



# Water for Production

## Women in Decentralised Irrigation Systems in Maharashtra, India

### Issues and Recommendations

#### Introduction

Reforms in the irrigation sector have largely been driven by diverse sets of agenda within the broader neoliberal framework. What is interesting is that different stakeholders tend to agree on the need for improving water resources through such reforms and most would even agree that decentralisation is the best form to achieve this. For the hitherto excluded groups - such as women, dalits<sup>1</sup>, landless and the poor, decentralisation raises hope to redress their historical exclusion from accessing water and making decisions around it. Claims for representation in the decision making process therefore becomes critical for these groups. For local vested interests this often holds a promise for strengthening their political base. For

multilateral agencies (e.g. the World Bank in Maharashtra) and often the government as well, it holds meaning in terms of reducing state expenditure and responsibility on both management as well as infrastructure and for private parties it opens up spaces for making economic profits in the event of clear entitlements getting institutionalized

Given these diverse set of interests, which often appear like a win-win situation, it is not surprising that there is little struggle or debate over the new reforms in the sector. The state too has been straddling between supporting and advocating neo-liberal reform on the one hand, and performing its welfare role on the other.

#### Research questions, objectives and methodology

The main goal of the project was to understand the factors, which have either facilitated or constrained rural women in the exercise of their rights and priorities as empowered water decision-makers and the implications of such articulation for the sustainable, gender-just and equitable management of community water resources. Here we looked at the financial, political and administrative aspects of decentralised reforms that have created space for women to participate or be excluded, which are the women who get selected and why and how do they do so. Moreover are there any opportunity costs of participation for them. While doing so we mapped the performance of decentralisation in the irrigation sector to

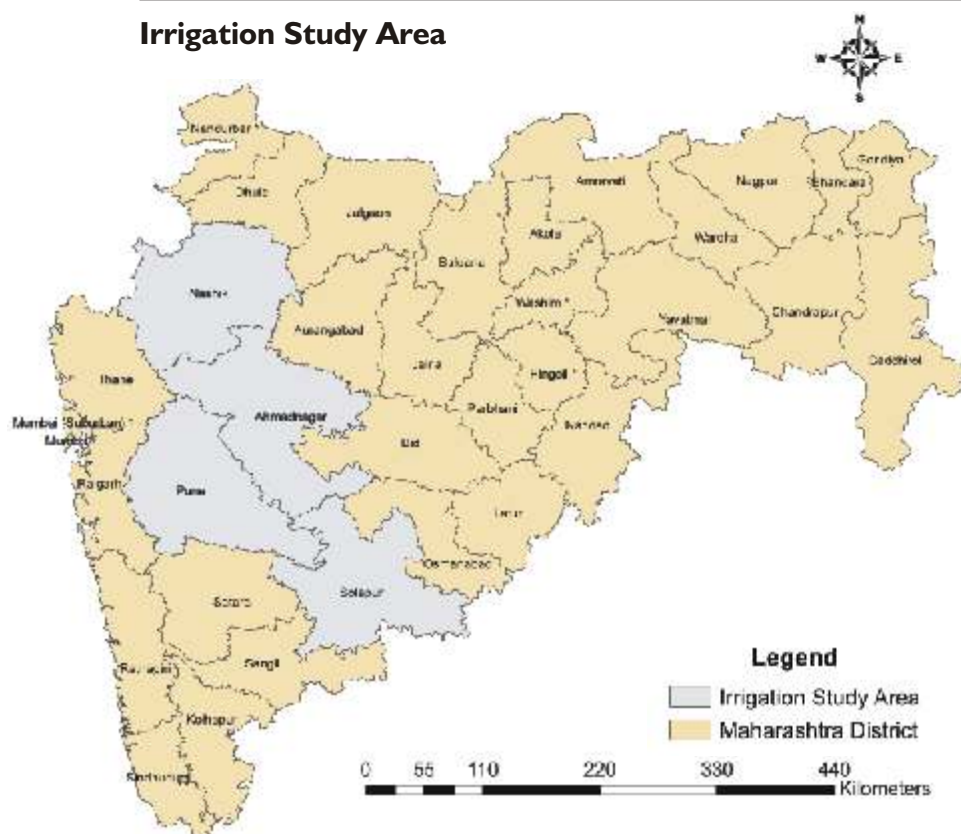
understand how favourable the context for women to participate was.

Our study covered five water users associations under the Maharashtra Water Sector Improvement Programme (MWSIP) across four districts of the western Indian state of Maharashtra covering major, medium and minor irrigation projects. We spoke to 53 women across diverse groups and several men through group interviews and discussions. Our discussions with government officials and review of policy and other government documents inform our study. We bring you here a very brief glimpse of some of our key findings and recommendations for policy.

