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**Decentralisation Trajectories with Multiple Institutions:
The Case of PIM Programme in India**

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Abstract

One of the offshoots of the planned economic development model in India has been the increasing emphasis on effective local governance. With newer models of implementing programmes, incremental steps in governance and institution building have assumed importance. These models of development emphasise users involvement in programme resulting in groups formed under JFM, Watershed programme, WUAs under PIM and so on. One predictable outcome of this approach has been the multiplicity of user groups in a small geographical area like village. Since the *panchayats*' portfolio of work also includes tasks that are now turned over to these user groups, a question is posed as to whether these new institutions are then competing for the same space of work, authority and power? This paper uses one such user group - water users associations (WUA) set up under the participatory irrigation management (PIM) programme to analyse the institutional dynamics at the local level.

Though the analysis points out that the newly formed user groups shows only modest success in their tasks so far, yet, to expect existing institutions like the *panchayat* to learn the intricacies of specific functions like water distribution and management and liaisoning with the irrigation department tasked with this role also appears difficult. A careful scrutiny in to some of the programmes implemented by a *panchayat*, reveals that a *panchayat* is also often treated as a 'contractor;' similar to the NGOs in PIM. Very few *panchayats* were found to initiate a planning process for its income and expenditure and priorities. Reportedly on many occasions the government or other agencies do not even care to obtain the mandatory no objection certificate (NOC) from *panchayats* thus blindfolding them of programmes or processes that agencies set up in the village.

Against this background, the paper highlights the difficulty to assume that a Sarpanch of a village *panchayat* would be willing to take on roles in diverse specializations. The creation of the new institutions like WUA is based on specific functions. First is the technical including maintaining the canals and distributing water. Second is the set of managerial functions specific to its functions, like, levying and collecting water charges. Third is the set of coordinating functions - besides coordinating with the irrigation department, one of the major coordination role is in resolving conflicts.

The paper thus argues that in so far as there is no overlap or competing interests in the functions of the user groups, there appears no reason to presuppose that a *panchayat* should be the last layer in decentralised administrative process. In fact, these new user groups together could possibly complement the *panchayats* functions. Also, the paper argues that it would be simplistic to view decentralization process having a last, identifiable administrative layer. However, one advantage of the *panchayat* institution is that there have been periodic commitments to review and strengthen them. In the case of the user group institutions being created, there is a real danger that these are sometimes viewed variously including as ones to offload functions the government does not want to do anymore. There is thus a need to be cautious and careful while crafting and tasking the new institutions.

JEL Classification: *D73, D78, H11, O21, P16, P21, R11*

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Decentralisation Trajectories with Multiple Institutions: The Case of PIM Programme in India

R. Parthasarathy

1 Introduction

One of the offshoots of the planned economic development model in India has been the increasing emphasis on effective local governance. While some scholars lay emphasis on financial decentralisation others view decentralisation as a political process involving strong local self-governments that plan and execute local developmental needs. The political parties and the people alike have also argued time and again for greater 'administrative freedom' at local levels. Strong *panchayat Raj* (local government) institutions are viewed as a step in this direction. During the first few decades in Independent India, the State governments adopted legislative and administrative measures with a view to expanding and developing local self-government. Policy makers were influenced by the Gandhian view, democratic constitution of the country and the five-year plans, which emphasised the promotion of peoples' participation in management especially for rural development through tiered representative institutions.

In the past few decades, however, with newer models of implementing programmes, incremental steps in governance and institution building have assumed importance. These models of development are an outcome of both the recognition of local level governance and the importance of users' involvement in programme conceptualisation and implementation. Examples of this type are: the user groups formed for Joint Forest Management (JFM), Watershed programme, water users associations (WUA) under the Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) programmes and so on. One predictable outcome of this approach has been the multiplicity of user groups in a small geographical area like village¹. The membership to these groups sometimes comes from a single village *panchayat*, while in others membership is spread over different villages or *panchayats*. This

¹ In Andhra Pradesh for instance, there are user groups formed to manage irrigation canals and water distribution; WUAs, watershed committees, development programme implementation committees under *Janmabhoomi*, school management committees, etc.

process of decentralisation, theoretically at least, has brought into fore different trajectories and dynamics in the space assumed to be for *panchayats*.

The new user groups could be viewed as logical extensions of the decentralisation process, thus hypothesised as complementing the *panchayat* committees. It is also possible that a plethora of institutions at the village level may work at cross-purposes; worse they may appear competitive as most groups are vested with managerial functions and with special funds. The fear is that these might lead to a further fragmentation of the society by providing fertile political grounds. In a flourishing democracy, however, it could be argued that politics is an integral part of the set up, yet, in so far as the influential members of these new user groups belong to a caste or class group, the political powers unleashed by such groups may have an adverse impact on various parameters.

