivate Aklamoy because it is characterized by highly palatable straw for animal consumption and high gelatine content in the grains resulted in best consumer preference.

WUAs work without technical advice as they lack enough power and rights even to consult an engineer as stated by 76.77% of WUAs. Each WUA has an operation and maintenance plan but unable to implement it because of financial and technical problems. (Fernandez and Vidal, 2002) concluded that the introduction of new WUAs and the upgrading of existing technologies, without providing adequate training, fulfilling maintenance requirements, undertaking adequate longer term cost-benefit analyses and the provision of adequate legal and policy environments, often results in failure. Technically flood management, agricultural practices and production are crucial for spate WUAs. Mesquite constitutes real problem in GDAC. It makes land difficult to cultivate, causing the obstruction of flood paths and changes the river morphology (FAO,2010). At the same time mesquite is considered as a prime source of income for landless families, who use it to produce charcoal.

Therefore, technical solution should integrate both flood management aspects, socio-economic and agricultural aspects. Regular maintenance of spate system infrastructure such as Messga levelling, canal de-silting, and bund formation are important for equitable distribution of flood. Maintenance of the headwork and main canals should be under the responsibility of government as it is beyond the capability of WUAs. Spate systems are managed through rules and regulations. Legal rights for managing the distribution of flood among members are required. Water rights in spate irrigation are integral part of spate management (Abraham et al., 2005). Training on development of rules and regulations for WUAs is very important as flood water is distributed through these rules. The most important factors influencing technical capacity in Gash is the low educational level among farmers. Most of farmers have an educational level either Khalwa (religious traditional school) or primary school. (Vuren, et al., 2004) confirmed that education level of farmers constitutes successive factors of participatory irrigation management; however, the illiteracy level is high in GDAC.

Financial capacity of WUAs

Worldwide, one of the most common reasons for governments to start considering the possibility of turning the management of irrigation schemes over to users is the lack of public funds to cover the Operation and Maintenance (O&M) costs of the schemes. For any WUAs financial autonomy and management transparency constitutes the major factors for long-term sustainability (FAO, 2010). In Sudan, when privatization was initiated in the early 1990s, the government was under pressure of poor performance of irrigated agri-

culture (Dingle, 1994). In this study, WUAs finance sources; expenditures on O&M, transportation and annual budget review meeting are often used as indicators to evaluate the financial capacity of WUAs. The results indicate that WUAs are financially poor as shown in table 3. The results show that, there is no financial source for WUAs. Focus group discussion indicated that water fees collected from the members was the only financial source i.e. there is no effective water fee collection system in place. Only a few of the 92 WUAs make a proper annual O&M plan with budget breakdown. Whereas some exemplary WUA has a collection fee rate of above 90%, the success rate of nearly 75% of the WUAs is still below 50%. Block inspectors are still responsible for land and water charges. This responsibility should be transferred to the WUAs. WUAs need to collect and utilise the fees by themselves. Reliance on water fees from the farmers alone will not result in financial sustainability (Eiman et al., 2013). Very poor financing is risky because WUAs may take several years to increase agricultural production to the point at which farmers are able to pay water use charges out of sales of production. Since there is no external fund to WUAs, there is a general need for WUA to add revenue and diversify their financing sources beyond what they can obtain from only water charges and dues from members. WUAs in GDAC is considered new and new institutions tend to become financially stronger as stated by (Ratna and Pudhvikar, 2005). According to Saleth and Dinar (2005), no WUA would succeed without financial viability as financial problems remain the underlying forces for institutional change. In GDAC there is limited funding for maintenance by government. GDAC is constrained in its ability to plan for development because of inadequate funding, lack of revenues and technical capacity (FAO, 2010). Land and water fees are low as US$ 6.2/ha and insufficient to pay for full maintenance as annual maintenance requirement is estimated at US$1.8 million. In GDAC the required budget is far more than the actual budget received, which is mostly spent on supporting a large permanent agency staff, offices, vehicles and other support services, while little was spent on actual scheme maintenance. This requires mechanism to control financial management for WUAs. Sonal (2003) concluded that financial incentive provided through partial refund for undertaking O&M, gives effective control over O&M expenditure and at the same time assist in adopting strict measures for recovery. WUAs bank accounts were opened to respond to the borrowing regulations. It is an empty account because no fund is transferred from government or any agency to WUAs. Farmers are reluctant to utilize bank finance due to rampant illiteracy, recovery problems and fear of such finances. The available thin fund, which is collected from members, is spent on transportation of WUAs executive committees' members and seeds. Similar financial problems exiting in GDAC are summarised by Vermillion (1997) stating that the most problematic financial situation for WUAs appear to be where the cost of irrigation to farmers is already relatively high, and where either the government is dropping a subsidy or where the profitability of agriculture is not high. WUAs are good in conducting budget discussion meetings; however, the budget is too small. To overcome the financial problems, WUAs must have the power to levy and collect water charges from farmers. WUAs should have freedom to fix water rates to be collected from their members provided such rates are decided by them in their general assembly meeting through consensus. Farmers should have the freedom to grow the crops they want to grow within the available flood. Government may influence their

