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Everyday politics of water: From water reform policies to water resource configurations in rural Africa

Teaser

Often to the disappointment of policy makers, water flows in agriculture seldom follow policy directives. Especially given the notoriously capricious nature of water, relatively little is known what happens between government's policies on paper and everyday water management practices within rural waterscapes. This paper zooms in on this 'grey' area, in a concerted attempt to identify and shed light on spaces of negation, tinkering and bricolage and how this affect the implementation of agricultural water policies.

This policy brief is based on empirical research in four African countries which have implemented institutional reform processes during the last two decades. The policy brief concludes with an attempt to formulate three concrete suggestions that could help in revisiting the current policies within the agricultural water realm in the hope it will contribute to redressing historical inequities.

Keywords

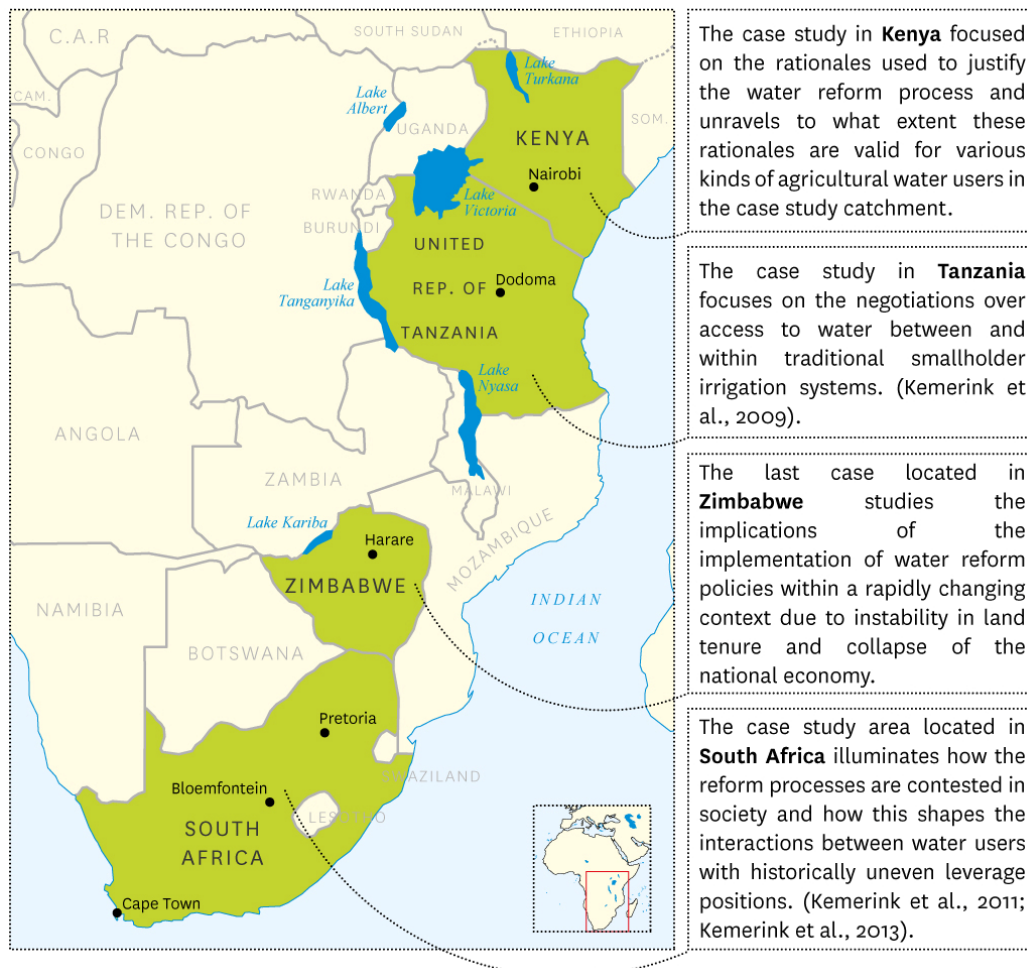
Everyday politics, agriculture, water reforms, institutional bricolage, water infrastructure, Africa.

Introduction

In their very essence (public) policies are always based on simplified models of reality, likewise policies related to agricultural water management. This creates tension between the inevitable simplicity of policies on paper and inherently complex practice that they aim to steer (Mosse, 2004; Peck and Theodore, 2010; Bourblanc, 2012). As a result, and often to the disappointment of policy makers, water flows in agriculture seldom follow policy directives (Van der Kooij et al., 2013; Kemerink, 2015). In response, much attention is paid on 'getting the policies right' in an attempt to overcome this disjuncture rather than trying to understand what happens to, with, and through water that escapes stipulated plans, prescribed rules of control, designed pipes and canals, and visible decision-making arenas. Especially given the notoriously capricious nature of water, relatively little is known what happens between government's policies on paper and everyday water management practices within rural waterscapes. This Policy Brief zooms in on this 'grey' area, in a concerted attempt to identify and shed light on spaces of negation, tinkering and bricolage.

