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Direct exchange between local stakeholders and national policy makers helped to launch a political debate and set in motion national law.

PARTICIPATORY ADVOCACY FOR BETTER IRRIGATION

In Kyrgyzstan, a local advocacy initiative successfully changes national law

Agriculture uses 70% of the world’s water. As global population increases and climate changes, the threat of water and food shortages is a growing reality. To address this, a multi-stakeholder initiative was launched in 2014 to improve water productivity in agriculture: WAPRO. Sustainable irrigation is often impeded by problems that go beyond the reach of individual farmers or a company, thus calling for joint large-scale solutions. Through its policy component, the SDC Water Productivity Project (WAPRO) encourages and empowers concerned stakeholders to advocate for changes in the legal and regulatory framework, with the aim to establish conducive frame conditions for effective irrigation. In Kyrgyzstan, WAPRO co-funded the Irrigation Water Integrity Project (IWIP). Operated by Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, it supported a group of local actors advocating for a conducive legal framework for local irrigation. The participatory, bottom-up campaign eventually succeeded when parliament and the president endorsed a reform package in late 2021, thus paving the way for better local irrigation management.

The Irrigation Water Integrity Project (IWIP) started in early 2018 as a continuation of the On-Farm Water Management Project (2010–2013) and the Efficient Use of Water Project SEP II (2014–2017). Both projects – implemented and funded by Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation – addressed the multifaceted conflicts over irrigation water in Southern Kyrgyzstan through technical and governance support at the local level. At the same time, they showed that it takes more to make on-farm irrigation sustainable. While insufficient local user fees and poor maintenance of the communal irrigation infrastructure were just some of the causes leading to substantial water losses, inconsistencies between various national laws prohibited municipal authorities from contributing to the maintenance and operation of canals. IWIP therefore set out to improve the legal and regulatory frame conditions for local on-farm irrigation. To do so, the project supported a group of concerned citizens (Initiative Group) advocating for changes to the Kyrgyz Water Code, the Law on WUAs, and the Code on Legal Violations so that municipal authorities would be allowed to support local Water User Associations (WUAs). Within four years, the campaign led a national consultation process, drafted a legislative project in close cooperation with national authorities, and fed it into the parliamentary process. In late 2021, the legal changes were eventually endorsed by parliament and the president, thus paving the way for better local irrigation management. While IWIP offered financial, technical and process expertise, local stakeholders led the campaign, which started in municipalities in Southern Kyrgyzstan, but gradually expanded its outreach towards national policy dialogue. This bottom-up approach proved to be a major success factor and generated many lessons on the dos and don'ts of participatory, bottom-up advocacy.

THE INITIATIVE GROUP: CREDIBLE, KNOWLEDGEABLE, LEGITIMATE

Advocates who master their subject and are directly affected by the problem in question are often more credible than full-time lobbyists. Thus, the campaign's participatory, bottom-up approach was one of its main strengths. At the outset, the Initiative Group consisted of farmers, members of local WUAs, representatives of local governments and councils, and local NGO leaders. This made decision-making difficult, but considerably boosted the group's credibility towards local allies and national policy makers alike. To ensure compliance with legal standards and legislative procedures, the Initiative Group teamed up with a group of legal experts. Moreover, its legitimacy was further strengthened by the support of the National Union of Local Self-Governments and the National WUA Union.

WAPRO Kyrgyzstan

OBJECTIVE: Increase water productivity in cotton production and improve livelihoods of cotton growing farmers

PROJECT AREA: Jalal-Abad (JA) region

PROJECT DURATION: Phase I (2016–2018), Phase 2 (2019–2022)

IMPLEMENTER: Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation

KEY PARTNERS: JA Rural Advisory Services, Agricultural Commodity and Service Cooperative 'BioFarmer' and Public Fund 'BioService'

IMPACT AND KEY OUTCOMES:

- **1,010 beneficiaries incl. 269 women (27%)**
- **48% increased water productivity** resulting from 67% adoption of short furrow irrigation
- 965 tons of seed cotton delivered to ginneries and sold with organic and FT premiums **increasing farmers income by 203 USD/ha**
- Amendments to the **Kyrgyz Water Code** to improve local irrigation management



