
4. PRINCIPLED PRAGMATISM AND “RULES FOR REFORMERS”

This Report (and many other documents) make it clear that India is going to have to make major changes in the way in which it develops and manages its water resources, and that this process has to start soon.

Tushaar Shah¹⁵⁷ has described several types of reform initiatives in India, all of which have “failed to produce broad and deep changes.” They include:

“[a] a reformist measure is proposed, discussed and shelved. The draft Groundwater Regulation bill is the case in point. It is tossing around for 35 years; yet has found few takers because few political leaders are willing to absorb the transaction costs (including political costs) of seriously implementing it;”

“[b] a bold reformist measure is proposed, discussed and diluted by removing all difficult-to-implement elements, resulting in paper reform. India’s Water Policy announcements of 1987 as well as 2002 are good examples. Nothing in the way India’s water sector function has changed as a result of these.”

“[c] a bold reformist measure is proposed, discussed and launched but cold-stored in the face of popular opposition or insurmountable difficulties in implementation. Efforts by many Chief Ministers to meter electricity supply to tubewell irrigation during recent years is a good example. So are Maharashtra’s 10 year old law to protect drinking water wells from groundwater overdraft by irrigation wells, and Andhra Pradesh’s more recent land, water and trees act.”

“[d] a bold reformist measure is introduced and enforced to produce desired outcomes. Examples of this are rare; Chennai’s groundwater law, which has begun to bite, is an example. Another is West Bengal’s enforcement of permits for new electricity connections for irrigation wells. In Chennai’s case, extreme water scarcity has likely created popular support for strong measures. In West Bengal’s case, restrictions began to be enforced long before well irrigators organized into a powerful political force.”

“[e] finally, there are examples of reform ideas that refuse to die despite recurring evidence of their failure to deliver. Participatory Irrigation Management is one such; India has been trying farmer management or irrigation for nearly 150 years. While there are islands of excellence, there is no evidence of WUAs having produced sustained performance improvements on a significant scale. Similar communitarian models have dominated for decades institutional discourse in culture and capture fishery, watershed management, water supply systems. Countless studies show that fishermen co-operatives are almost always fronts for contractors, that watershed associations seldom maintain structures after funding runs out.”

Review of similar reform water reform efforts throughout the world suggests that the guiding mantra must be “principled pragmatism”¹⁵⁸. “Principled” because principles matter, a lot. And “pragmatic” because principles can only be translated into practice by following a step-by-step, persistent process which “fits” with the local culture, people and environment. This section reflects on some of the lessons of “principled pragmatism” in water reform processes elsewhere¹⁵⁹, and from reform processes in other sectors in India. They are presented in the form of “rules” (really suggestions) which a reforming government might keep in mind.

Rule # 1: Water is different

There is much that aspiring water reformers can learn from reforms in other sectors – such as power and telecommunications and transport. But it is also true that water is, and is perceived to be, different from these other “created” sectors in many fundamental ways. The resource economist Kenneth Boulding’s ode to water¹⁶⁰ captures many of these distinctions very well.

Water is far from a simple commodity
Water’s a sociological oddity
Water’s a pasture for science to forage in
Water’s a mark of our dubious origin
Water’s a link with a distant futurity
Water’s a symbol of ritual purity
Water is politics, water’s religion
Water is just about anyone’s pigeon
Water is frightening, water’s endearing
Water’s a lot more than mere engineering
Water is tragical, water is comical
Water is far from the Pure Economical.

This specialness does not mean that reform is impossible, or that water reformers can not learn from reforms in many other areas of public service provision. What it does mean is that there has to be a particular emphasis on public discussion and on addressing the many concerns which people legitimately have about water.

Rule # 2: Initiate reform where there is a powerful need and demonstrated demand for change

Habits of water management and use, and the organizations and practices involved, have evolved over time and have, at some time, “fitted” the particular prevalent economic, social and environmental circumstances. Change is not easy or welcomed, unless there is a very strong need for change. Abstract and idealized statements (such as “river basin management” or “integrated water resources management”, the mantra of the international community in recent years) have some resonance with professionals, but do not constitute a reason for organizations and people to change the way water is managed.

Because changes are difficult and often wrenching, they will be undertaken only when there is a powerful need and a demonstrated demand for change. Global experience¹⁶¹ shows that the impetus for change is usually either a serious breakdown in services, an environmental failure which affects large numbers of people, or a fiscal crisis which makes the status quo untenable.