decision indirectly through the price mechanism and not through imposition of restrictions. WUA with common consent of its members may take up any activity of common interest to farmers such as marketing of produce, and supply of inputs provided these are financially viable. International experiences suggest that the majority of farmers in successful participatory cases are full-time farmers deriving a substantial proportion of their livelihoods from irrigated farming. In GDAC and because the farming season is very short, the majority of farmers generate income from free work like producing charcoal from mesquite.

Administrative capacity of WUAs

Administratively WUAs can be classified as average according to 61.35% of the respondents. This is attributed to ability of WUAs to prepare an agricultural plan and to record activities in a ledger book. Preparation of agricultural plan and record books were classified as very good and good respectively as shown in table 3. It is observed and confirmed by IFAD (2004c) that no women are registered on the books as landholders. For cultural reasons women inherit land in GDAC. Most women forego their inheritance rights in favour of their brothers and thus they are excluded from the land distribution and allocation.

Most of WUAs conducted an acceptable number of meetings per year but these meetings were actually conducted without specific agenda to be circulated to members prior to meetings. The constraint has been the lack of managerial skills of the WUAs, which has resulted in poor provision of services. To improve WUAs managerial skills FAO (2007) and Petter Mollinga (2010) suggest the need to update the traditional mind-set of WUAs on spate irrigation administration. By its nature, spate irrigation requires well-functioning institutions with shared responsibilities and strong relations. In Gash, relationship of WUAs with related institutions is very poor as shown in table 4. WUAs lack relation with the farmers union which is an influential body. The farmers' union is supposed to be elected by the farmers in GDAC and intended to represent their interest. The boundaries between the WUAs and the farmers union are grey area by the fact that most of the farmers' union members have several hats, as they are in most instances the leaders of the WUAs. In Sudan, the presence of a strong local branch of the farmers' union and supportive political leadership were factors of success of farmers-managed systems' (Samad and Dingle 1994). WUAs lack direct relation with government related ministries. These related institutions should treat WUAs as a permanent feature in the irrigation sector to ensure sustainability of irrigation systems. The results indicate that existing relations are not strong enough to support sustainability of WUAs. Gash institutional problem require further cooperation and collaboration between different institutions and other stakeholders as suggested by Raadgever et al. (2012). The agricultural inspector has a great role to play within WUAs. The inspector is bridging the relation of WUAs with GDAC.

