



Anna Blomqvist

Food and Fashion

Water Management and Collective Action
among Irrigation Farmers and Textile
Industrialists in South India

In recent years, much of the political debate in the West, East and South has focused on the decentralization of responsibilities from the state to private enterprises and NGOs. But what potential is there for local communities to create their own governance structures able to deal with issues previously seen as the responsibility of the state? This thesis tries to answer this question by analyzing two case studies from the semi-arid Coimbatore-region in South India from an institutional perspective. One case concerns the efforts to involve farmers in irrigation water management in the Lower Bhavani Project, while the other focuses on the pressure on textile industrialists in Tirupur city to commonly treat their polluted effluent water.

In both cases, the new distribution of responsibilities required that groups of water users would succeed in creating new entities for collective action.

Overcoming three main obstacles proved crucial in this process; meeting coordination costs, re-defining the meaning of free-riding among resource users, and meeting motivation costs. Factors both within and outside the local community affected the degree of success. The distribution and use of economic, moral and physical power between various actors and the interconnectedness between local and external institutions proved crucial for the establishment of local governance structures.

Clearly, resource management problems at the local level can not be solved by simply decentralizing responsibilities from the state to groups of resource users. Rather, the state could play an important role by initiating, supporting and directing such local entities of collective action.



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