In India today there are a number of settings where there is a powerful need and demonstrated demand for change and which are, accordingly, the areas where reformers should put their initial efforts. These include:

- Cities where individual households are facing greater and greater difficulties in making their “coping strategies” work, because the groundwater option is no longer tenable. The case of Chennai (described in Box 2) is such a case, where the political pressures are great and the State government is being forced to confront the systemic issues. In some cases these responses are of the “silver bullet” variety (hoping that institutional changes can be avoided by getting someone else – Union Government, as always – to pay for the very costly desalination can resolve the problem, for example¹⁶²). But it is increasingly clear that Chennai has to seek a range of new

sources of supply, as well as greatly improve the functioning of the distribution cities within the city. It is, therefore, not surprising that Chennai emerges in several places in this report – in establishing incipient “water markets” for the voluntary transfer of water from farmers to the city; in “purchasing” water from the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh (albeit in such a poorly-specified contract that the city seldom gets the water); in mobilizing new forms of finance (from the Sai Baba philanthropic foundation); and in pushing for new forms of inter-state agreements on water (including “river linking”). The number of cities and towns falling into similar circumstances (including the metropolitan area around Delhi, where the groundwater table is falling almost a meter a year¹⁶³) is growing rapidly, and the political pressure to find new institutional arrangements to meet their needs is similarly strong. Dealing with urban bulk water issues is thus an opportunity for reform in water allocation practices.

- Fiscal constraints will, sooner or later, constitute a heavy pressure to improve the financial performance of public irrigation and water supply systems, both of which are major sources of red ink. This will force cities to look for lower-cost sources of supply – calculations by the Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board, for instance, show that the city could buy water from farmers in the Singur area at less than half of what it would cost to bring water from Nagarjunasagar on the Krishna River.
- Industries in areas where water availability is a serious constraint. It is a commonplace in India that the availability and quality of infrastructure is one of the major threats to the continued health of the Indian economy. In the words of the Finance Minister, "India's most glaring deficit is its infrastructure deficit."¹⁶⁴ Until recently “infrastructure” meant ports, railways, roads and electricity. Now there is a palpable sense that water is joining this list, with the two major industrial associations – FICCI and the CII – both becoming very active on water issues. Industry leaders have a major role to play in local politics, and can become powerful voices pushing for improved water management at the local level. An example of this is the path breaking takeover by the textile industry of the Tirapur urban water supply in Tamil Nadu¹⁶⁵.
- Agricultural areas where water security is of high importance. Agrarian India is undergoing a quiet but rapid revolution – contract farming is happening in many places, high-value crops are displacing food grains, aquaculture is increasing. In each case the importance of a predictable supply of water becomes vital. There has been a rapid uptake of drip irrigation and other new technologies, but these “exit options” will not be sufficient, and there will be pressures to allow water to move more flexibly and voluntarily from low-value to high-value uses. As Maria Saleth¹⁶⁶ details in his background paper, much of this now takes place in informal water markets but as agricultural production moves to scale there will be pressures to formalize such relationships. Again, this is an important area where there will be demand for changes in water management practices.

The key message is that there are many windows of opportunity opening up for water reforms which will constitute specific, practical solutions to local problems. It is these which will show what can be done, and will, by producing tangible results, constitute a pressure on, and example for, others to follow. The centrality of “demonstration” has been well stated in a similar context: “We don't need the government of India to transform every aspect of Indian infrastructure,” says Ratan Tata, head of the Tata companies which comprise India's largest private-sector group. “All you need is for a private company to take over one airport and then show by results what everyone else is missing.”¹⁶⁷

Rule #3: Involve those affected, and address their concerns with effective, understandable information

People are, for good reasons, always apprehensive about changes which will be thrust upon them. And when it involves something as sensitive as water, communication, discussion and information become central elements for any reform process. What would this mean in India?