On the contrary, it would be simplistic to view decentralisation process having a last, identifiable, administrative layer. It would be easy to argue, as some do, that the *panchayats* should be recognised as the last level in the hierarchy of decentralised political institutions. Therefore, both in terms of finance as well as on managerial aspects, *panchayats* should be supreme and all other (emerging) user groups should function under the *panchayat* umbrella. There is also a school, which argues that all programmes in a *panchayat* area should be implemented at the behest of the *panchayat*. In the course of reforms and decentralisation of power and functions, this aspect of institutional dynamics is often ignored. The present paper sets out to explore this class of issues by considering the case of participatory irrigation management (PIM) programme. Largely the cases are drawn from the field studies carried out in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat. The paper is organised as follows: section 2 shares the understanding of the problem. Section 3 presents an overview of the PIM programme. Section 4 discusses the various aspects of financial and managerial functions of the new institutions set up under the PIM programme. In both these sections, the interrelationships between the newly set up organisations and the *panchayats* are discussed. The last section 5 summarises the findings.

2 Panchayats and User Groups: Competing Spaces?

Functions of a *panchayat* include local administration, water resources development and management, sanitation and health, public works, school and adult education, community development, agriculture and animal husbandry, forest, and village industries and so on. Over time, the government has also transferred various other functions and development schemes to be administered by them. A part of the finances for the *panchayat* now come directly from different government departments, besides, they also collect local taxes, rents, levies, rates, fees, etc., as authorised by the Acts (For a comprehensive review of *Panchayati Raj* in India, see, RGF, 2000).

During the British rule and after Independence, there have been assessments and reviews on the performance of the self-government *panchayat* institutions by the government and academics like, the Ashok Mehta Committee, (GOI, 1978); Shiviah, 1986; GOK, 1996; RGF, 2000, etc. The striking feature of all these reviews and studies is their recommendation on ways and means of further strengthening the *panchayat* system. Thus, the village *panchayat* as a unit of decentralised administration has come to be accepted and importantly reviewed periodically. Indeed this is an important signal for local level institutions that they are not only recognised but attempts are also on to strengthen them periodically.

Inter alia, the Government of India and the various State governments have also started recently emphasising direct involvement of participants at local level in their various programmes. These new efforts are partly due to attempts at downsizing of the government roles but largely based on the experiences of NGOs and donor insistence. By and large, the user-involved programmes are based in rural areas² and often revolve around managing resources like land, water or forests. As mentioned, the *panchayats* portfolio of work also includes tasks that are now managed by separate user groups. In fact in some tribal areas like the Central India regions and in other scheduled areas, there is an apparent conflict between the *Panchayats* and the local bodies of *tribal panchayats* and *hill councils*. The power and jurisdiction of these bodies are matters of dispute and affect the development. So far no resolution is in sight probably because of the tribal councils also enjoy similar powers in matters of administration like the *panchayats* and would be

² There are some urban area based programme as well, like SJRY, Development of Women and Children in Urban Areas (DWCUA), Infrastructure Support and so on.

reluctant to give up. However, it is clear that the users group roles and responsibilities (discussed in subsequent sections) are indeed different. Yet, can these new institutions be viewed as the ones competing for the same space of work, authority and power? This paper uses one such user group, namely water users associations (WUA) set up under the participatory irrigation management (PIM) programme to analyse the institutional dynamics at the local level.

3 PIM: A Brief Overview

During the successive Five Year Plan period there has been an expansion of the irrigated area and some efforts to improve the maintenance of the irrigation systems. The significant qualitative attempts are directed toward increases in irrigation efficiency, introducing better methods of water control under the recently introduced participatory process in irrigation management (in some states)³. The importance of institutions in all these aspects is obvious; yet there are relatively fewer attempts to relate the structure of these new institutions and their working to the larger context of decentralisation initiatives.

In line with the National Water policy 1987, several states have enacted or are in the process of enacting irrigation policies/laws with an emphasis on users managed irrigation system. In Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, the governments have taken initiatives in sponsoring irrigation management transfer (IMT) but the approach and process have been different (for a synoptic view, see, Table 1 and for details see Parthasarathy, 2000). In the case of Gujarat, a Government Resolution in 1994 authorised the creation of 13 pilot projects in some major and minor irrigation schemes⁴. In the case of Andhra Pradesh, the state government enacted a law, The Andhra Pradesh Farmers Management of Irrigation Systems Act (1997), and

³ However, the persistent underutilisation of irrigation potential and the continued slow growth of yields suggest that the effectiveness of irrigation management is lower than its potential.

⁴ The implementing agency in six projects was an NGO; in the remainder, government officials undertook the transfer programme. These agencies besides motivating the farmers also aimed to build their capacity to manage the WUAs. The notable feature of the PIM scheme is its emphasis on the social engineering aspect (for details, see, Parthasarathy, 2000).

created 10,262 water users associations (WUAs) in the command areas of major, medium and minor irrigation projects.

The Gujarat approach emphasised on the consultations with farmers and the main feature has been a gradual approach rather than a forceful push by the government like in Andhra Pradesh⁵. While the PIM programme in Gujarat envisages a complete turnover of operation and maintenance (O&M) to the WUAs, the Andhra Act empowers farmers to manage the irrigation systems themselves. In both the cases, canals remain government property and major repairs continue to be the responsibility of the irrigation department, however, the day-to-day functioning of the system passes on to the users associations.

