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***Viewpoint* – Rent-Seeking in Agricultural Water Management: An Intentionally Neglected Core Dimension?**

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ABSTRACT: In the early and mid-1980s, two seminal papers on agricultural water management came as a shock to the international professional community. They drew attention to the fact that public irrigation is particularly prone to rent-seeking and corruption. Both papers – one by Robert Wade in 1982 and the other by Robert Repetto in 1986 – described hidden interests of the involved stakeholders in irrigation development and management that open doors to opportunistic behaviour – thus perpetuating technical and economical inefficiencies.

About twenty-five years later, Transparency International (TI) in its often cited Global Corruption Report 2008 – dedicated to the issue of corruption in the water sector – made the following statement: "corruption remains one of the least analysed and recognised problems in the water sector. This report provides a first step in filling this gap" (TI, 2008: 106).

The question arises as to why, through twenty-five years following the publications of Wade and Repetto, the topics of corruption and rent-seeking in agricultural water management seldom gained serious attention in international research and development. And why, strangely enough, the critical topic of rent-seeking is hardly dealt with in the above-mentioned report and even in recent publications of the Water Integrity Network (WIN).

The author, drawing on thirty-five years of experience in the field of agricultural water management and on cases from research and from development cooperation, puts forward his personal viewpoint on this matter. He contends that local as well as international professionals on different levels in the water sector are caught in multifaceted conflicts between formal objectives and hidden interests – and often tend to resort to rent-seeking behaviour themselves.

KEYWORDS: rent-seeking, corruption, development cooperation, water management, irrigation development, irrigation maintenance

INTRODUCTION

For me, trying to reflect critically on the wider politics of dealing with water as a professional – as required for this special issue of Water Alternatives – is not an easy undertaking. After all, I am not a trained political scientist and I retired from day-to-day involvements in the water profession some years ago. When revisiting past experiences in my professional life that might fit into the category of "silent and unarticulated experiences of social and political processes" as stipulated by the editors, I became aware of two things: first, I felt, that there is no dearth of such experiences. But reflecting on them brings to the fore more questions – at least for myself – than clear-cut answers and conclusions that might be helpful to the reader. Second, I found that many of these cases are in some way related to a theme which I believe to be a critical issue in water management in general and in agricultural water management in particular. It is an issue which has found astonishingly little attention in the past and present water debate: the question of rent-seeking behaviour of the involved stakeholders.¹

¹ A rare exception in this respect is Renger and Wolff, 2000.

Given this background, I structure this article as follows: first, I will present a brief outline of the concept of 'rent-seeking' as I perceive it – without further dwelling on explanations of the term 'corruption', and then point to some personal experiences that made me particularly aware of the topics of rent-seeking and corruption in agricultural water management. After this, I reflect on selected professional experiences of my own, referring to the particular theme of rent-seeking. I hope that in such a context my humble personal reflections might be worthwhile enough to read even if they end up with open questions in most cases.

SCRUTINISING RENT-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

Efforts by individuals or by specific interest-groups to influence the decision-making of the state or the bureaucracy in order to extract economic gains are called 'rent-seeking' (see e.g. Richter and Furubotn, 1996). The ensuing benefits or 'rents' are of extended duration in most cases and are not based on any productive- or investment-related activity. Lobbying for government subsidies is a well-known area of such rent-seeking behaviour. Robert Repetto, applying this concept to farmers in irrigation systems defines an 'economic rent' in this sector as '*the difference between the value of additional water to the farmer and what the system charges for it*' (Repetto, 1986). Hence, farmers or groups of farmers who lobby for irrigation water tariffs that are lower than the actual value of that water are rent-seekers in this sense, trying to 'skim off' the difference in value as a rent. Typically enough, Repetto's seminal paper to which I will refer again below, was entitled *Skimming the Water*.

In my further elaboration, however, I will mirror my professional experiences in a wider context of rent-seeking behaviour. Following Renger and Wolff (2000), I will designate as rent-seekers all those actors who are trying to induce (or prevent) political or institutional changes in order to garner individual or group specific rents. Doing so, I will not confine my attention to *economic* rents alone. Instead, I will consider *political* and *strategic* rents as well. *Political* rent-seeking in such a perspective describes the behaviour of politicians or bureaucrats who, in return for rents which they have granted, strive for political favours by their 'clients'. Such favours can materialise in different forms e.g. as support in upcoming elections or as reciprocal political concessions. What I call *strategic* rent-seeking here refers to two particular cases: first, it describes the conduct of private companies that try to influence the processes of agenda setting and public policy formulation in ways that further their own strategic interests. And second it relates to public officials and organisations that consciously (but in concealed ways) deviate from their entrusted formal mandates in order to secure their hidden primary goal: the consolidation or improvement of their own position.