First, there is a general tendency for government-led discussions of water policy to take place among water professionals, the vast majority of whom are engineers, and the vast majority of whom have little exposure to changing global good practice. This community of practice is still – see the discussion in Chapter 2 – very much a part of the “this will not work in India” school of thought, one which still thinks in terms of command and control (Mohile, background paper¹⁶⁸) and which tends to look backward, not forward (Sekhar¹⁶⁹, background paper). This means that discussions of reform are often severely truncated, and often quite at odds with the reality on the ground. To take just one example -- the engineers of Chennai Metrowater were emphatic that farmers would never lease their water to the city because it is “against their culture”; once the trading was started the farmers were, indeed, unhappy, because almost all farmers wanted to trade some of their water (and the city could not buy from all).

Second, there is often an attitude by government that “there should not be discussion of issues of water entitlements or water reforms because these are too sensitive”. And when there is a forum for discussion it is exactly these issues which people want to discuss, because they are sensitive and central.

Things are, however, changing. The process followed by Suresh Prabhu, the Chairman of the (now-disbanded) Task Force on Linking Rivers was a model of open communication in many respects. Prabhu held literally hundreds of public meetings, throughout the country, to apprise people of what was at stake, and to listen to their concerns and get their suggestions. This led to enormous amount of public discussion, not just of linking rivers, but of virtually all of the major challenges facing the water sector in India. It put some of the most critical issues – like the need for a new, modern, approach to state water rights in a federal system – on the front burner. (The major caveat was that the machinery of government was not equipped to do its part, and the process suffered from a paucity of material available to both the Task Force and the public on the specifics of what was being proposed, and the results of the twenty years of work that the National Water Development Authority had undertaken on this subject.)

There is a palpable sense of a looming water crisis in India, and an opportunity and need for the Union Government to undertake a major, multi-stakeholder dialog-cum-campaign.

Such a campaign would need to engage farmers with the hydrological reality of the aquifers that they currently rely on. Farmers know that suicides are increasing because, even with massive electricity subsidies, larger and larger numbers of farmers simply cannot afford to drill deeper and deeper. They need to know that there is simply no alternative to adjusting aggregate abstractions to the level of sustainable yield. They need to know that other countries have made such transitions, often, remarkably, with positive economic outcomes. They need to understand the combination of government regulation, user involvement, and packages of “virtuous subsidies” that could reasonably substitute for the vicious subsidies that are driving their aquifers (and them) to ruin. They need to be informed that formal water entitlements would not harm them, but provide them with assets they do not now have.

Irrigators must realize that in the future surface supply systems – now so discredited – must again play a central role. This means that there must be a new social compact for public surface irrigation systems – a compact in which users have clear entitlements, in which they pay for reliable services, which are provided by accountable, transparent and efficient suppliers. Irrigators must also understand that with limited resources and growing cities and industries, there must be transfers of water from the farm to the city. They must understand that many countries have developed mechanisms for this to happen in a way that such transfers are transparent, voluntary and to the mutual benefit of both parties. They must understand that if such mechanisms are not put into place, then these transfers will take place by stealth, without any compensation.

Such a campaign would need to engage the urban middle class, who have “exited” from public water supply systems by self provision. They need to understand that with massive urban growth and rapid aquifer depletion these “coping strategies” will not work for much longer. They need to realize that they will, as do people in all large cities of the world, rely on effective, accountable providers of public water services. They also need to understand that there are large demands for tax revenues for true public services (such as cleaning up the rivers which have turned into sewers in all the cities of India), and that they must be willing to pay for water supply services (provided, of course, the provider is efficient and accountable).

Such a campaign must engage industry, so that it understands that the standard industrial response (of “captive generation of water”, mostly by groundwater pumping, but also increasingly through expensive recycling and desalination) is inherently limited. Industrialists must exert their considerable pressure on government for putting in place systems – which work well in many countries – whereby they can purchase the water they need from willing sellers (often farmers) for whom the value of water is much lower than it is for industry.