In Andhra Pradesh active membership starts with the electoral process of the WUA executive committee. However, in both the states voting rights are vested in the landowners in the command area irrespective of the farm size. Tenants have no voting rights in either state, although the APFMIS Act acknowledges their membership in the WUAs. Repair and rehabilitation of the infrastructure has been the most important component in both IMT Programs (Table 2). But, the major functions of WUAs are water distribution management and day-to-day operation and maintenance of the canal and field channels under their jurisdiction⁶. Due to the differences in the prevailing system of water distribution and water charge collection⁷, intra-scheme water distribution to the farmers fundamentally changes

⁵ It should however, be mentioned that Gujarat too is considering the legislative route to PIM programme and is in the process of drafting an Act.

⁶ While the WUAs in Gujarat are responsible for the collection of the demand forms and water charges, in Andhra Pradesh the collection of water charges is the responsibility of the revenue department. In Andhra Pradesh, the water charge is part of land tax collected by the officials of the Revenue Department and the amount depends upon the classification of land like, wet or dry and the farm size. It is expected that the WUA will eventually take over the responsibility of water fee collection, which will then be disconnected from land taxes (Table 3).

⁷ In Gujarat *sejhpali* system is in vogue, which is based on the farmers' demand for water allocation and water payment is based on crop area to be paid to the Irrigation Department. The new WUAs take over the collection of water demand and employ operators for the canal gates and inspection of water distribution. The operators being paid by WUAs replace the local-level functionaries of the Irrigation Department officials (*chowkidar*).

under the PIM program in Gujarat but remains almost the same under APFMIS in Andhra Pradesh.

There have been efforts to make the WUAs financially viable. Though charging economic rates for water had been a very difficult task in all the states, the WUAs in Gujarat at least had begun fixing and collecting water charges from member farmers. There are also attempts to strengthen the finances of the WUAs by the government. In Gujarat for instance, there are two types of grants for the WUA. The first is related to the performance, where the WUA retains 30 per cent of the water charges collected toward O&M expenditure and another 20 per cent of the total water charges collected for administrative expenditure. The second grant consists of a contribution of Rs. 250 per hectare from the state government, Rs. 200 from the Central government and Rs. 50 from the members of the WUA. In so far as the first type of grant is based on a proportion of the total water charges collected, there is an incentive for the WUAs to raise the water charges (see for details, Parthasarathy, 2000). In Andhra Pradesh too, funds for repairs have been disbursed to all the WUAs and federating bodies *albeit* through the Irrigation Department. In 1997-98, the actual amount to be spent on maintenance works was fixed at Rs. 100 per acre and a total of Rs 10.6 million was allocated for repairs and rehabilitation. The lump sum grant was shared in the following way: 50 per cent to the WUA, 20 per cent to Distributory Committee (DC), and 20 percent for the Project Committee (PC). Importantly, the remaining 10 per cent was earmarked for the village *panchayat* to undertake development programmes.

Thus, there has been some attempt in Andhra Pradesh to bring about a link between the new water management institution, WUA, and the *panchayat*⁸. The fact that Andhra Pradesh Act is touted as the model of irrigation sector reform, it is possible that other states, which use the Andhra Act as basis, would also try and forge similar links with the *panchayats*. There exist other linkages, weak though. Of the members of the WUA, around one-fifth in Gujarat and one-fourth in Andhra Pradesh hold some office in the village *panchayat* (Table 4) but there are variations in pattern among the WUAs. The (slightly) higher proportion of the members of the WUA involved in *panchayat* activities in Andhra Pradesh than Gujarat also reflects

⁸ In the subsequent year though the government had planned to maintain this level of grant for maintenance works, a new dimension of farmers sharing/contributing 15 per cent has been added. Like in Gujarat, in Andhra Pradesh too, no fixed commitment of grants for the PIM programme has been made (except the first two years in Andhra Pradesh).

the political process used for the constitution of the WUAs. Conversely, in Gujarat the fact that more than 21 percent of the WUA members also hold active office in the village panchayat indicates that consciously insulating WUAs from either *panchayats* or the political process is nearly impossible. It is recognised that taking part in the *panchayat* activities is not the same as involvement in party politics, yet, there is a fair play of party politics at the panchayat level that should be kept in view. This sort of linkages if sustained proves that decentralisation is not an exclusive or static process or that the newer institutions' "encroachment" into *panchayats*' "space" is necessarily a competitive phenomenon. Few institutions in a developing democracy can be viewed as sacrosanct to the extent that parallel or competing institutions should be forbidden. It is plausible that *panchayats* may view the newer institutions in its area as beneficial additions since they not only bring in additional resources but take away some of the management responsibilities as well in to small 'homogenous' groups. The challenge, therefore, is to find a proper balance of institutional arrangements at the local level that promote development effectively. This balance is not easily determined as they shift in tandem with the performance and changes in the new institutions⁹.