It is essential to realise that rent-seeking is not always illegal. After all, as Grindle points out, in a pluralistic society democratic politics is based on large numbers of different interest groups that compete for the promotion or protection of their common interests. While such interests are usually economic, they can also relate to other shared concerns and policy goals. In this sense, interest groups lobby, campaign or vote in order to influence public officials to act on their behalf (Grindle, 1991: 47). In contrast, rent-seeking will be unacceptable if it is accompanied by illegal practices like bribery or if it centres on illegal goals. However, what makes rent-seeking behaviour so difficult to scrutinise is the fact that it may be legal but morally highly questionable at the same time. This is the case in particular, when the 'rent-seekers' as lobbyists provide skewed or false information or when they withhold critical information altogether. Here, one enters a grey area where it is hard to differentiate between legal but morally questionable behaviour and outright illicit practices. One of my personal experiences may illustrate this particular point.

During my work as a land and water professional in Haiti in the late 1970s and early 1980s, to which I will refer further below, we had discussions with the Director General (DG) of the regional development organisation *Organisme du Développement du Nord* and the World Bank on the specific location of an agricultural area to be upgraded with irrigation infrastructure. A few days after this

decision was taken and officially approved, the chief of our topographic survey team who had strongly supported the choice of a particular area, came up to me telling me proudly that he owned large pieces of land in that area. Participating in the meeting with the World Bank but withholding this information, he could be sure that his interventions to influence the selection decisions would pay off with a substantial rent in the future. There could be no doubt that the value of the agricultural land he owned would rise substantially after being converted to irrigation. His behaviour was in no way illegal in the Haitian context and, at least in his own perception, was not considered as morally questionable, as his proud and open disclosure indicated.

In my view, the development of both public irrigation and other infrastructure (not only) in agriculture (and not only in development countries) is notoriously subject to similar kinds of morally questionable rent-seeking at various levels. Although this is particularly detrimental to poor and marginal people, it will go unnoticed by usual evaluations most of the time.

THE WAKE-UP CALL

In the early stages of my professional life I worked four and a half years in Haiti, as indicated earlier. The World Bank, in cooperation with German and French development cooperation, was engaged at that time – end of the 1970s and in the 1980s, i.e. during the reign of the infamous 'Baby Doc' Duvalier – in a programme of 'integrated rural development' in the north of the country. Amongst others, activities concentrated on agricultural research and extension, the rehabilitation of degraded irrigation systems and on rural water supply. Working in one of the poorest countries in the world during a time when it was governed by a regime that was generally regarded as kleptocratic – notoriously misusing public funds for private use of the Duvalier clan – provided lessons in many respects. One of them was, not surprisingly, related to the issue of rent-seeking and corruption, a thematic field that was (and still is) rarely mentioned in official project documents of development cooperation in the water sector. This sheer negligence contrasted sharply with the reality of everyday professional work relations, where countless attempts to gain undue privileges and to misuse public funds by various local actors hampered the programme. Leaving aside everyday cases of corrupt procurement, falsified billing, embezzlement of project assets and nepotism in personal management, etc. again and again, project activities had to be interrupted when World Bank supervision missions discovered undisclosed 'drainage' of substantial amounts of project funds by the Haitian government. Several times, we as international project staff were at the brink of returning to our home countries, when – at the last moment – those finances finally reappeared and allowed project continuation.

With this background and a sharpened sensitivity for the workings of opportunistic and corrupt behaviour in the agricultural water sector, later I found that similar dynamics were at play in other countries, even if less drastic and in many cases more refined. Hence, it came as a tremendous relief to me when finally the papers of Robert Wade (Wade, 1982) and the publication of Robert Repetto (Repetto, 1986) appeared in the early and mid-1980s. These authors presented research findings dealing head-on with the topics of rent-seeking and corruption in irrigation. Among other things Wade drew attention to the fact that engineers kept water allocation to irrigation farmers intentionally unpredictable and thus invited 'side payments' for timely and preferential water provision. And Repetto drew the attention of the professional community to the pervasive occurrence of economic rent-seeking behaviour. Unequivocally he stated:

While the rent-seeking phenomenon is legendary in public irrigation systems in the United States, it is being under-emphasised in the rest of the world. Those concerned with irrigation development are trying to 'work around it' to improve the performance of public irrigation systems by physical rehabilitation and efforts to strengthen management. These efforts, while also critical, are unlikely to succeed (Repetto, 1986: 37).

