Water Users Associations in Tanzania: lessons for IWRM policy

Water Users Associations in the Great Ruaha River, Tanzania, offer an analytical illustration to why policy-shaped institutions stemming from Integrated Water Resources Management principles may not carry-out their functions according to their design. Explanations for the causes and implications in terms of equity, and environmental and economic sustainability are discussed below.

Water Users Associations (WUAs) are the lowest level of water management in Tanzania. They have been set up gradually over the past ten to fifteen years following reforms in the water sector to apply the Dublin principles and Integrated Water Resources Management - 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" (GWP, 2000). Tanzania is one of the 80% of countries worldwide applying the Dublin principles that emerged in 1992 (Cherelet, 2012 *in* Allouche 2016). The governance model was set-up by the Ministry of Water of Tanzania and follows a nested and decentralised system of governance of water resources, divided into nine watersheds managed by Basin Water Boards (BWB). In the case of the Rufiji basin (the most important basin in Tanzania), international donors and NGOs helping with the process of setting-up a governance structure around water resources are manifold.

Recently WUAs have been heavily funded by external donors as they fit in today's governance trends following principles of decentralisation, participation, and full cost recovery. The objectives which WUAs are designed to fulfil correspondent to those of Equity, Efficiency and Environmental sustainability which are the three pillars of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). WUAs are created seemingly as apolitical and technical arms to implement the principles outlined by IWRM (Derman and Prabhakaran, 2016). Their roles are to conserve and manage water catchments sustainably; increase the usage of water for economic and social improvements and develop sustainable and responsive institutions; resolve conflicts on water use; and lastly monitor water availability and use. WUAs are thus designed to be localised actors implementing the overall responsibility of the Basin Water Board.

The setting-up of WUAs follows fixed guidelines set-up by the Ministry of Water. The process is undertaken by the collaboration between the district facilitators and the basin water board officers (in this study a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) was heavily participating in the WUA set-up process) and includes the following steps: identification of the common water resources and stakeholders; community mobilisation through awareness and public meetings, election of WUA members, training, establishment of the WUA constitution, election of WUA leaders, and finally registration of the organisation. The community is meant to own the process of WUA formation so as to insure its legitimacy and sustainability, however the process is largely directed by governmental and NGOs. In reality, the participative aspect of the WUA formation is very limited due to financial and capacity constraints, as well as the remoteness and spread of areas for which the BWB is responsible. This has resulted in shortcuts in the setting-up procedures of the WUAs such as the unintended exclusion of marginalised people, livestock keepers, as well as the private sector (which generally prefers dealing with higher authorities rather than local institutions, generally presided by successful locally known farmers). Although depending on the same resources, the interests of commercial investors are not always aligned with smaller scale farmers who struggle to access water through formalised channels such as authorised water permits. Small-scale farmers are generally either part

of cooperative schemes, or practice bottom-valley cultivation, dig furrows or use water pumps if they are not renting land from the commercial farms. There is a perceived competition between the needs of the commercial farm and those farming outside of them. Moreover, there is an economic incentive for the BWB to solely allocate and retrieve water permit funds from larger farms, thereby formalising access to water for the private sector and excluding smaller users from formal access.

In this competitive and politicised environment, the role of the WUA should be to define equitably the water allocation for various interests and uses. However, the delegation of these powers is not applied in practice from the BWB. The result is a two track way with one for the large farms (whether private or cooperatives) who deal directly with the basin authority, and another track for smallholders whose traditional / informal allocation practices have not been formally recognised (and some illegalised such as bottom-valley cultivation) due to the practical and financial difficulty of allocating permits to small users. The lack of delegation of powers from the BWB to the WUAs resulted in reducing the coverage of activities undertaken by the WUAs. WUAs have therefore been reshaped into conservation oriented institutions with limited power of action: in fact, they are mostly undertaking activities which are legitimised by traditional practices around water usage, such as the preservation of springs, therefore only undertaking uncontroversial roles and thus failing to address equity issues.

However, it is necessary for the BWB to enable WUAs to carry-out more sensitive activities such as water permit allocation. This delegation of powers would increase the leverage the WUAs have in the face of the private sector's needs. If WUAs are in charge of water permitting, the monitoring would be higher, the WUA could professionalise and recover its costs, and have enough power to include and negotiate with the private sector in order to distribute resources and rights over the resources in a more equitable manner. This may be possible as long as the private sector does not take over the WUA, and that the WUA represents all interests equally. Indeed, to share water resources sustainably, there is a need for a space for all types of water users to plan the allocation of resources.

In conclusion, pre-designed institutions will not always be able to carry the weight of pre-existing power structures. The Great Ruaha River is a case that argues for contextual adaptation: indeed where informal access to water pre-exists, the formalisation of access rights must take into account pre-existing arrangements and not prioritise those who conform with the externally designed system. Newly designed institutions require negotiation and readjustment to the pre-existing power structures in order to fulfil the objectives of equitable, environmentally sustainable and economically efficient water allocation as best as those three objectives can co-exist.

References

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