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IWMI International Water Management Institute BRIEF SERIES

WATER ISSUE BRIEF

ISSUE 5 2010

Putting Research Knowledge into Action

I Water governance

Lack of good governance is one reason for some forms of water scarcity.

Water governance is the set of formal and informal processes through which decisions related to water management are made. Good water governance is primarily about knowing what processes work best in a particular physical and socioeconomic context.

Key messages

- Different systems of water governance are required for different contexts and scales.
- It is often better to incorporate informal systems when reforming water governance programmes than to simply replace them.
- Governance of water resources spanning state or national boundaries needs particularly careful handling to avoid conflict.

The context

IWMI's analysis of water issues affecting the world's farmers in the book, *Water for Food, Water for Life*, cited poor governance as one reason for some forms of water scarcity. In calling for action to face the threat of a catastrophic water crisis, former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, said we must adopt a new spirit of stewardship. "There must be solidarity in international and regional governance; there must be solidarity between sectors and stakeholders; and there must be political will amongst governments to work in good faith both with their neighbors and with their own people," he urged.

IWMI's position on water governance

What exactly is good governance of water? And how does one go about improving poor governance? These are questions that IWMI scientists are currently trying to answer through a variety of projects at scales from community and irrigation-system to river-basin and transboundary levels. For example, its project on Water Governance Benchmarking aims to analyze different forms of governance and provide benchmarks for understanding strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, it aims to help countries assess how well societies are governing their water resources and, if need be, outline ways in which they can define, make and monitor improvements.

"Governance is the framework for the system that you operate in," explains Mark Giordano, Theme Leader of IWMI's research theme on Water and Society. "However, many people confuse water governance and water management. For example, you might say that irrigation works well in a particular country because the system for managing it is effective. But if society placed a higher value on the water for another use – say, fisheries or hydropower – then continuing with 'effective' irrigation might be a mistake, so that's not good governance of water resources. At IWMI, our belief is that good governance requires a transparent system with mechanisms for broad participation, so that a diverse range of stakeholders contribute opinions. Basically, there must be a good process for determining where you want to go and then making inclusive decisions that will get you there."

Action needed

What is clear from IWMI's work in this field is that different systems of water governance are required for different contexts and scales. What works well at transboundary level might not be effective for managing water resources within a small community. Similarly, countries with a low level of economic prosperity and minimal water resources development require a different system of governance to those that are economically advanced with a high degree of water resources development. "Consultants often take a model that works well in the developed world, where there are high levels of economic development and water resources development, and try to use it in the developing world," says Giordano. "They then find it doesn't work within the developing world context."

The Mekong River is an example of where such 'blueprints' of the developed world failed to deliver effective water governance in a developing world context at river-basin scale. For example, in a review

Irrigation in Sri Lanka. Water runs along Mahabage Canal near Kitulgala, Sri Lanka (*Photo Credit*: Karen Conniff, IWMI).

Farmers planting onion seedlings on irrigated farm plots in Ethiopia (*Photo Credit*: Mastewal Degefa, IWMI).

of policies in six countries that rely on the Mekong River for water, IWMI found that Cambodia's draft water law was much more complex than it needed to be. The plan involved a system of water use licences, water resource monitoring and fees. However, levels of water abstraction were low, there were very few conflicts over water allocation and there were minimal hydrological measurements. The scientists also found that thorough and transparent cost-benefit analyses and environmental impact assessments were rarely undertaken in any of the Mekong countries.

Water governance reforms are often unsuitable for the socioeconomic context at community scale too. Community-based water governance is often guided by a collection of informal institutional, socioeconomic and cultural arrangements that have developed over time. Often existing only in oral form, they have frequently been ignored when formal water governance reforms are made. However, IWMI research in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia has shown that informal community-based water law can provide a system of governance that is just as effective as more formal systems. It is often better to incorporate such informal systems when reforming water governance programmes than to simply replace them.

How IWMI can help

Governance of water resources spanning state or national boundaries needs particularly careful handling to avoid conflict. When the Soviet Union broke up in 1990 its vast farms and irrigation systems became fragmented and chaotic. Since 2001, IWMI has worked in the Ferghana Valley, spanning Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, to reinstate systems of governance that promote efficient, equitable and sustainable use of water supplies. An assessment of the impact of the project showed that, in addition to improving water use, conflicts over water resources were eradicated. IWMI hopes to repeat this success with a programme planned to provide advice on water governance in the Krishna Basin, which spans the Indian states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra in South India. Here, there is not enough water to meet the needs of all users and the environment, so effective governance is likely to focus on allocating water resources and formally valuing the environment as a water user in its own right. "Successful water governance is about understanding what works where and why," says Giordano.

Source

This Water Issue Brief is based on the following publications:

Lautze, J.; de Silva, S.; Giordano, M.; Sanford, L. 2011. Putting the cart before the horse: water governance and IWRM. *Natural Resources Forum* 35(1): 1-8.

Merrey, D.J.; Meinzen-Dick, R.; Mollinga, P. 2007. Policy and institutional reform: The art of the possible. In: Molden, D. (ed.) *Water for food, water for life: A comprehensive assessment of water management in agriculture*. London: Earthscan; Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Water Management Institute. Pp.193-232.

van Koppen, B.; Giordano, M.; Butterworth, J. (eds). 2007. *Community-based water law and water resource management reform in developing countries*. Wallingford, UK: CABI. 280p. (Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture Series 5).

Related IWMI Publications

Open access (electronic version freely accessible via the internet)

Bhattarai, M. 2004. *Irrigation Kuznets Curve, governance and dynamics of irrigation development: a global cross-country analysis from 1972 to 1991*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Water Management Institute (IWMI). 53p. (IWMI Research Report 078)

IWMI (International Water Management Institute). 2006. *Water governance in the Mekong region: the need for more informed policy-making*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Water Management Institute (IWMI). 6p. (IWMI Water Policy Briefing 022)

Opoku-Ankomah, Y.; Dembele, Y.; Ampomah, B. Y.; Some, L. 2006. *Hydro-political assessment of water governance from the top-down and review of literature on local level institutions and practices in the Volta Basin*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Water Management Institute (IWMI). 55p. (IWMI Working Paper 111)

Svendsen, M. (ed.). 2005. *Irrigation and river basin management: options for governance and institutions*. Wallingford, UK: CABI; Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Water Management Institute (IWMI). 270p.

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