Such a campaign must engage the leadership of State Governments. They must be made to realize that there is an alternative to the current anarchic inter-state system. They must be presented with the data on the huge costs which this system imposes on all parties (upstream and downstream alike) and must come to understand that there is an alternative for sharing waters (and sometimes sharing benefits) that works well in developed arid federal countries and which has worked well in India’s international water treaties with Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Finally, and pulling all of these strands together, such a campaign must engage national political leadership, again with complacency as the greatest enemy. A common commentary on India’s economy was, in the memorable words of a Finance Minister “every budget is a gamble on the monsoon”¹⁷⁰. A feature of India’s recent economic growth was captured in a newspaper headline stating that “India’s economy is no longer a gamble on the monsoons”, noting that India’s growth in the bad monsoon year of 2004/5 had been reduced only by about 2% (to 6% overall growth). Political leaders must be aware that this may be a brief and temporary escape from hydrological constraints, and that unless the economy is put on a sustainable water platform, the “water brake” on the economy – working through the industrial, agricultural and urban economies as described above -- will become endemic rather than sporadic. The urgency of this transformation is accentuated by the likely effects of climate change. The best projections suggest, for example, that in the western Himalayas, where precipitation and snow deposition are relatively low, glaciers are particularly vulnerable and are likely to result in, for example, a runoff “windfall” during the next couple of decades, followed by flow reductions which may be of the order of 20% for the Ganga at Haridwar, for example, by the year 2100. As for so many other reasons, this requires the establishment of a water management system which is flexible and robust.

Rule #4: Reform is dialectic not mechanical

Ideas like “river basin planning” and “integrated water resources management” have sound conceptual roots, and appeal to technicians, many of whom perceive implementation of these ideas as the path towards better water management. Useful as they are, in the words of the Operations Evaluations Department of the World Bank “progress takes place more through ‘unbalanced’ development than comprehensive planning approaches”¹⁷¹. As Karl Marx (had he addressed the subject!) might have said it as follows: water reform is a dialectic, not mechanical process.

Improvements in water management- occur when there are tensions (between users, between users and the environment, between the water agencies and the finance ministries) which can no longer be accommodated within the existing institutional arrangements. But reforms do not lead to “mukti” (liberation for ever) – they simply mean that “lower-order tensions” are replaced by higher-order tensions.

Again Tamil Nadu provides a useful illustration. State-wide approaches to water reform have built some important building blocks, but have made few contributions to actually resolving specific problems. These general reforms therefore lack legitimacy and “demonstration power”. But when the textile manufacturers of Tirapur actually resolve the problem of their own water service, this has a powerful demonstration effect. It does not mean that “water problems in Tirapur are now over”, but it means that as the issue of getting water delivered to industries and households is largely resolved, the focus will inevitably and appropriately shift to the “higher-order” problems of ensuring adequate supplies of bulk water and of dealing with water pollution from the town and industries.

Rule # 5: It’s implementation, stupid

Lawrence Summers has observed¹⁷² that the great distinction between developing countries which have progressed over the last 30 years and those that have stagnated is not the ability to formulate perfect policies, but the ability to translate reasonable policies into actions on the ground. Paraphrasing Bill Clinton’s famous election mantra, “it’s implementation, stupid”.

And so it is with water in India and elsewhere – policies and recommendations abound, some very good (such as the recommendations of the 1991 Vaidyanathan Commission). But as Tushaar Shah¹⁷³ has emphasized., what matters is identifying improvements that can actually be implemented.

Rule #6: Develop a sequenced, prioritized list of reforms

Any journey requires a knowledge of the destination and a road map for getting there. However the journey itself is taken step by step. And so it is with water reforms – there must be a long-term vision, but immediate attention must be on putting first things first – to sequencing and prioritization. The practice of (aborted) water reform by government agencies in India (reinforced by some of its external supporters) has often been to make everything (and therefore nothing) a priority. A major recent water commission for an advanced state in India came up with a set of over 340 “recommendations”, ranging from major legal changes to what crop should be grown in what district. Similarly a major 1998 World Bank report on the water sector in India¹⁷⁴ made 170 recommendations, all presumably to be done simultaneously.

A relevant example of a principled but pragmatic approach to sequencing relates to that of “cost recovery” for irrigation services. Cost recovery is, of course, an appropriate aspiration, but it is almost never the place to start. Farmers will not and should not, pay for the costs of poor services which are delivered by inefficient and corrupt agencies. The first step must be to address the issues of accountability and efficiency (as described earlier in this report). Once services are improved and there is trust in the service provider, then tariff increases to bring revenues in line with costs becomes possible. As shown in Figure 65 on the urban water supply example in Guinea, Africa, public funding will generally be necessary, on a declining basis, to “finance the transition”.