4 An Assessment of WUAs' Performance

For assessing the performance of the newly formed WUAs a sample was drawn that would represent different regions and irrigation schemes in each state. In Gujarat for instance, Thalota in the Dharoi irrigation scheme and Laxmipura in the Dantiwada scheme represent the North Gujarat region; Tranol in the Mahi-Kadana project and Digas in the Ukai-Kakrapar irrigation project were chosen from the

⁹ According to the 9th plan document, to ensure that the *Panchayat* act in the most effective manner, the involvement of people and facilitators in planning, prioritisation and implementation of programmes and in monitoring of their activities is essential. To circumvent the problem of disparity in the allocation of available financial resources between the main village and the hamlets, there is, perhaps, a need for developing appropriate principles of allocation of resources at the micro level. The second constraint can be removed through training and retraining of the *panchayat* members. Public administrators, managers of co-operatives and social activists/leaders could design training courses and manage training centres. The States should evolve appropriate mechanisms to ensure harmonious working of different tiers of the *panchayats*, perhaps, legislative actions would also be required.

Central and Southern regions¹⁰. In Andhra Pradesh, one WUA was selected from each of the following irrigation schemes and regions: Sriramsagar in Telangana, Nagarjunasagar in Coastal Andhra Pradesh and Cuddapah-Karnool and Thungabhadra in Rayalseema region. In all, seven WUAs, four in Gujarat and three in Andhra Pradesh were studied. Including Gujarat (341) and Andhra Pradesh (359), 700 households representing different socio-economic statuses were surveyed. Table 5 and 6 provide details about sample households.

4.1 Water Distribution and Management

As mentioned, the important difference between Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh is that they adopt different systems of water distribution - *sejhpali* in Gujarat and *warabandhi* in Andhra Pradesh. In *Warabandhi*, each farmer is entitled to a fraction of the total flow available to the system proportional to his land area in the canal command. Water is supposed to be delivered to farmers below each outlet by means of a strict rotation schedule. During his turn each farmer gets the full flow from the outlet. Under *sejhpali* system, every farmer is required to apply for irrigation each season indicating crop and the area. Under the decentralised set up, after receiving necessary guidance from the irrigation department, WUAs in Gujarat began to perform various water distribution and management related tasks. Some of the WUAs had framed rules however, as expected their effectiveness varied from one WUA to another. In some measure, the process of PIM has been able to introduce important changes through the local institution; such as an increase in accessibility of water to tail portions, expansion of area under irrigation and prevention of wastage of water by carrying out repair and rehabilitation work.

It is evident that the WUAs have addressed (though with varied level of success) some of their specific problems that had prevailed before their formation. For instance in the two states, appropriation of water by farmers in the head reaches of the canal and improper field channels were reported as two major reasons responsible for inadequate supply of water before (the formation of WUA). After the PIM, it was R and R work and management by WUAs, which led to a better supply of water than before. Two important reasons for the reported inadequacy of water even after the PIM are the location of plots and insufficiency of water in the

¹⁰ In Thalota and Laxmipura, the PIM programme was implemented by an NGO. In Tranol and Digas the irrigation department implemented the programme.

reservoirs¹¹. Evidently, both these problems are beyond the scope of WUAs influence and functions and hence the PIM programme's impact on water distribution and management through its new institutions namely, the WUA appears to be modest so far.

Regardless of its modest success why the government planners, donor institutions and the observers of the development process continue to promote and support the new local-level institutions? This could partly be due to the recognition that, "while in principle the *Panchayats* could be effective bodies for local planning and implementation, they may not be so in practice because of a number of constraints. First, all *Panchayat* members do not necessarily seek to achieve social goals and hence may not be sensitive to the needs of the people. Diversion and misuse of resources have been reported even where the PRIs are involved in the implementation of programmes. It has also been found that the *Gram Pradhans* who are mostly elected from the main village (71 to 92% in different districts of a State) ignore the development of hamlets. Second, most of the members do not have the necessary background in planning and implementation of development programmes. Third, unless there is a functional link between the various tiers of the *Panchayats* in terms of administrative and financial control, the required coordination in planning and implementation may not come through. Fourth, the *Panchayats* need flexibilities in operational rules, authority and financial resources if they are to participate actively in planning and implementation of development programmes" (IX Plan document, Vol. I, Planning Commission). Although the President of Gram (village) *panchayat* is the head, s/he does not exercise the status of the Executive as done by the Taluk and District *panchayats*. "In practice, the Secretary exercises more powers than the President. All correspondence and communication between the village *panchayat* and other *panchayats* and departments are done through the Secretary. Since he is the only recognised official at the *panchayat* level the members depend very much on the Secretary (*than the President*) for carrying their works and *panchayat* activities." (RGF, 2000, pp 67).