Overall, these publications came as a wake-up call to a professional community still mainly dedicated to searching for engineering solutions to the impending problems of malfunctioning irrigation systems. And their conclusions were unambiguous: rent-seeking and corruption are core determinants of failures in operation and maintenance of public irrigation systems. They may cause tremendous financial and economic losses and hence can have negative repercussions on agricultural development in irrigation-dependent countries.

Two further aspects of these studies deserve attention:

First, Repetto's work indicated clearly that deficiencies of this kind were in no way restricted to developing country contexts. His case examples proved the fact that rent-seeking behaviour in irrigation was a major drawback as well in industrialised countries, not least in the U.S.

Second, Wade went clearly beyond the usual micro-focus when considering corruption phenomena. He did not confine his analysis to the workings of corrupt interactions at local level between irrigation farmers and engineers. Instead, he drew attention to the systemic character of corrupt and illegitimate interrelationships in the wider bureaucratic and political context of the agricultural water sector. He described a

 circuit of transactions in which the bureaucracy acquires control of funds, partly (in this case) from farmers in the form of variable levies, and partly from the state's public work budget, then passes a portion to politicians and especially Ministers, who in turn use the funds for distributing short-term material inducements in exchange for electoral support (Wade, 1982: 319).

The shock that this seminal research had raised amongst professionals, however, in my opinion, did not have the impact I expected. In my perception, it did not induce the international research and development community to give more and in-depth attention to the causes and special features of opportunistic behaviour in agricultural water management and to the search for options on how to mitigate such phenomena. Even when James Wolfensohn became president of the World Bank in the second half of the 1990s and raised awareness concerning the problems of corruption, I had the feeling that the topic of rent-seeking and corruption remained largely untouched in the agricultural water sector and was treated like a taboo topic further on. And the particular issue of rent-seeking virtually 'got lost' for the time being.

What were the reasons for such negligence? Searching for an explanation it helps to be aware of the following fact: Robert Wade, a highly respected sociologist and one of the early pioneers with respect to questions of agricultural water management, had based his statements on extensive empirical work in canal irrigation systems in southern India. Amongst others he uncovered that systemic corruption and illegitimate rent-seeking practices had infected whole parts of the southern Indian irrigation bureaucracy.

The reaction came immediately: Wade was forced to leave the country – so at least went the rumours that circulated widely in professional irrigation circles. Obviously, in the perception of these circles – and I certainly shared it – this turn of affairs proved insights like those of Colin Leys who years before had explained the general dearth of studies on corruption as follows:

 one reason for this seems to be a widespread feeling that the facts cannot be discovered, or if they can, they cannot be proved, or if they can be proved, the proof cannot be published (Leys, 1965, cited by Pritzl, 1997: 17).

Water professionals in research and in development cooperation alike seemed to have understood that pondering on issues of rent-seeking and corruption might impinge in unpleasant ways on the outcomes of projects and programmes they were involved in and hence on their personal ambitions and reputations. Therefore, it appeared to be advisable to disregard such issues altogether. I will refer to this suppression and concealment of rent-seeking and corruption issues in agricultural water

management as the '*Leys effect*' in the following. This effect in my view is still omnipresent in the international research and development community in the field of agricultural water management. My contention is that it links up to the mentioned rent-seeking and corruption in developing partner countries and can thus help to perpetuate it.

In the following, I present a number of personal experiences in development cooperation referring to cases of rent-seeking on very different levels in the field of agricultural water management. I will reflect on them with particular reference to the earlier-mentioned interpretation of rent-seeking behaviour. I will start with a case that refers to political and strategic rent-seeking in development cooperation related to the land and water sector. Then I continue with an example that focuses on strategic rent-seeking in international research. And finally, I will touch upon a case that exemplifies multiple forms of rent-seeking in one of the functional areas of agricultural water management, i.e. the maintenance of irrigation infrastructure.