Rule #7: Be patient and persistent

Water reform processes are never short, decisive affairs. A review of the experience of rich countries by the OECD¹⁷⁵ shows that progress in water reforms takes place over decades, not years, and that even the most advanced of countries is only about half way towards the ideal forms of water management described in declarations of intent by the countries themselves and by the international community¹⁷⁶. In the case of a vast, federal democratic country like India, as described by the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission¹⁷⁷ “pluralistic and highly participatory processes forces one to gradualism....”

Rule #8: Pick the low-hanging fruit first – nothing succeeds like success

The world over citizens are either concerned or skeptical about announcements of “reform”, with some advocating abolition of the word from the public policy lexicon. “By casting their agendas as reforms, political advocates don't aim to stimulate debate and discussion. They aim to suppress it. They aim to stigmatize adversaries as nasty, wrong-headed, selfish or misinformed. The trouble is that as a society, we need debates over principles and practicality. All reforms are not desirable, at least not to everyone.”¹⁷⁸

The corollary is that public support will only build if there are visible, tangible results from the changes which are advocated. The key is “show me”.

It certainly can help to show opinion leaders that these changes have been affected in other countries. The formation of the famous French River Basin management system in the 1960s was strongly influenced by the successful experience of the Ruhrverband, established in neighboring Germany in 1916. And the political leaders of the water reform process in Brazil ascribe high importance to a study tour of Mexico and Colorado at a critical time. But there is nothing like demonstration on home territory. And since changes are always difficult, it is imperative to start changes where conditions are propitious – where there is a real demand for change, where there are champions, and where it is possible to show results. For example, there were real gains from the organization of Water User Associations in Andhra Pradesh in recent years, gains which were appreciated by visiting Haryana farmers who found in the AP “success” some inspiration for similar efforts in their home state¹⁷⁹.

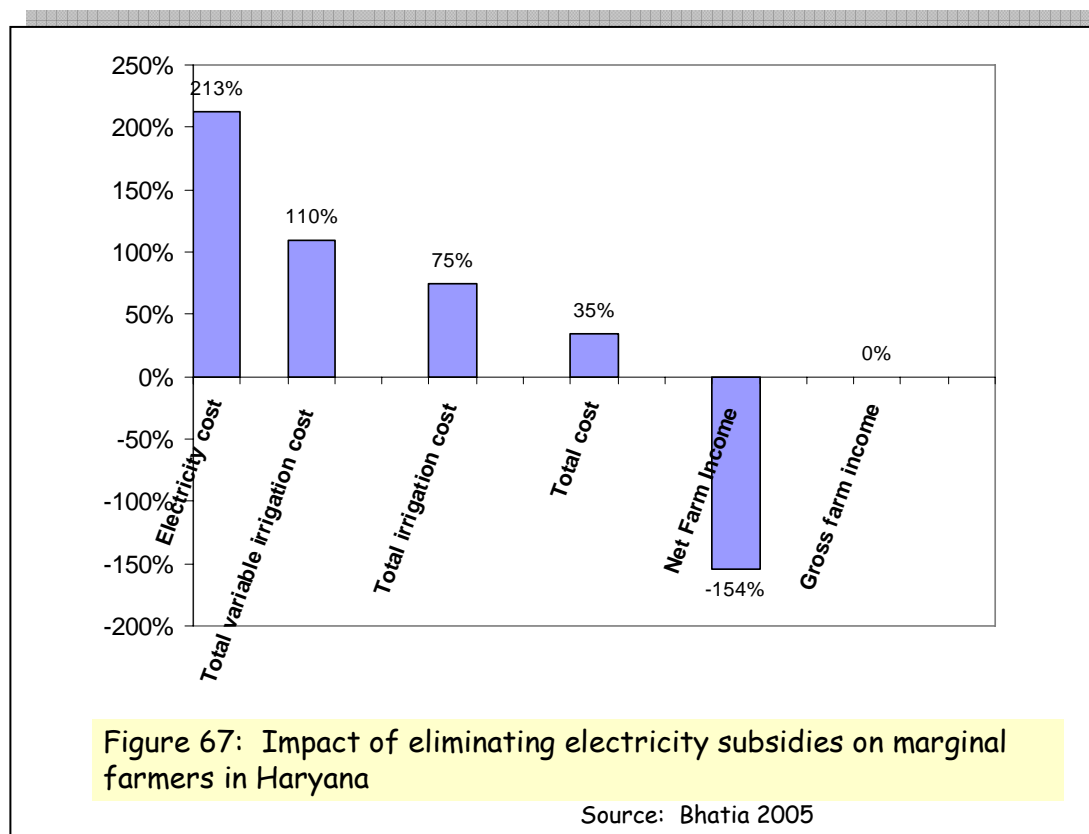
On the central but complex issue of water entitlements the embryonic experience in Chennai (Box 2) was a relatively “low hanging fruit”. So too would the use of water entitlements to resolve the water conflicts afflicting the Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary. If and when these and other “easy cases” mature, then they will provide a beacon for tackling the bigger and more difficult challenges of water entitlements.