Even in the case of WUAs, the proposed solution of simple transfer of the responsibilities of the existing government department like say irrigation, that was

¹¹ In Gujarat, insufficient supply of water, plots located in the tail-end and poor R and R work seemed to be major limitations for the adequate supply of water before the formation of WUA (for details, see van Koppen, Parthasarathy and Safiliou 2002).

handling these functions without bringing about necessary changes in their (department's) role, attitude, and without fostering linkages to the already existing (local level) institutions is like setting up newer priority to the older methods. As a result, these steps fail to have the force of a corrective measure aimed at improving efficiency. Similarly, creating newer institutions (or even accompanying them with awareness creation and training modules) will not *per se* bring about changes since the efficiency and effectiveness of these new institutions depend on the performance of the new actors. Yet, to expect existing institutions like the *panchayat* to learn the intricacies of specific functions like water distribution and management and liaising with the irrigation department tasked with this role also appears difficult. Some States have already created institutions for the training of *Panchayat* members but the effective functioning of the *panchayat* depends on facilitative functional relationship in terms of coordination, cooperation between the elected and official functionaries. Further, "it is a prerequisite of a democracy that administrative wing should function under deliberative wing, that is, bureaucracy should be answerable and accountable to the elected political leadership.. In most states the bureaucracy was found to be in a prime position over elected leadership (RGF, 2000, pp 11)." One of the reasons for this outcome is the fact that local leaders, be it *panchayat* or the WUA are seen by the bureaucracy merely as communicators and beneficiaries (now, *termed (sic)* participants) in the programme and not as channels to planners and implementers. To a large extent, then, participation of users in the programme would only be treated as adjuncts and only marginally influence the implementation or reform process. "Commenting on the relationship between non-officials and the officials (in a *panchayat*), the P R Nayak Committee states that the role of Government officials within the Panchayati Raj institutions should be facilitative and executive rather than authoritative" (RGF, 2000, pp 68).

In some programmes implemented by a *panchayat*, it is found that they enter into a contract with taluka *panchayat* as 'contractors;' similar to the NGOs under PIM. Under the circumstance, the *panchayats* do appear as an agency that serves as fast channel mechanism. In fact, *panchayats* seldom initiate a planning process for its income and expenditure and priorities. Nor are the *panchayats* always consulted while initiating programmes like building tanks or check dams within the village area. It is reported that on many occasions the government or other agencies do not even care to obtain the mandatory no objection certificate (NOC) from *panchayats*. Worse still, the *panchayats*, in some cases are not even aware of

programmes or processes that NGOs or other governmental agencies set up in the village. Similar is the case of investments in a village under the Member of Parliament or Member of Legislative assembly discretionary funds. In the present set up the *Talati* or Secretary (lowest level revenue officials) is more powerful than the collective of a *panchayat* to the extent *Talati* dictates on how funds are to be disbursed and the quantum of grants/funds that the *panchayat* should demand every year. A close look at the devolution of powers and functions to *panchayats* reveals that, "the State Government has retained many regulatory, controlling, supervising powers and some important functions like public distribution system. More importantly, the personnel of the *panchayats* are very much controlled by the State Government, both in terms of requirements and transfers." (RGF, 2000, pp 70).

Against this background it is difficult to assume that a Sarpanch of a village *panchayat* would be willing and able to take on roles in diverse specialisations from distributing water and fixing up water charges to planning and executing watershed works including construction of check dams and so on besides the regular work of the *panchayats*. The other major drawback in the *panchayat* administration is that once a work is planned and tasks cut out, *panchayats* do not have the right to refuse even when they find the process or programme difficult. Thus, there is a real danger that even in the event of some of these programmes not working, some ways would 'officially' be found to make them appear working.

4.2 Farmers Participation in PIM Programme

In most of these new programmes including PIM, the key to successful operation is the kind and degree of participation by water users. The evidence suggests that participation varies according to local socio-cultural, economic and political factors. The policy approaches are also found to create different contexts for participation and the initial arrangements heavily influence the establishment of norms of participation as well as impacts. For example, in Gujarat, the joint (users-department-NGO if present) surveys undertaken to decide the extent of R and R work needed and in estimating the costs prior to handing over of the canal management to the WUAs, reveal that only 12 per cent of the households had participated. Incidentally, a majority of them have their lands either in the head or in the middle portions of the canal. In Andhra Pradesh, participation in joint surveys only meant involvement of the department and the WUA President. In some WUAs,

Territorial Committee (TC) members have also taken part yet, most of the ordinary members are not even aware of these surveys. As far as different WUA activities are concerned, both in Gujarat and in Andhra Pradesh the involvement of farmer-members was found to be minimal and there was no discernable difference between the two states (Table 7). Members had shown relatively higher level of involvement in motivation of fellow farmers to join the WUA and R and R work as compared to their involvement in other activities.

Level of attendance in meetings is often considered to be an important indicator for assessing participation. Participation in annual general meetings (AGM) was higher in Gujarat (22 per cent) than in Andhra Pradesh (13 per cent). Awareness about the programme is a prerequisite for members to participate. It is striking to note that in Andhra Pradesh more than 50 per cent of the households were not even aware of the WUA. In Gujarat also, 22 per cent of the member-households were not aware of the WUA. This significant variation between the two states could partly be due to the impact of the differences in the approaches adopted¹².