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People who are directly affected by a problem can be highly credible advocates



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A parliamentarian responds to a group of journalists during a field excursion in Southern Kyrgyzstan

THE ADVOCACY STRATEGY: THREE-PRONGED AND VERSATILE

By and large, the Initiative Group used three different routes to bring about policy change:

- **The administrative route** targeted the State Water Department. A Working Group consisting of experts from the Department, the World Bank-funded National On-farm Irrigation Project and the initiative's Expert Group drafted a list of proposed amendments to the Kyrgyz Water Code, the Law on WUAs, and the Code on Legal Violations. This package would do away with existing legal obstacles prohibiting local authorities from intervening in local irrigation management.
- **The legislative route** targeted the Agrarian Committee of the Kyrgyz parliament. Politicians with an interest in rural development were taken on a field excursion so they could see and discuss the problem with those directly concerned, and at the same time attract media attention. After this, the Initiative Group was invited to a new working group overseen by the Agrarian Committee which considered the draft amendments and invited other ministries and state authorities to analyse and comment.
- Via **the public route**, the Initiative Group launched public debates across the country. The lively interest of the public helped to reinforce the campaign by validating and refining its initial problem statement and proposed solution, and by broadening public support through scaling up a previously scattered debate into a national movement.

In early 2020, the Covid pandemic brought the campaign to a sudden halt. The Initiative Group then shifted its activity focusing on open letters and the media. This strategy later helped it to cope with another setback a few months later, when the country entered a phase of political turmoil following irregularities during national elections.

« I learned how to communicate the problem to decision makers. And I have the confidence that one can reach a goal, set a precise goal and implement it. »

Member of the Initiative Group



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Advocates and state authorities discuss legal changes at a round table meeting at the Ministry of Agriculture

FINAL SUCCESS AND NEXT STEPS

Despite these disruptions, the campaign eventually secured a resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers, recommending the parliament to endorse the proposed legal changes. The cause also profited from farmers' protests against irrigation water shortages following a severe drought in early summer 2021, which revived the attention of policy makers. In late 2021, parliament and president finally endorsed the legal amendments, thus paving the way towards improved irrigation management at the local level. To make this happen, continued awareness-raising and capacity building of key actors at all levels are needed. National ministries, local municipalities, and WUAs need to learn about the new legal framework and be able and willing to apply it in practice to bring about positive change.

LESSONS LEARNED

Beyond the immediate policy change, IWIP generated a few key learnings with relevance for comparable interventions in other contexts:

Mediate carefully between different interests and perceptions. Establishing and consolidating the Initiative Group and balancing it out with external experts' knowledge took time, as different actors held different views on what had to be done and how. In the case of IWIP, careful mediation paid off with a strong, credible, legitimate campaign.

Clarify rules, roles, and responsibilities early on. It took time to clarify roles, responsibilities, and internal decision-making procedures within and between the Initiative Group, external experts, and the project. Once an agreement was reached, things began to move fast.

Invest in capacity building of motivated advocates. IWIP strengthened the lobbying capacities of local actors and meticulously prepared them for each conference and field excursion. Depending on people's strengths and expertise, everyone was able to assume a particular role and key message.

Build lasting relationships with system actors. The campaign identified and worked with systemic actors (public servants, politicians), but sometimes struggled to maintain these relationships. Having alternative allies as a backup and a solid link between decision makers and local advocates is key, especially in fragile political contexts.

Combine personal experience and scientific evidence. Personal experience was one of the campaign's main assets for convincing others. At the same time, the campaign always substantiated its key messages by referring to hard facts and figures.



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The successful legal reform paves the way for improved local irrigation management

Maintain flexibility. More than once, external disruptions forced the Initiative Group to fundamentally change its plans. This would not have been possible with a rigid campaign plan. Hence, flexibility is key – as long as we don't lose sight of the overall goal.

Don't expect quick results (but combine technical and policy actions early on). The campaign relied heavily on expertise, credibility, and networks of previous project phases (OFWM and SEP, since 2010), which had a technical focus. An earlier combination of technical and policy actions might have been possible – but would not have guaranteed quicker results.



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