1. Exploited castes in India which are now referred to as scheduled castes

## Map : District wise locations of selected WUAs

### Irrigation Study Area



### Policy context

Maharashtra is a state representing paradoxes with its prosperity on the one hand and deepening inequalities on the other. It is also a state with the highest number of large dams but characterized by frequent droughts. It has been in focus of late due to its drive in proposing reforms in the water sector. In the irrigation sector these reforms specifically include

- Decentralisation of management of irrigation systems through formation of Water Users Associations (WUA) at what is called as the minor level canal, i.e. the lowermost level in the irrigation project which progressively federates at every subsequent level of the canal network system i.e. the distributory, the canal and finally at the project level
- Improvement of irrigation infrastructure including maintenance of dams, main canals etc, and
- Enforcing legislation such as participatory irrigation management, water regulatory authority and the state water policy itself.

Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) is not new in the state and has a history, which dates back to 1930's and the first formal WUAs were set up in the late 1980's by SOPPECOM.

The new reform formalises this arrangement by making, setting up of decentralised management groups as mandatory. The main aim was to establish a more appropriate policy and institutional framework for multisectoral and environmentally sustainable water resource planning, management and allocation and to separate the over all water resources planning and allocation functions from the service delivery functions. It is in this context that the MWSIP was launched in 2003 through an agreement with the World Bank with a loan assistance of USD 325million.

For the first time as part of these reforms decentralised governance also brings in women in decision making bodies through quotas. Although these are limited to women with land titles within the service area or the command area<sup>2</sup> of the canal, it still a step forward towards advancing gender justice in the sector.

In this larger frame of policy of institutional and economic reform our enquiry focused primarily on decentralised governance at the local level, brought in with the hope of better water management through ensuring equity, sustainability and participation.

2. Command area or a service area is an area served by the canal through a gravity flow. It typically includes good quality lands in the valley portions of the village leaving the upstream areas unserved.

## On the ground

### Equity, sustainability and democratic participation

Water rights and membership to WUAs is vested in commodities rather than people. Right to water for those with land ownership in command areas excludes a large number of women, landless and dalits in most villages.

Inequities are also seen in terms of the location in the command area i.e. farmers located at the tail end of the canal often are deprived of water and until recently also a say in the decision making processes.

Social inequities are perpetuated by certain kinds of technological and institutional choices as well. They are manifested in the way rotation schedules are decided; measuring devices are maintained or not maintained etc.

Sustainability of the resource and institutions hinges largely on the question of equity and vice versa. Most inequitable systems also end up being non sustainable ones and that is what we see in the Maharashtra irrigation sector. In all the five WUAs that we studied the canals were poorly maintained, seepage losses were fairly high, water quotas of most WUAs had reduced considerably, intersectoral uses such as drinking water, irrigation and industry were affecting the farmers' availability of water, water thefts<sup>3</sup> remained unchecked and in fact sufficient incentives seemed to work in favour of those indulging in theft. All these contributed to the non-sustainable and irrational use of water further aggravating inequities in the command area.

In this context, participation remained limited to distribution of water as per the demand of the users which was largely in proportion to the land owned by them in the command areas, collection of water charges and operation and maintenance of the minor level canals. We found that the local elite largely works in close association with the lower level irrigation officials to exclude some sections.

### Women's voices

This larger picture of **decentralisation** in a way sets the tone for women's participation. One of the men chief functionaries in a WUA puts this very succinctly *"the canals are bad, there is water theft, and users fight at midnight when the water is not as per schedule.... what can women presidents or committee members do in these kinds of situations."* Transfer of an ailing system does not facilitate participation of the community.

The first level of **exclusion** eliminates all women who belong to landless households themselves as well as landless women who come from landowning households – they are not exactly 'landless', but by not having any legal rights to land, whether solely or jointly, can exclude them from being members of WUAs.

A few women who by virtue of being landholders<sup>4</sup> in the command area are now eligible for being on the managing committees but none of them were aware of their roles

and felt they were too under-equipped in front of the task before them. The entry of most of these managing committee members is largely mediated by dominant men in the committees and in their responses, women made sure that they had sufficiently attributed their presence in the committees to the men who recommended their names.

Women's absence in the meetings and silence if they did attend them comes from the specificity of the **culture of the sector** which is very male dominated. The defining characteristics of the sector are production, markets and prosperity with an unbridled promise to alleviate poverty and move out of subsistence. In fact this very culture sets the tone for what is respectable for women and what is not. So whereas men and the State see it respectable for women to participate in the domestic water they do not see so in the irrigation sector.