Table 4. *WUAs relation with related institutions*

	Yes %	Type of relation
Farmers union	00 42	No relation Supervision
Gash Agricultural Scheme	68 35	Coordination Consultation
WUAs	65	Coordination
Government related ministries	00	Indirect relation

Cultivated area in GDAC is relatively large (33,000 ha) therefore, cooperation of government related agencies is important to complement the efforts of WUAs. Huge work such as organizing maintenance and supervising flood distribution is beyond the capacities of WUAs. Strong relationship with government and nongovernment organizations will help obtain funding, agricultural equipments such as machinery, and training for WUAs. Confusion over roles and responsibilities constitutes major problem in the Gash area. This is because of the large number of institutions involved in spate management such as Gash Agricultural Scheme, River Training Unit of the Ministry of Water Resources and Electricity, farmers union, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MOAI), and WUAs. Some of these institutions are competing with the WUAs instead of providing support. As stated by Raadgever et al. (2012) overlapping functions and fragmented institutions constitute main reasons for failed water management programs. The roles of WUAs, farmer union and GDAC are not well defined to avert conflicts (Hanan, 2010). Also one of the limitations observed and reported during group discussion is lack of transparency between executive committees and members.

Per block assessment of WUAs

In spate systems like in GDAC, the Gash River relocates and renews soil as it carries the soil from upstream to downstream. Also the wave of the flood is high at Kassala block in upstream and expected to be low at Degain block in the middle of GDAC. This will damage the irrigation infrastructure and may interrupt agricultural season at kassala block as occurred in 2003 and 2007 flood seasons. The results presented in table 5 shows that financially and administratively, Kassala block WUAs located in the upper spate system are better than those of Degain block WUAs located in the middle of Gash spate system. This is because a spate irrigation system poses institutional and technical challenges. Hans et al. (1998) stated that collective action is challenged by complex upstream-downstream interactions between users within the system. Kassala block is around Kassala city in the upstream side, so WUAs are in direct contact with service providers. Technically WUAs in Degain block are

better than those of the upper system as shown in table 5. This is mainly attributed to the training program offered to Degain WUAs as the establishment of WUAs has started in Degain. Also the GDAC administration office is originally located in Aroma town which is closely located near Degain block. GDAC agricultural staff technically supports WUAs in Degain since inception of WUAs. This support facilitates upgrading of spate infrastructure in Degain block. Farmer schools activities also started in Degain. Farmers school is qualifying farmers' capacities to administer their activities effectively. Focus group discussion of Degain members reflected that, under the circumstances of absence of regulation of flood distribution in Gash, upper WUAs utilise both first and second flushes of Gash River, while middle and downstream users utilise only the first flood.

Conclusion

WUAs in GDAC have low technical knowledge, are ill equipped and at the same time lack enough finance to take the full responsibilities of managing the spate system. Involvement of framers in spate irrigation management in GDAC is still slow and can be summarized in consultations, collective bargaining and sharing information. The problems associated with WUAs are low technical know-how, lack of cash crops, lack of bylaws and regulations, lack of cooperation, and unclear relation with other institutions working in GDAC. There is a need to explore new mechanisms to develop capacity of WUAs to deal with technical, financial and administrative issues related to their activities. WUAs involved in management of spate system require skills of financial and administrative management and should be backed by technical know-how. Capacity building of farmers, financial viability, willingness and efforts of members to participate in collective action of WUAs and continuous innovative improvements are urgently required to ensure sustainability of WUAs in GDAC. Therefore, this paper recommends a strengthening program that will integrate financial, technical and managerial issues to ensure continuity and sustainability of WUAs in GDAC.

Technical Capacity	WUAs in Kassala Block	WUAs in DegainBlock	Technical Capacity	WUAs in Kassala Block	WUAs in DegainBlock	Technical Capacity	WUAs in Kassala Block	WUAs in DegainBlock
Training of WUAs	Average	Very good	Finance source	Poor	Poor	Record books	Very good	Very good
Crop Choice	Very poor	Very poor	Expenditure on O & M	Very poor	Very poor	WUAs meetings	Very good	Average
Technical advice	Very poor	Very poor	Expenditure on transportation and labour	Average	Good	Agricultural plan	Very good	Very good
O &M Plan	Good	Good	Budget discussion meeting	Good	Good	Relation with related institutions	Very poor	Very poor
Agricultural assets and equipments	Very poor	Very good	Cash crops	Very good	Very good	Cooperation with inspector	Very good	Good
Average	Very poor	Average		Poor	Very poor		Good	Average

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