THE SHADOW OF THE 'POLITICAL WILL'

A central aspect of my work as a technical officer in the former German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) was the stipulation to proceed according to the internationally sanctioned 'logical framework' thinking. Planning and implementing project and programme support together with development country partners according to logical framework approaches was generally applied in GTZ. Such approaches were (and still are for many planners internationally) an attractive way to structure intervention processes according to a simple and deterministic goal-purpose-outputs-activities sequence. An overview can then be presented to decision-makers in a clear and easily comprehensible matrix format.² As most of the readers will know, part of this exercise is the formulation of 'important assumptions'. In case a certain assumption appears to be central to the success of a project but is not likely to occur during implementation, the assumption becomes a 'killing factor'. This implies that the project needs to be redesigned or it has to be rejected.

In practice, the assumptions at the high objective level are the most difficult ones to define. It is, for example, not easy to formulate in brief the critical assumptions – and hence preconditions – that need to hold for the successful implementation of complex programmes of Irrigation Management Transfer (IMT). These are reform efforts in the irrigation sector of many countries that have been and still are much debated since the 1990s. Their objective consists in the sustainable devolution of responsibility and authority for irrigation management from government agencies to non-governmental organisations, such as water user associations. Important assumptions for the objective level of such programmes and interventions were often formulated in ways similar to the statement of Vermillion and Sagardoy in their guidelines on IMT: "[t]wo things are essential for reform: (i) strong political commitment and (ii) stakeholders who are willing to cooperate constructively" (Vermillion and Sagardoy, 1999: 16).

However, Brinkerhoff observes that, with such formulations, the notion of 'political will' (or political commitment) remains under-defined and poorly understood (Brinkerhoff, 2010: 1).

To be more precise, assumptions referring to the existing governance structures and processes and to the prevailing context of power and interests at various levels would have to be formulated. This, however, happened rarely in our planning exercises. Attempts to do so were tacitly perceived by operational staff to run the risk of intruding unduly into internal affairs of the partner country. Moreover, in-depth analyses of the political economy of the concerned project regions rarely existed. Instead, a common practice consisted – and I contributed to its application myself – in assuming the

² It is obvious that complex, self-referential and path-dependent social processes of change (not only) in agricultural water management are difficult to plan and steer only along such lines of thinking. Even so, the question of how to cope with such complexities in agricultural water management is rarely addressed (see Huppert, 2009).

existence of sufficient 'political will' on both sides of the development cooperation partnership to stand behind the agreed upon goals and objectives. After all, there had been intergovernmental negotiations and agreements on the respective interventions. With these written commitments to support and defend the agreed upon project and programme purpose, so went the implicit argument, the goal projection could be regarded as realistic. In fact, we had become used to turn a blind eye to the urgent necessity to explore in more detail this crucial assumption of the political will. What was (and still is) widely missing was (is) a clear definition of the meaning of 'political will' and relevant criteria on how to rate it.

In retrospect, I ask myself how we could be so naïve and build whole project and programme designs on such a weak basis. After all, such proceedings are comparable to attempts to build a high rise building without any subsoil investigations for the foundations. Did we not – consciously or unconsciously – indulge in hidden efforts of strategic and economic rent-seeking ourselves? At both individual and organisational levels? On the individual level of the planners we might have been inclined to avoid impending work loads of re-planning in case we would come up with realistic socio-political assumptions that were unlikely to occur. On the level of our organisations there might have been concealed tendencies to secure the economic and strategic rents of forthcoming project contracts. And last but not least: is the 'lack of political will' not a welcome culprit in case project intentions fail?

A case in point to illustrate this is the following incident that happened during the time of my professional engagement for agricultural water interventions in Haiti in the 1980s – and during the time of the reign of Baby Doc Duvalier. In the south of the island and outside of my own province, German development cooperation supported a programme against erosion in the catchment area upstream of the irrigation system of Les Cayes in south-west Haiti. Erosion problems are an absolute nightmare in Haiti. Hence, the project was supposed to contribute to forest protection and erosion control and thus mitigate the sediment intrusion into the mentioned irrigation system. One day, the German agronomist supporting that programme discovered that the Duvalier family was heavily involved in illegal logging activities in that catchment and around the mountain area of Pic Macaya. He vaguely hinted at this fact in public. The Haitian government immediately decided that he had to leave the country within 48 hours. To our knowledge the German side did not resort to any drastic counter action in the face of this 'unfortunate' lack of political will on the side of the partner country. Political considerations in times of the Cold War (Haiti being located 'dangerously' close to Cuba) seemed to have gained preference. If this is true, the German government opted, perhaps not unintelligibly, for political rent-seeking, sacrificing its own serious 'political will' for objective achievement in this project in order to gain political rents in the arena of other foreign affairs. For us as professionals in agricultural water management – and beyond – the consequences were twofold: First, we strongly internalised the above mentioned *Leys effect*. As indicated earlier, it refers to a feeling that is particularly strong in development cooperation: even if cases of corruption can be proved, one has to be extremely careful to make them public. And second, we learned that no further and more stringent planning requirements resulted from such incidents. 'Political will' remained a much used assumption and a meaningless term at that.