Rule #9: Keep your eye on the ball – don't let the best become the enemy of the good

Almost any progress is progress worth making, whether or not it measures up to some abstract global notion of “excellent”. The idea that practice can go from terrible to perfect in one fell swoop is one that is attractive to outsiders and is sometimes adopted by financial agencies (so-called Volvo instead of Volkswagen standards¹⁸⁰). But it fits poorly with the one-step-at-a-time gradualism which characterizes water reforms, everywhere.

Consider the case of subsidies for electricity for groundwater. There is no doubt that this is a problem which must be addressed, and that the longer it takes to address the deeper the groundwater, the

greater the subsidies and the more difficult it will be to find a way back. But the fact is that farmers are now so heavily dependent on electricity subsidies that drastic elimination of these would simply put many farmers out of business (see Figure 67), and, for this reason, be politically infeasible. The task must be to address this issue on multiple fronts, which in this case would include an improvement in the quality of electricity, the appropriate pricing of the low-opportunity-cost electricity which farmers use, and the introduction of a set of “virtuous subsidies” (as was done in Mexico, for example, in refurbishing inefficient equipment and for adoption of water-efficient technologies) as electricity subsidies are reduced.



A good example of the “the best is the enemy of the good” rule at work is the justly-famous Indus Treaty, which has, since its inception, had its detractors in both India and Pakistan as “not fair”¹⁸¹. Confronting the Pakistani detractors of the Treaty Ayub Khan gave advice which is relevant for all would-be water reformers: “..very often the best is the enemy of the good and in this case we have accepted the good after careful and realistic appreciation of our entire overall situation..... the basis of this agreement is realism and pragmatism....”¹⁸²

Rule #10: There are no silver bullets

The challenges which India faces in water management are environmentally, socially, and technically complex. There is a justifiable, human fantasy that there is a single “silver bullet” which will “solve the problem”. In some parts of the India water establishment today there is still faith that the old remedy – more dams, and variants of this – will solve all water problems and should be given near-exclusive priority. In situations where this remedy is patently impractical, then there are a host of other “supply side” solutions ranging from high-tech (cloud seeding and desalination) to low-tech

(rainwater harvesting and desilting of ancient tanks), most of which have an important niche but are falsely marketed as “the solution”.

Take the case of “restoration of traditional water bodies”. There is a great attraction to the notion that rediscovery of “Dying Wisdom” (the title of a book¹⁸³ by Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain of the Delhi Centre for Science and the Environment) will provide the cures to the water ills that afflict modern India. There is a large and active movement which sees community “rainwater harvesting” as the solution, everywhere and for all problems (almost). Deeper investigations show that it isn’t quite so. David Mosse’s detailed anthropological investigation¹⁸⁴ into the social ecology of the tanks of southern India draw a much more complex picture, showing that the tanks were in steep decline long before the advent of canal irrigation (the ostensible cause of the loss of traditional wisdom) and that they were a solution well suited to a particular demographic and social situation which has long gone. Similarly, objective evaluations (described earlier) of watershed management efforts in India show some, but rather limited, success. Applying the powerful words of Judith Tendler¹⁸⁵ from another context (the analysis of Social Funds) “The reason for (their) popularity ...relates to their effectiveness as a powerful “development narrative”. In environments with great ambiguity as to cause and effect, such narratives offer convincing and simple explanations for the causes of certain problems and provide appealingly straightforward blueprints for action. Because of their power as narrative, these accounts are rather invulnerable to empirical evidence that challenges their accuracy”.

The point is not that these community-based efforts have no role to play – they do, and an important one at that in some circumstances. The point here is that they can never be a “silver bullet” in an increasingly urbanized and industrial society which needs a host of different kinds of actions.

