

Learning from Southern Africa on Fair and Effective Integrated Water Resources Management

Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) has been promoted by international donors, global water organisations and financiers as the answer to the water crisis in the Global South. Yet the experiences of countries in southern Africa including Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe suggests that IWRM has failed to adequately address issues of inequality. More needs to be done to ensure that water reforms are informed by a better understanding of specific political and social country contexts and are driven by the needs of local communities.

What is IWRM?

IWRM is "...a process which promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources, in order to maximise the resultant economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems" (Global Water Partnership, 2000). While nobody will deny the importance of such a holistic and integrated process, it remains abstract at the theoretical and conceptual level, let alone when unfolded on the ground.

Adoption and implementation challenges

While IWRM has raised awareness amongst a host of actors about the need to adopt an integrated approach towards water resources and water supply across various scales, emerging evidence suggests that IWRM has:

- Obscured the political nature of water resources management
- Faced challenges in promoting the management of water along hydrological boundaries. The political, social and historical contexts of river basins and administrative structures have not been fully recognised and as a result factional divisions and conflict that shape local contexts are reinforced and replicated
- Not prioritised the livelihoods of poor women and men
- Failed to take into account wider natural resource management
- Often neglected the importance of living customary laws by which poor women and men achieve their food and water security
- Placed too great an emphasis on outside expert

authority at the expense of local knowledge and management systems

- Rolled back the role of the state in water services provision, often to the detriment of poor people's access to water

Lessons from southern Africa

Politics matter

South Africa's water reforms have been lauded as some of the most progressive in the world. However the process of implementation has been problematic. Reform plans included establishing 19 Catchment Management Agencies (CMAs) to oversee the management of the country's water resources. Yet 15 years later, only 2 of these CMAs have been created and 50 per cent of the water still comes from inter-basin transfers. A lack of political will and coordination nationally, regionally and locally has led to poor levels of trust amongst large- and small-scale users. It has also led to continued poor water access for small-scale and emerging farmers. Many of them also lack awareness of and engagement with water reforms.

IWRM adoption in the mid-1990s in Zimbabwe was donor-driven and focused on those sectors of the economy that could pay for water and not small-scale farmers who needed water. However, support for Zimbabwe's water reforms from international donors was withdrawn following 'fast-track' land reform in 2000 which saw most white farmers forced from their land. While donor funding has partly returned due to the cholera outbreak in 2008 it remains uncertain what part IWRM will play as government struggles with a

highly degraded water infrastructure and a dramatic decline in irrigated agricultural production.

Whose priorities count?

Water reforms in Mozambique were heavily influenced by international donors, particularly the Dutch. Policies and strategies were drafted by a close knit group of policy makers, all trained and supported by Dutch universities and international aid, and with little input from the broader population. In Tanzania, the needs of large-scale users, donors and investors have been prioritised over the rural majority of small-scale users. An analysis of the data from the Wami/Ruvu basin office shows that the 30 largest registered users use 89 per cent of the volumes allocated, and the 930 other users access just 11 per cent. With such inequalities in water use, efforts to tax small-scale users are disproportionate, often leading to a net loss of revenue. In Zimbabwe the focus has been on commercial water with little or no protection for small-scale users, especially women, as they have expanded their irrigated home and stream gardens.

Addressing issues of gender inequality

A central aspect of IWORM was the recognition of the role of women in the planning and management of water resources as set out in Dublin Principle No. 3, established at the International Conference on Water and the Environment in Dublin in 1992. However, the adoption and implementation of IWORM in southern Africa countries has demonstrated its limited understanding of how women use and manage water not just for domestic needs and as subsistence producers, but to generate livelihoods, for small-scale farming and small-scale household production. IWORM's focus on formal water rights and water pricing, does not take account of the fact that in southern Africa women acquire water and land through use and customary rights, not through formal land titles. It also places too great an emphasis on formal networks such as water user associations which often replicate broader societal power imbalances that marginalise women's voices.

Policy implications

- **Politics** – Understanding the specific political, economic and social contexts of countries, which in southern Africa have been shaped by independence struggles and the intersection of water and land reforms, is critical to the success of water management and reform policies.
- **Priorities** – Water policies need to be shaped by the priorities of small-scale users, who are often invisible to donors and policy makers because their rights are enshrined in customary systems. The dominant discourse on water as an economic good to be allocated to 'highest value' also has led to the 'demonisation' of small-scale agriculture without recognising intra-sectoral differentiation and inequality distributions. The depoliticised policy narrative of IWORM has led to the prioritisation of powerful users over more marginal ones.
- **Gender** – Water policies and reforms need to be informed by a more nuanced understanding of how women use, manage and access water and how these are shaped by broader social relations and power imbalances.
- **Long-term development** – Greater effort needs to be targeted at the long-term development of water infrastructure and broadening of access to water. Simply focusing on the adequate management of limited water resources is not sufficient. The focus needs to be on developing locally viable alternatives to top-down blueprints.

Further reading

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Mehta, L. and Movik, S. (2014) 'Flows and Practices: Integrated Water Resources Management (IWORM) in African Contexts' *IDS Working Paper 438*, Brighton: IDS

Credits

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Participating institutions

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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
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