Another important yardstick in the PIM process are the meetings of WUA. Usually, the Executive Committee of the WUA is supposed to meet every month in Gujarat and once in a fortnight in Andhra Pradesh. In practice however, in both the states the meetings are held 'as per the requirement' of the individual WUAs. Level of participation in committee meetings was found to be significantly higher in Andhra Pradesh (72 per cent) than in Gujarat (48 per cent). And in Gujarat, involvement of Committee Members in meetings was significantly higher in NGO-led WUAs compared to others.

The argument that user-specific-groups, say a WUA, would have a greater advantage over a congregation of all village members (in a *panchayat*) is obviously based on the premise that these specific groups will not only have higher stakes because of the 'homogeneity' but will also have a deeper understanding of the issues. Given the differences between member-farmers with respect to land holding

¹² There are, however, other aspects to the level of involvement in the IMT. Unawareness about the WUA was prominent among the farmers having smaller land holdings and belonging to socially and economically backward communities. As expected, the importance of the political process in the formation of Andhra Pradesh WUA is evident from the fact that 7 per cent of the members had reportedly taken part in the electoral process of the WUA president or TC members.

size, location of plots, class and caste it is difficult to expect the WUA to be a homogenous entity. As far as the effectiveness of the committee members' involvement either during the planning stage or in executive capacity is concerned, this would vitally hinge on their understanding of the area and on their relationship with other members of the WUA. Further, these committee members as leaders are also supposed to execute the decisions taken during the meetings. One of such activities is their ability to motivate other members to join the WUA and act as a collective. In Gujarat, the role of the committee members is evident during the motivation work, at the time of R & R work, negotiations with the irrigation department and NGO, collection of water charges and dissemination of information. And, in Andhra Pradesh, the committee members were found to be involved in R and R work and water distribution and management. Though in Andhra Pradesh the irrigation department manages water distribution, committee members reporting their involvement in this activity were mainly engaged in supervision. Their involvement in other activities like dissemination of information and motivational activities was found to be modest. These modest successes are however, only at the beginning stage of the programmes and hence with greater authority and resources to perform their new roles, it is possible that the user specific groups like the WUA will bring in the skills and understanding of irrigated agriculture of their members to manage the functions effectively. In the early stages it is indeed possible that they act as an extensions of centrally established organisational controls. This could partly be due to the fact that establishing political and administrative linkages involve some gestation time and that recognition of authority hinges on the political clout, at least in a democracy.

4.3 Politics and WUAs

For reasons not clear through a provision in the byelaw of the WUAs in Gujarat, politics was consciously kept out of the purview, whereas the post of the president of the WUA in Andhra Pradesh has been a coveted one from the beginning. It is possible that such posts enhance their visibility and help further their political ambition, while it also suggests that only the influential sections of the society could afford to become leaders of the WUAs – as is the case with other institutions including the *panchayat*. Interestingly, in many Andhra Pradesh WUAs, farmers reported that party politics did not play any role. Plausibly, use of money in the elections might be due to the attraction of the financial stakes involved in managing the WUAs. The funds handled by a WUA annually were substantial (at least in the

initial years) and hence a vested interest could have developed in acquiring control over them. However, in the subsequent years the quantum of money handled by a WUA in Andhra Pradesh has declined and it remains to be seen in the subsequent rounds of elections to the WUAs, whether the WUA posts continue to be viewed as stepping stones to the political ambitions of the people or are they perceived to be important as seats of authority by themselves, parallel to *panchayats*!

5. Conclusion

It should be recognised that taking part in user group activities is not the same as involvement in (*party*) politics, yet, there is a fair play of party politics even at the village level. This sort of linkages if sustained proves that decentralisation is not an exclusive or static process. Few institutions in a developing democracy are held sacrosanct to function without competition. For a *panchayat*, newer institutions in its area could also be viewed as beneficial additions, as they not only bring in additional resources but also manage specific functions in small 'homogenous' groups. The challenge, therefore, is to find a proper balance of institutional arrangements at the local level that promote development effectively. This balance is not easily determined as they shift as the performance of the new institutions change.

The performance of a WUA is based on three specific functions. First is the technical function of maintaining the canals and distributing water. Evidently, a group of irrigators is better suited to perform this role rather than a set of elected people whose stakes in the functions or performance of irrigation systems are limited. As indicated, for a *panchayat* to learn the intricacies of specialised functions of irrigation in one case, watershed in another is difficult if not impossible. The other important difference in these functions is that unlike the general administrative and facilitative roles involved in routine or in implementing programmes with a set of defined rules and targets, irrigation or watershed management would involve varying degrees of work in each agricultural season and years and considerable process component. Secondly, the WUA also has a set of managerial functions to discharge that are specific to the functions it performs. For instance, accounting the area actually irrigated for levying and collecting water charges. This function would certainly call for some degree of indifference to the legal status of the plots irrigated. It is implicit in the argument

that the WUAs unlike the *panchayats* have to perform its functions in a market mode rather than on a purely as a routine task. Third is the set of coordinating functions. Besides coordinating with the irrigation department, one of the major coordination roles is in organising and motivating member-farmers and resolving conflicts that may arise out of water distribution. It is thus, apparent that the WUAs or similar user groups are by design different from the *panchayat* institutions. In the course of discharging these specific functions, there is elfin element of overlap between the user groups' institutions and the *panchayats*. In so far as there is no overlap or competing interests there is no reason to presuppose that *panchayat*, as a village level institution should be the last layer in decentralised administrative process. As mentioned, many of these new user groups together could possibly complement the existing local level institution.

