

ABSTRACT

This thesis critically assesses the effectiveness of Vietnam's transfer of responsibility for the operation and management of its irrigation systems through a process of reform, known as Irrigation Management Transfer. It has been the objective of many governments to reduce expenditure on irrigation infrastructure management, to improve the performance of irrigation systems, and to increase agricultural production. Shifting responsibility from government to farmers through Irrigation Management Transfer (IMT) is considered to be a cornerstone of water-management policy designed to achieve such benefits, and IMT has been supported by international organisations such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency.

The Vietnamese Government in the early 1990s transferred responsibility for the operation and management of its irrigation systems to groups of farmers through local Water User Associations or Agricultural Co-operatives. Although IMT has been beneficial to both the Government and farmers in Vietnam, there are a number of concerns to be addressed. Evaluations of IMT in Vietnam were conducted during the pilot phase of infrastructure development projects whilst funding donors were still present, or immediately on completion of projects. In addition, methodological approaches applied to evaluate the results of the IMT have been limited to quantitative assessments. There has been very little research engaging farmers who have directly participated in the IMT and who have been directly impacted by it.

This study begins to fill research gaps by exploring the perceptions of farmers about the changes the IMT has made to them, society and to irrigation systems management. Three irrigation systems in Vietnam provide the case studies for this research. The case studies have been selected to contrast varied geographic conditions (from mountainous to flat landscapes) and different local governance models.

An evaluation framework has been developed by this thesis, synthesised from previous evaluation studies of IMT from other countries. Seven elements related to the impacts of IMT form the basis of the evaluation of each case study: revenue and financial performance issues, water supply, operation and management of

infrastructure, agricultural benefits, social and economic outcomes for farming households, and governance aspects of IMT.

The study is based on 15 in-depth interviews with government agency staff, four focus groups with Irrigation Management Company (IMT) staff, Water User Association (WUA) members and 200 questionnaires administered to farmers. The findings suggest several benefits for farmers including increased agricultural productivity, increased household income, and the ability of farmers to diversify their household income. The administration of irrigation systems has improved since the IMT with farmers reporting they receive a more reliable delivery of water. Farmers also report social benefits associated with the IMT and the more equitable supply and access to water has resulted in improved community cohesion and less conflict between upstream and downstream farmers.

This thesis demonstrates that there are problems still to be addressed including long-term sustainability of irrigation systems including regular maintenance and upgrades, protection of irrigation system infrastructure from destructive practices, challenging inequitable funding policies and unreliable/insufficient funding support, lack of technical and management training programs for members of WUAs, and farmer resistance/reluctance/refusal to participate in the operating and managing the irrigation systems.

This thesis study contributes to a greater understanding of the impact of IMT in Vietnam by providing a detailed analysis through three case studies and from various stakeholder perspectives (Government, local organisations and farmers). Factors that have assisted beneficial outcomes from the IMT are explored along with the barriers that impede progress. The achievements of the IMT from farmer's perspectives will contribute towards a greater understanding of more sustainable approaches to irrigation systems management.