
The Zanjera Commons

J.K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron & Stephen Healy

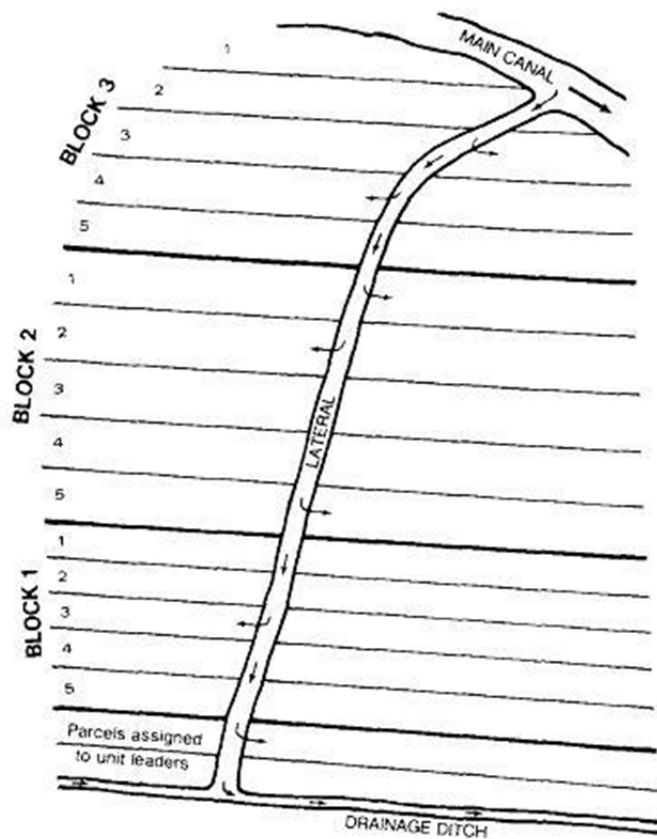
In the Northwest region of island of Luzon in the Philippines, associations of farmers called *zanjera* build, operate and maintain irrigation systems made up of dams, canals and ditches that probably date from at least the period of Spanish colonialism in the 1600s, though it is likely the system pre-existed this period going by a different name.ⁱ There are between 1,000 and 1,200 *zanjera* and these groups manage irrigated lands that range in size from two to 4,000 acres (or from one to 1,500 hectares). In 1978 it was estimated that they covered almost 33,000 hectares. One area with around 200 *zanjera* is known to support over 10,000 farmers.

The irrigation systems generally enable farmers to get three crops a year, usually two rice crops and one non-rice crop and therefore are critical in helping farming families survive.

Some *zanjera* are made up of farmers who already own small farms. For many others, however, *zanjera* are a way of accessing land. It works like this. A group of landless farmers enter into an agreement with a landowner (often landowners who live elsewhere). The farmers commit to building and maintaining an irrigation system on the property and in return they can farm the land. The farmers also give 25% of the produce or its cash equivalent to the landowner. These lease arrangements are supported by strong cultural narratives captured in sayings such as *biang ti daga* (or sharing of land) and in traditional songs.

This valuing of sharing also determines how the land is divided up. Main blocks of land are subdivided into smaller units. Farmers receive units in different blocks so that all have access to the high flows of water at the start of a ditch or canal. In times of water shortages the *zanjera* can also easily limit water to only one unit for each farmer, and the other units can be farmed using dryland techniques.

Several additional units of land are given to the farmers who lead the *zanjera* as a form of 'payment' for their extra effort coordinating work teams and generally overseeing the irrigation system. This provides an incentive for farmers to take on leadership positions and once in those positions to organize the system wisely so that water flows to the tail end of the canal or ditch. Some *zanjera* also keep several units of land that are farmed collectively to help support the *zanjera*.



Extensive norms have evolved ... that narrowly define 'proper' behavior. Many of these norms make it feasible for individuals to live in close interdependence ... without excessive conflict.

Elinor Ostrom, 1990, 88-89

The shared labor of caring for the commons is supported by strong cultural understandings and agreements. Member-farmers contribute *dagup* labor before the rainy season. This involves member-farmers working as a whole group to undertake major repairs and rebuilding. Member-farmers then contribute *sarungkar* labor by working in smaller work crews to carry out routine maintenance and repairs.

ⁱ Material on Zanjera from:

E. Walter Coward Jr, 1979, Principles of Social Organization in an Indigenous Irrigation System, *Human Organization*, 38(1), 28-36.

James Kho and Eunice Agsaoay-Sano. 2005. Customary Water Laws & Practices in the Philippines. <http://www.fao.org/legal/advserv/FAOIUCNcs/Philippines.pdf>

Ostrom, Elinor, 1990, *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action*, Cambridge University Press.

Yabes, R., 1994 FMIS Institutional Status of Inventory of Zanjeras in Ilocos Norte, Philippines' in F.M. Lauraya, C.M. Wijayaratna, D.L. Vermillion (eds), *Information Support Systems for Farmer Managed Irrigation*, Selected Proceedings of the Asian Regional Workshop on the Inventory of Farmer Managed Irrigation Systems and Management Information Systems held at October 1992, Tagatay City, Philippines, International Irrigation Management Institute, Colombo, Sri Lanka, pages 101-115.