What is clear is that the most effective responses to the water challenges in India are going to vary very widely and are going to require a host of interventions, of all different scales. As suggested by the “Stages of water development” in Figure 1, the major instrument is not going to be infrastructure alone, but management supported by both old and new types of infrastructure. “Management” is going to mean systemic sets of legislation, capacity building, organizational change and the use of entitlement, pricing and regulatory instruments. And it is not going to be the task of government alone, but concerted and reinforcing actions by a host of stakeholders. But that there were a silver bullet!

Rule #11: Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater

A corollary of the previous rule is that there is a tendency when the silver bullet does not work (mixing metaphors badly) to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Dams (or rainwater harvesting or tank restoration) are propagated with missionary zeal, and when they do not deliver communities to the promised land, they are stigmatized and it argued that they should no longer be part of the “toolkit”.

Take the example of dams. There is an energetic and resourceful anti-dam lobby in India. Spurred by legitimate issues of inadequate resettlement at Sardar Sarovar and elsewhere, these groups – with their message magnified by Arundhati Roy’s powerful prose¹⁸⁶ -- have identified dams as one of the ultimate evils on the world. There is, in their minds, no dam which ever should have been built in India -- even Bhakra¹⁸⁷, which as described earlier, has been shown to have brought such massive benefits to the people of northwest India and beyond.

Take another example, that of Water Users’ Associations. The idea of WUAs transforming irrigation services has been and is, a powerful and persistent one, despite mounting and long-standing evidence that reality is a bit more complicated. The Vaidyanathan Commission of 1991, for example, reports that “there is a general consensus that efforts to actually organize farmers’ groups and make them

participate have not really made much of an impact”. Similar evidence from around the world notwithstanding, the idea has had remarkable staying power in the global water community, again, “because of their power as narrative, these accounts are rather invulnerable to empirical evidence”.

For some the case is clear: the idea of WUAs is partly a cruel trick played so that the more difficult issues – of real reform of the irrigation agencies – can be avoided. But the fact is that organized farmers do play a role in all successful irrigation schemes throughout the world, but only as a part of a set of reinforcing instruments, which always include water entitlements and accountable service delivery agencies. The WUAs should not be thrown out with the bathwater but propagated as part of an overall reform package. The distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions for progress is a vital one.

Rule #12: Reforms must provide returns for the politicians who are willing to make changes

Politicians may not be the most revered figures in India (or elsewhere), but it is they who are “in the game”, who are elected to make crucial tradeoffs, and who have the critical role as judges and champions of reform. A discussion with politicians who have led water-related reforms throughout the world¹⁸⁸ found general agreement in a “rule” articulated by Digvijay Singh, then-Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh: “If it is to work, water reform must be good politics”. There is evidence that this was, indeed, the case for community-based watershed management projects for Mr. Singh in Madhya Pradesh. And the intensive formation of WUAs in Andhra Pradesh was certainly politically useful to Mr. Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh, because farmers perceived this to be a reform which moved in the right direction.

The bottom line is that an essential element of any reform program is that it must be viewed as a “good thing” by sufficient numbers of people that they will consider voting for the politician who championed the reform.

There are two important riders to this “rule”. First, it is often quite difficult to judge how actions relating to water are being received by citizens. For example, anyone reading the English language newspapers of India would perceive that the Sardar Sarovar Project on the Narmada River is almost universally opposed. However a detailed analysis of press coverage by Sussex University¹⁸⁹ showed that the picture was considerably more nuanced. “Environmental debate in India is governed by the language in which it is presented and understood. The message coming out of India, most likely to be heard by the developed world, comes out of its English language media, representing just 2% of the population. This elite group has adapted a pro-environment stance and is more likely to protest against new dams.... But inside India, the far bigger local language media representing the vast majority and poorer sections of society are expressing the heart-felt cry for development”

Second and related, is the fact that on any reform proposal there will be a cacophony of voices. Montek Ahluwalia¹⁹⁰ has described this well: “Sometimes I feel as if there’s a completely false assumption that if only you talk to everybody you will get an agreement . Only on a very boring issue or in a very boring country would you find that. To my mind the debate Does not eliminate the need for political risk... At the end the government has to take the risk” In short, while all voices must be heard, much greater weight must be given to the voices of those who have responsibility and face the voters, and less weight to those who are self-appointed or who represent small special interests.