**Numbers** do give strength and in this sector women are hardly seen either as simple members or in decision making processes. The exception is evident in the work they do i.e. while working on the fields and irrigating their crops, weeding or harvesting the yield. Numerical strength as members and decision makers, they said would be an important incentive for them to participate in WUA functioning and know more about it.

*"If we knew what to do in these meetings, we would have participated in it. It is only after you have come here that we know we have to participate..."* **Information and knowledge** leads to informed participation and women articulated their concerns in this area where they felt incapacitated firstly by the fact that they did not know they were members and could play an active role and secondly because they had little knowledge around governance issues in WUAs. They therefore cited the need for separate training and capacity building inputs for their effective participation.

Women's **agency** and the factors that lead them to participate or not participate overcoming the structural context were the toughest to comprehend. While some women participated despite the constraining context, because they had some prior experience, or were more educated or simply had more enterprise and interest in the public sphere. Some others had similar attributes but prioritized and decided against participation in the sector, partly because there was little incentive to do so and largely because there were no direct stakes for them through participation. How and whether these stakes can be created is an area that needs further exploration.



3. Water thefts are commonly seen in most WUAs where water is directly lifted from the canals through small motors. This often remains unaccounted so water charges cannot be collected.

4. Most women landholders had land titles in their names because the households they belonged to either wanted to evade land ceiling laws or gain more shares in the sugar factories. Only few had inherited land with due respect.

## Key recommendations

### 1. Water for livelihoods- re-conceptualising women and water: Broadening the scope of WUAs

As a first step women need to be understood differently as having a dynamic relationship with nature. They need to be seen in different roles in the sphere of production and reproduction- as cultivators, labourers, subsistence farmers, mothers, owners of land as well as landless etc. Moreover, they also need to be seen as belonging to diverse social groups, carrying different identities and therefore representing diverse needs as well. In terms of policy, this means broadening the scope of the WUAs to include as a first step all women from land holding households in the command area without foreclosing options to extend equity beyond the command areas.

Water Users Associations need to become far more inclusive and membership to it needs to be granted on the basis of citizenship rather than ownership to property, in this case, land.

For poor men and women citizenship is often expressed more in terms of livelihood rights rather than political or civil rights alone. **Right to vote is often not sufficient for the poor to move out of poverty or for the women to counter patriarchal exploitation.** Citizenship is therefore seen in this broader context of gaining rights over resources and decision making.

Water for livelihoods would need a different thinking around water as well. This means looking at water as an integrated resource coming from a common pool, with minimum ecosystem needs to be fulfilled. This approach calls for a minimum assurance of water at an affordable rate for livelihoods for all. Needless to add that restructuring may not be possible if the path for equity, sustainability and democratic participation is not created.

### 2. Numerical strength

This leads to our second recommendation which emanates from the first and directly reflects the concerns expressed by women. Larger numbers of women in the WUAs and the managing committees would provide some incentive for women to come together and participate. This means all adult men and women inhabiting the village become members of the WUAs. Although it does not necessarily lead to a gender just articulation, it is the first step in moving towards gendering WUAs.

### 3. Separate forum

A separate forum needs to be set up for women to participate freely in the meetings and air their views without inhibitions. These women's meetings should precede the larger WUA ones and the decisions taken by women have to be considered in the larger meetings.

### 4. Capacity building

Lack of information and training are major gaps that need to be addressed. Unlike the domestic water sector, the irrigation sector does not actively seek women's participation. There is little by way of campaigns or trainings for women's participation. Dedicated funds need to be earmarked for capacity building in relevant areas in water management based on principles of equity, sustainability and democratic participation.

### 5. Need for a gender strategy

Last but not the least is filling in the yawning gap in irrigation policy and programme on gender. None of the irrigation programmes have a well worked out strategy on gender which talks about their rights of use and participation in decision making. Needless to add there is little financial commitment to making the sector gender inclusive. In Maharashtra there are a few groups who have been working on equity concerns in the sector for more than a decade, demonstrating possibilities of making the sector more gender inclusive and suggesting policy recommendations in this regard.

We strongly recommend the need to constitute a planning and monitoring group for making irrigation more gender inclusive. This group would include a diverse group of academics, grassroots practitioners and government officials.

This policy brief draws on the two-year study (2006-2008) supported by IDRC, Canada titled 'Water Rights as Women's Rights? Assessing the Scope for Women's Empowerment through Decentralised Water Governance in Maharashtra and Gujarat'. The study was jointly done by SOPPECOM, Pune, Utthan, Ahmedabad and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.



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