One must take cognisance of the reasons behind the modest performance of the new institutions. Partly the fact that they are in the formative stages could explain the level of performance. It could also be partly due to the structure, yet the difficulties in evaluating the impact of new decentralised institutions on new programmes and on the existing local institutions are obvious. Essentially most of these institutions are formed through political process, though a number of non-political institutions could be involved as channels like the line departments or apolitical local institutions or NGOs. As discussed, one advantage of the *panchayat* institutions is that there have been periodic commitments to strengthen and review them. In the case of the user group institutions being created, there is a real danger that these could be viewed variously as the ones to offload functions the government does not want to do anymore. Few institutions in a developing democracy can be viewed as sacrosanct to the extent that parallel or competing institutions should be forbidden. It is plausible that *panchayats* may view the newer institutions in its area as beneficial additions since they not only bring in additional resources but take away some of the management responsibilities also. The challenge, therefore, is to find a proper balance of institutional arrangements at the local level that promote development effectively. This balance is not easily determined as they shift in tandem with the performance and changes in the new institutions. There is thus a need to be cautious and careful while crafting and tasking the new institutions.

**Table 1: Some Features of the Irrigation Management Transfer Programme:
Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh**

Details	Gujarat	Andhra Pradesh
Name of the Program	Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM)	Farmers Management of Irrigation Systems
Year of Commencement	1995	1997
Status of the program	Pilot phase (13 pilot schemes were chosen to serve as learning laboratories) Plans are to cover 50 percent of irrigated area (of 15 million hectares) in the state by year 2003.	State wide coverage (excluding tribal areas)
No. of WUAs formed	13 in the pilot phase (There are however, WUAs formed prior to the PIM, like Mohini, Chopadvav, etc. Claims on the exact number of such WUAs vary; even the most optimistic estimate does not exceed 45).	10,292 WUAs have been formed in all the 22 districts of Andhra Pradesh covering major, medium and minor irrigation projects in the state.
State's role in water distribution	To provide water at the outlet (off-take) stage	Commitment to ensure adequate water supply at the outlet level
Membership criteria in WUA	Land owners in the WUA area	Land owners and tenants in the WUA area. Other water users to be co-opted in to the WUA
Status of women representation in WUA	Rules of the WUA state that one-third of the managing committee members will be women	No explicit provision
Members' voting rights	Land owners in the WUA area	Land owners in the WUA
Procedure for electing WUA management committee	Varies between WUA	District collector in charge of the election Managing committee will hold office for three years Provision to recall the President or a Chairman or a member of the WUA

Table 1 (Contd...)

Details	Gujarat	Andhra Pradesh
Federating WUAs	Not so far attempted	Three-tier management structure. At the primary level is the WUA, at the secondary level, a distributory committee (DC), and at the apex level, there is a Project Committee (PC), which has DC presidents as members.
Involvement of NGOs in the Program	NGOs play a larger role in policy making and program implementation	Under the new act no clear role for the NGOs

Source: Parthasarathy R and Harish Joshi, 2001.

Table 2: A Summary of Repair and Rehabilitation Programme: Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh

Components	Gujarat	Andhra Pradesh
Rehabilitation and Repair Support	State expenditure vary and are established on the basis of a joint survey of Irrigation Department and farmers	State expenditure of fixed amount of Rs. 100 per acre. The irrigation Department continues to assess the needs for R&R, certify and authorise works. Funds are channelled via the Irrigation Department.
Tiered Rehabilitation and Repair Responsibilities.	Not Applicable	The PC is responsible to attend to the problems relating to repairs and rehabilitation (R&R) and operation of the main delivery systems. The DC is responsible for the O&M of the distributory level structures and at the WUA, the farmers are responsible to manage the field level distribution.

Source: Same as Table 1.

Table 3: Highlights of Water Distribution: Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh

Components	Gujarat	Andhra Pradesh
State's role in water distribution	Irrigation Department continues consultation with farmers (now the WUA) on timings of water allocation. WUA either employs own operator, or local-level ID official distributes (<i>sejhpali</i> -based on water demand forms).	Irrigation Department (through its local level <i>luskars</i>) continues to distribute water (<i>warabandhi</i> no water demand forms).
State's role in water supply.	Not Clear	Commitment in the Act to ensure adequate water supply at the outlet level.
Water charges: rates and collection.	WUA collects water demands forms. It sets the water rate, but often had raised it compared to the period before PIM. WUA collects water charges and the recovery rate has improved, perhaps due to the provision of rebate for payment of water charges on time.	Water rate was tripled in 1997. Department continues to collect the water charges as part of the land tax. No legal provision has been made as yet to delink water charges from land cess. To transfer the water charges to the WUA

Source: Same as Table 1.

