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Assessing the Contribution of Irrigation to Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Livelihoods

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Abstract

The international consensus on water management tends to accept projections of a need for expansion of irrigation to ensure future global and national food security, but holds to the precepts that such expansion will come with high social and environmental costs. Irrigation in developing countries is stereotyped as equity reducing, in competition with other uses for scarce water resources, and often resulting in negative impacts for women and other disadvantaged groups.

This paper examines agricultural intensification through the practice of irrigation as a strategy for poverty reduction. There are four inter-related mechanisms through which irrigated agriculture can reduce poverty. These are: improvements in the levels and security of productivity, employment and incomes for irrigating farm households and farm labour; the linkage and multiplier effects of agricultural intensification for the wider economy; provision of opportunities for diversification of rural livelihoods; and multiple uses of irrigation supply. There are also significant risks that badly designed and managed irrigation can negatively impact on poverty.

It is concluded that irrigated farming varies widely in its form and impacts, and has diverse local attributes. Water resource management decisions must recognise this and be based on a holistic and livelihood centred assessment of irrigation benefits and costs that goes beyond food production objectives. In this respect the international water consensus fails to adequately connect with a wider consensus concerning the centrality of agricultural growth in poverty reduction and development.