Collective action for water harvesting irrigation (WHI) refers to the joint or collective effort of farmers in getting and using water for crop, animal, household, or other purposes.

Organized water user groups also handle external representation with government programs and external demands (either competing or complementary) for water and other resources. In water-scarce areas, the goal is for farmers to produce high crop yields with less water, which can be achieved when farmers collectively manage the water resources available to them.

Why Collective Action?

- It makes participatory management of water resources possible — community members then have a stake in making decisions.

- It promotes equity and efficiency in water distribution — no member can monopolize the use of water resources, and distribution scheduling is normally based on optimizing conveyance efficiency.

SOURCE:
• It reduces cost—members equally share/divide the cost of labor and materials that are needed in maintaining water harvesting irrigation systems.

• It builds internal community unity and camaraderie—fighting among members is lessened.

• It can strengthen efforts to defend their resources in the case of competition from outside the community.

What Hinders Collective Action?

Given the increasing demand for water from the uplands for use by lowland communities, collective action is the best option to achieve the objectives of sustainable water harvesting irrigation. Factors hindering collective action include the following:

• conversion of community-owned farm lands to privately/individually owned farm lands;
• availability of off-farm job opportunities and diversified forms of livelihood;
• increased migration of male members of communities, leaving women as the primary source of labor; and
• reduced community cohesion.

Conclusion

Changing property rights over land and water, a growing number of available work opportunities outside farm areas, increasing water scarcity, increasing number of users, increasing migration of male farm workers to other economically lucrative areas, and feminization of the farm labor force are among the many challenges that confront small-scale water harvesting irrigation systems.

The two case studies illustrate how communities respond to these challenges in the context of collective action. In Trojes de Paul, the community collectively built the water harvesting reservoir. They shared labor and materials and sought external support for the reservoir from the Agriculture and Water Resources Ministry. Their social cohesion and relations, both internally and externally, resulted in improved crop yields for community members.
On the other hand, in Nápoles, where water was scarce and there were more crop failures, community members still responded collectively to outsiders claiming water, but also relied more heavily on off-farm income sources.

WHI will remain a subsistence activity. As a result, ensuring productive and equitable benefits to users is critical for their continued viability.

Suggested Readings


Sourcebook on Resources, Rights, and Cooperation, produced by the CGIAR Program on Collective Action and Property Rights (CAPRI)