Table 4: Distribution of Members having Association with Other Organizations: Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh

Gujarat						
Sl. No	Name of the WUAs	Number of members in				
		WUAs	Panchayat	Cooperative	Political Party	Total Members
1	Tranol	98	24	4	2	30
2	Thalota	113	22	5	0	27
3	Laxmipura	91	17	2	1	20
4	Digas	39	11	4	1	16
	Total	341 (100)	74 (21.7)	15 (4.4)	4 (1.2)	93 (27.27)
Andhra Pradesh						
1	Ellabotharam	121	30	4	--	34
2	Peddapalalakuru	118	27	--	--	27
3	Jantaluru	120	30	--	--	30
	Total	359 (100)	87 (24.2)	4 (1.1)	--	91 (25.3)

Note: Figures in parentheses indicates percentage to total members.

Source: van Koppen *et al.* (2002).

Table 5: Distribution of Sample Households: Gujarat

Categories	Tranol	Thalota	Laxmipura	Digas	Total
Up to 0.5 ha. Males	15 (15.3)	15 (13.3)	15 (16.5)	1 (2.6)	46 (13.5)
Up to 0.50 ha. Female heads	2 (2.0)	3 (2.7)	2 (2.2)		7 (2.1)
Up to 0.50 ha. Female respondents	13 (13.3)	12 (10.6)	11 (12.1)	1 (2.6)	37 (10.9)
0.51-1.0 ha. Males	15 (15.3)	15 (13.3)	15 (16.5)	6 (15.4)	51 (15.0)
0.51-1.0 ha. Female heads	2 (2.0)	2 (1.8)	2 (2.2)		6 (1.8)
0.51-1.0 ha. Female respondents	13 (13.3)	13 (11.5)	13 (14.3)	1 (2.6)	40 (11.7)
1.01 - 2.50 ha.	15 (15.3)	15 (13.3)	15 (16.5)	15 (38.5)	60 (17.6)
2.51 + ha.	15 (15.3)	15 (13.3)	15 (16.5)	15 (38.5)	60 (17.6)
Tenant Male	5 (5.1)	8 (7.1)	2 (2.2)		15 (4.4)
Tenant Female headed		1 (0.9)	1 (1.1)		2 (0.6)
Tenant Female respondent	3 (3.1)	14 (12.4)			17 (5.0)
Total No. of households	98 (100.0)	113 (100.0)	91 (100.0)	39 (100.0)	341 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentage to total

Source: Parthasarathy, R. et al., (2001).

Table 6: Distribution of Sample Households: Andhra Pradesh

Categories	Ellabotharam	Peddapalalkaluru	Jantaluru	Total
Up to 0.5 ha. Males	15 (12.4)	14 (11.9)	15 (12.5)	44 (12.5)
Up to 0.50 ha Female heads headed	1 (0.8)	7 (5.9)	7 (5.8)	15 (4.2)
Up to 0.50 ha. Female respondents	14 (11.6)	7 (5.9)	9 (7.5)	30 (8.4)
0.51-1.0 ha. Males	15 (12.4)	16 (13.6)	14 (11.7)	45 (12.5)
0.51-1.0 ha. Female heads	5 (4.1)	2 (1.7)	4 (3.3)	11 (3.1)
0.51-1.0 ha. Female respondents	10 (8.3)	13 (11.0)	11 (9.2)	34 (9.5)
1.01 - 2.50 ha.	15 (12.4)	15 (12.7)	15 (12.5)	45 (12.5)
2.51 + ha.	16 (13.2)	14 (11.9)	15 (12.5)	45 (12.5)
Tenant male	14 (11.6)	15 (12.7)	15 (12.5)	44 (12.3)
Tenant female headed	2 (1.7)	1 (0.8)	4 (3.3)	7 (1.9)
Tenant female respondent	14 (11.6)	14 (11.9)	11 (9.2)	39 (10.9)
Total No. of households	121	118	120	359

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentage to total

Source: Parthasarathy, R. et al., (2001).

Table 7: Distribution of Households Involved in WUA Activities

Details	Gujarat	Andhra Pradesh
No. of households	341	359
Participation in following activities:		
Motivation	15 (4.4)	9 (2.5)
Contribution collection	7 (2.1)	3 (0.8)
Registration of WUA	4 (1.2)	NA
Election of WUA members	NA	25 (7.0)
R and R work	21 (6.2)	21 (5.8)
Water distribution	4 (1.2)	4 (1.1)
Demand forms/water charges	2 (0.6)	1 (0.3)

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentage to total participants.

Source: Parthasarathy, R. et al., (2001).

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