For me, the question remains how we can get out of this 'shadow' of the political will? How can *realistic* goal and objective projections and the related critical assumptions for interventions in agricultural water management (and other fields of development cooperation) be developed? How can they be formulated without any eyewash with respect to institutional weaknesses in the respective partner country and the prevalence of partially excessive corruption? But also how can this be achieved when at the same time temptations exist for donor countries and donor organisations and their staff to resort to economic, strategic and/or political rent-seeking and to display a correspondingly weak 'political will' themselves in their development cooperation engagements?

DIPLOMATIC SCIENCE

From 1998 to 2004 I was a member of the Board of Governors of the International Water Management Institute (IWMI). In the course of this period, a very engaged and highly competent professional was appointed to the post of DG of IWMI. During a number of board sessions I argued that further research would be needed in the area of corruption in the water sector and with respect to institutional deficiencies that open doors to opportunistic behaviour. Given the decisive influence of corrupt practices on different levels of water management in agriculture, such a research component appeared to me to be of utmost importance with respect to IWMI's mandate as the leading research institute dedicated to issues of water management. However, each time I raised the subject there was a kind of awkward silence by the DG and amongst the other board members followed by a quick change of subject. Nevertheless, I was too shy to insist on an in-depth discussion of the topic and on a feedback as to why there was no response at all. Finally, I felt to be rather naïve to come up with such a topic – and probably I was. After all, the board is not only entrusted with keeping an eye on IWMI's thematic excellence but also on its strategic orientation as an international research organisation, thus paving the way to a sound future corporate development of the institute. And obviously, research on corruption related topics were not perceived to particularly further such a development. Hence, the *Leys effect*, i.e. the customary caution when confronting the topic of corruption, seemed to be fully effective here again.

Sometime later when I had already left the board, I visited Egypt and I had a meeting with my former Egyptian colleague of the board. At that time she was the head of Egypt's National Water Research Center and a widely respected water scientist in Egypt and internationally. It was nice to see her again and for the first time outside the board and in her home country. She greeted me with all her usual warmth, raised her hands, laughed and whispered meaningfully: "Walter, corruption, corruption, corruption..." – not returning to that topic after that welcome again. And I, intimidated by the workings of the *Leys effect*, did not enquire any further.

In 2008, the annual report of Transparency International (TI) and of the Water Integrity Network (WIN) dealt with corruption in the water sector (TI, 2008). At that time, the above-mentioned DG had left his job at IWMI. When I read this report, I discovered to my great surprise that it was nobody else but this DG himself who had written the chapter on corruption in irrigation, pointing to new and promising ways on how to deal with that topic and arguing that they deserve increased attention. No longer being the DG of IWMI allowed him to raise his voice on matters like these.

In my view, this experience illustrates the insoluble dilemma that exists for leading and engaged managers and board members in international research dedicated (not only) to agricultural water management. They all are well aware of the disastrous effects of rent-seeking and corruption on the outcomes of development efforts in the professional fields they are dealing with. But they are caught in the dilemma brought about by the *Leys effect* that induces them to intentionally neglect or suppress a topic of core importance in favour of the success and well-being of the organisation they are responsible for. They thus cannot but engage in what Pritzl calls 'diplomatic science' (Pritzl, 1997) and thus pursue strategic rent-seeking themselves.

In my view, the question remains as to whether and how all international research institutes dedicated to agricultural water management and related topics can escape from such strategic rent-seeking behaviour. How can they devote themselves to intensive empirical research related to the social and political intricacies behind rent-seeking and corruption in countries that are particularly prone to such deficiencies? Is there no other way than finding a delicate balance between their own strategic objectives and the economical and political rent-seeking attempts of their potential host countries – in other words: indulge in 'diplomatic science' – and thus exclude a core problem area from their research agenda?

