

Addressing Issues of Equity and Poverty Reduction in South Africa's Water Reforms

Over the last couple of decades Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) has become the defining water policy paradigm across the globe. Drawing on IWRM ideas, South Africa has in many ways been a pioneer in terms of water policy and legislation. The 1998 Water Act was an attempt at getting to grips with the injustices of the past and ensuring a more equitable and sustainable management of the country's water resources. However, it attempted to do too much, too fast. The need is now to concentrate on pragmatic solutions that work, with an emphasis on equity and poverty reduction.

Implementing IWRM in South Africa

Historical legacies

South Africa's history is characterised by colonialism and apartheid, which has left indelible legacies on the socio-economic and geographical make-up of the country. Under the rule of the National Party, the country was divided into segregated homelands. More than 3.5 million people were uprooted and resettled in marginal areas with poor soils, constituting only 13 per cent of South Africa's total land mass. The remaining 87 per cent of more fertile and better situated land was reserved for the white minority. Engineers embarked on a 'hydraulic mission', investing in large-scale infrastructure development to boost agriculture and to ensure water supply to the mines and the urban centres in the white areas. As a result, in rural areas 1.2 per cent of the population uses 95 per cent of the water resources. These apartheid era efforts at carving up the country according to skin hues are still visible in modern-day South Africa.

The success of reforms

The political transition opened up space for reform, including a shake-up of the water legislation. Four years of democratic rule before the National Water Act (NWA) was passed provided ample space for engaging in a major overhaul of all legislation, including the Constitution and the water law. South Africa formulated a new water law in 1998, which was heralded as world-class. Key ideas in the NWA included the 'Reserve' that meant reserving

a basic amount of water for the environment and human needs; the concept of categorising all water users and issuing licences which would facilitate regulation and reallocation and establishing Catchment Management Agencies (CMAs) along basin boundaries. However, putting law into practice has proved cumbersome. Water Allocation Reform was initiated to redress inequities, but it has had few results, if any, to show of actual reallocation taking place. Another phenomenon that occurred at this time was the veritable 'brain drain' as the Ministry of Water Affairs and Sanitation lost many of its most experienced and senior staff to the consultancy sector.

CMAs were widely seen, also by the Water Research Commission, as a fundamental element of IWRM and the new law. CMAs in the new South Africa were to serve a double role of upward and downward accountability. Initially, 19 CMAs were proposed but after 15 years only two were in operation, and hence a revised strategy is to establish nine CMAs that more or less coincide with the nine regional offices. The original proposal created a very complex institutional mosaic at the regional and local levels, with challenging coordination tasks, but without the necessary coordination between different departments taking place at the national level.

Experiences from the Inkomati basin

One of the two functioning CMAs was established in the Inkomati basin. Despite good efforts on the part of the Inkomati CMA (ICMA), there were

problems linked to coordinating with the other regional departments, as well as a lack of trust among the historically disadvantaged individuals who feel that progress on water reform is far too slow. Most reallocation of water happens, in principle, through the land reform, which points to the need to better integrate land and water reforms and provide

the necessary support for land claims beneficiaries. The ICMA has still not been delegated full powers from the national Department of Water and Sanitation, and is thus not yet fully operational. It has recently been merged with the neighbouring catchment to create the Inkomati-Usuthu catchment, as a part of the reform in institutional alignment.

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations outline ways in which issues of poverty reduction and equity could be effectively addressed by water reforms in South Africa.

Overall

- Pragmatism rather than principles need to be the focal point of developmental water resources management for poverty reduction, instead of a wholesale implementation of IUWRM.

At national level

- Focus on pragmatic cost-effective measures that work, rather than wholesale adoption of a particular approach that is over-ambitious, over-sophisticated and unfeasible.
- Recognise the central role of the Department of Water and Sanitation, with other departments, as financier, planner and regulator and also as a provider and maintainer of public water services.
- Articulate a clear vision of water resources management for equitable socio-economic development.
- Appreciate the expertise of the consultancy sector, but make sure it aligns with State goals.
- Considerably improve how the Department of Water and Sanitation reaches out and co-ordinates with other departments, such as rural development, agriculture, mining and energy, local government, etc.
- In the face of the failure of the water allocation reform, put much more emphasis on making reallocation work through simpler and better targeted approaches, with a much stronger emphasis on equity and poverty eradication, including pro-poor infrastructure development.
- Strictly regulate the large-scale users, rather than spending time on licensing all the small-scale ones.

At basin level

- All nine new CMAs should be established and ceded full powers as soon as possible.

Further reading

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Credits

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Participating institutions

Lead Institution: Noragric (Norwegian University of Life Science)
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Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE UK
T +44 (0) 1273 606261 F + 44 (0) 1273 621202 E ids@ids.ac.uk W www.ids.ac.uk
twitter.com/IDS_UK #idspolicy facebook.com/idsuk

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