THE MAINTENANCE DEADLOCK

In 1997, GTZ embarked on concept developments related to the topic of maintenance in irrigation.³ During the opening session of a meeting on this undertaking, some of us tried to underscore the importance and attractiveness of this badly neglected topic. Thereupon, Ian Carruthers, the highly respected rural economist, irrigation expert and professor of Wye College in London, took the floor. With undisguised irony he remarked that in his view there is no subject in irrigation more boring than maintenance. "In the army, our officer in charge used to give the following instruction when referring to the maintenance of infrastructural and mechanical parts: 'When they move, grease them, when they don't move, paint them. That is all there is to say about maintenance'". As always, Ian had the laugh on his side.

What Ian implicitly referred to were the obvious and well-known disincentives for adequate maintenance of irrigation systems. Such perverse incentives affect water users, operational staff and the management of irrigation agencies alike. *Not* to engage in maintenance appears to be rewarded by substantial rents for each and every one of these stakeholders:

- water users are subject to well-known tendencies for free-riding and thus hope to skim the rents of being inactive, benefitting from maintenance that other people will do;
- staff of irrigation agencies, especially engineers, see little professional appeal in maintenance activities and concentrate instead on activities with higher rent-seeking potential such as construction works or water distribution;
- management of irrigation agencies perceive deferred maintenance as a way to step up ministerial budget allocations in their favour.

First and foremost however, in my personal view, and one which is shared by many colleagues, senior government officials and international donors are likely to collude for rent-seeking interests when neglecting maintenance in favour of capital-intensive rehabilitation efforts or, even better, in the construction of new infrastructure.

My experiences with the German development cooperation in Jordan may illustrate this latter conjecture.

With short interruptions, Germany has supported irrigation development and management in the Jordan Valley since the 1970s. In the late 1970s and early 1980s there were explicit efforts to build up maintenance capacities of the Jordan Valley Authority (JVA). However, serious maintenance deficits lingered on. Being aware of that GTZ organised a series of roundtable meetings and workshops in Amman and in different locations in the Jordan Valley in 1998 in close coordination with JVA (see Huppert and Urban, 1999). JVA staff were asked to relate concrete problems that constituted key disincentives or constraints to effectively and efficiently manage and maintain irrigation infrastructure in the Valley. The meetings were chaired by a highly competent and energetic Assistant Secretary General of JVA who induced his colleagues to be open and explicit with respect to the hidden constraints in their mutual interactions with respect to maintenance. A high-level workshop was conducted with the heads of the regional and technical directorates of JVA. Additionally, several other workshops were held with the staff of the regional directorates. In these discussions the different actors involved in tasks related to maintenance were asked one by one to specify the contents and the bottlenecks of their working relationships with each and every one of the other actors with whom they had to cooperate or coordinate. Subsequently, the means and mechanisms were considered for each bilateral relationship that might enforce smooth functioning of the working interaction. In this way, the related relational problems emerged quickly and were articulated in an astonishingly frank manner. As I

³ The project MAINTAIN which operated in the second half of the 1990s produced a Guide on the Governance of Maintenance (Huppert et al., 2001) as well as a series of seven case studies and 12 thematic papers.

was present in these meetings as the representative of GTZ, I was enthusiastic about the openness and professional insight of the discussions and about the bold drive of the Assistant Secretary General who did not allow the discussants to evade sensitive issues. He did not even shy away from touching upon interaction problems that obviously opened doors to opportunistic or corrupt behaviour. Thus, perceived irregularities came to the fore such as e.g. attempts to withhold or delay essential information deliberately to gain leeway for refraining from carrying out essential tasks (such as preventive maintenance); suspected provisions of preferential water allocations; tendencies to engage in rent-seeking collusions with farmers who did not want to see irregular or excessive water withdrawals recorded; turning a blind eye to false readings of water meters, etc. Last but not least, the problem of hierarchical 'short-circuiting' by influential farmers who had direct connections to high-level decision-makers was hotly debated. JVA staff, whatever their position, were often asked by such farmers to provide particular services of water delivery, repair or other works quickly and irrespective of their official work programme. At times, the workshop participants laughed knowingly when such points were raised.

Admittedly, we were overly optimistic that this series of workshops would be an essential step towards breaking the 'maintenance deadlock' in the Jordan Valley irrigation schemes. Therefore, it came as a surprise to us when we learned, a short time later that the energetic Assistant Secretary General who had led these workshops had been replaced and had left JVA. I do not know whether or not this change was a reaction to the frankness of the workshops he had chaired. However, the issues raised in the workshops were not pursued thereafter.

Looking through the lens of rent-seeking analysis, this course of events should not have come as a surprise. After all, the objectives of improving the governance of maintenance provision and water distribution in JVA irrigation were supposed to be reached

- with a large body of grossly underpaid – and hence poorly motivated – staff;
- with a multi-layered hierarchical structure with restricted responsibility and accountability at different management levels;
- without an autonomous system for service-related financing;
- in an institutional environment with high legal insecurity, and
- in an international political environment where tendencies for economic rent-seeking interests by the Jordanian government could easily collude with political rent-seeking ambitions of donor countries, given the crucial role of Jordan in Near East politics.

Thus, the governance deficiencies revealed during the workshops were in fact instrumental in helping to provide rent-seeking possibilities to poorly paid JVA staff, in helping to distribute scarce water resources without major conflicts in an environment of low legal security, in keeping politically influential farmers satisfied through preferential treatment by JVA and in achieving all this with a minimum of risk for the responsible professionals to be held accountable. At the same time, the system was able to secure a performance level of the infrastructure just high enough to avoid substantial farmer discontent and low enough to attract donor support for Jordan Valley irrigation further on (Huppert and Urban, 1999: 68). Given the self-interests and the rent-seeking ambitions of certain stakeholders, this seemed to be a perfectly effective inefficiency.

Under such conditions it remains to be seen when and how the maintenance deadlock in Jordan Valley's irrigation can be broken.⁴

⁴ However, the ongoing efforts to strengthen water user associations in the Jordan Valley and raising the level of their discontent about performance deficits of the water delivery system together with the growing self-confidence of other social groups provide a glimmer of hope in this respect.

BEYOND RENT-SEEKING?

Closing these reflections on some experiences in my professional life, I return to the opening questions: Why did professionals in the field of agricultural water management largely ignore the findings of Robert Wade and Robert Repetto for more than a quarter century? Why did they – and why did I – shy away from articulating and confronting head-on the obvious problems of rent-seeking and corruption? Why does the conclusion arise that the core topic of rent-seeking has been intentionally neglected in the discourse on water policy and water development in agriculture – and beyond?

My contentions are twofold:

First, I presume that we are all still – at least to some degree – subject to the *Leys effect*. We go on practising the proverbial principle of 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' when it comes to rent-seeking and corruption in development cooperation. Looking behind the veil of such behaviour we have to admit that we pursue hidden rent-seeking efforts ourselves in many cases. We tend to ignore critical problems of rent-seeking and corruption so as not to compromise our own professional standing.

And second, we have to realise that as professionals we are part of specific political and organisational settings – replete with their particular interests – that strongly impinge on our perceptions and dealings as land and water professionals. Our parent organisations may act or be forced to act as morally questionable rent-seekers in certain circumstances. In such cases it will be hard for us to escape the accusation of pursuing undue rent-seeking ourselves while working within such contexts. As Thelen has observed: "once a set of institutions is in place, actors adopt their strategies in ways that reflect but also reinforce the 'logic' of the system" (Thelen, 1999: 64).

I admit that, even as a retiree, I am still a staunch supporter of international efforts aimed at 'Technical Cooperation' with developing countries. As such, I pin my hopes strongly on progress to be brought about by the recent emergence of new conceptual developments that will touch upon rent-seeking and corruption more in depth. Here, I refer to innovative concepts and ideas brought forward by TI and by WIN and point particularly to the new debates and discourses on 'water governance' in general and on 'water governance in agriculture' in particular. Hopefully, the concepts and innovations which emerge from these discussions will make good use of the insights gained in the fields of political and institutional economics where the topic of rent-seeking has received considerable attention for a long while. And hopefully, this scrutiny of rent-seeking behaviour will not focus exclusively on the developing country side but will embrace the donor country side as well. Nevertheless, in my view the big question remains whether and how far the logic of the existing system of international development cooperation will allow such promising shoots to sprout and to bear their fruits in practice.

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