Methodology

This research used the extended case study method to analyse four catchments in different southern African countries that all went through extensive water reform processes during the last two decades, namely Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Each case focuses on different facets of the reform process in order to thoroughly comprehend the working and implications of the shift in the policy approach that took place since the 1980s.



¹ This policy brief is based on Kemerink (2015), chapter 7.

Results and Discussion

The emerging water resource configurations

The water reform processes presented, shared albeit diverging political ambitions but similar policy objectives, namely; to provide security in access to water users; to decentralize responsibilities and include water users in decision-making processes; and to encourage efficient use of water by charging fees for service provision. Data shows that the water reforms have contributed to similar processes of social differentiation that have shaped the water resource configurations within each of the study catchments, mainly benefitting historically advantaged actors in the river basins.

The generic, decontextualized outcome of the reform processes in the four case study countries is thus that it contributes to processes of social differentiation that mainly benefits historically advantaged water users who, at least partly, have individual control over access to water and who produce their crops primarily for the commercial market. With a few exceptions in Tanzania (Kemerink et al., 2009) and Kenya (Kemerink et al., 2016), it should be noted that within the study catchments the outcomes of the water reform processes are therefore largely skewed along racial lines since the historically advantaged large-scale commercial farmers are from European descent, while the marginalized small-scale farmers have indigenous African roots. Moreover, the reforms have gendered implications within the researched waterscapes since those who managed to tweak the implementation process in their favour are primarily male farmers. Based on the above I conclude that in all four cases the water policy interventions have changed the water resource configurations within waterscapes studied under this research but in a particular yet limited way. It seems that institutions can thus, at least partially, be crafted through policy interventions. However, the question remains to what extent and how this happens and, perhaps more importantly, why the mainstream approach in water policy reforms led to these particular outcomes? Let me start with answering the question how the mainstream public policies interact with and alters institutions that govern access to and control over water resources within waterscapes.

Policies lost in translation?

In none of the case study areas the policy objectives have been fully achieved and in most cases it has sparked unexpected developments with sometimes adverse outcomes. This points to a more complex and dynamic process than straightforwardly implementing a public policy and enforcing externally designed rules.

In water reforms processes not only the policy itself but also the approaches and instruments selected for the implementation of the paper policy play a role in determining the outcomes of this dynamic process. For instance, the choice to use existing white dominated irrigation boards as a starting point to establish racially mixed water user associations in South Africa has greatly compromised the inclusiveness of these associations (Kemerink et al., 2013) and the external pressure to use quotas for appointing women in the water management committees did little to address the structural causes of gender inequity in the case study in Tanzania (Kemerink et al., 2009). Moreover, government officials tasked to facilitate the implementation of water reform processes at local level are actively involved in framing and interpreting the policies according to their own perspectives and experiences and as such steer the translation of the policies from paper to the local reality within the waterscapes

Historically advantaged users have tweaked the reform processes in such a way that it did not only increase their own security to water, but also gave them instruments to restrict the water use of other, less advantaged, users within the catchments by claiming the hydrological boundaries as 'natural' jurisdiction of the newly established water user associations (Kemerink et al., 2013; Kemerink et al., 2016). They manage to keep control over the agenda of the new collaborative platform at river basin level; redirecting the council away from tangible activities directly related to water resources development and management, and stalling discussions on the more contentious issue of water allocations within the basin.

Nevertheless, hegemony is never absolute and thus historically disadvantaged water users also have agency. These water users as well use the water reform process as an opportunity to contest established authority and renegotiate existing institutions that govern water resources. Moreover, the water users form relationships based on use of other (natural) resources, vicinity, family ties, employment, clientele, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, political association, nationality and so on that make categorizations like 'community' or 'emerging farmers' or 'the poor' for policy and/or research purposes problematic, because these labels do not capture the real complexity of somebody's social identity nor reflect their everyday struggles.

I conclude that, rather than through externally designed crafting processes steered by policy makers, the water reform policies have altered the institutions that govern the water resource configurations through complex and uneven processes of bricolage (see Cleaver, 2002, for a detailed discussion on the concept of institutional bricolage). This has led to unintended outcomes and thus to a disjuncture between what is written on paper and what emerges within the waterscapes. I therefore argue that the policies have to some extent been lost in translation somewhere within the implementation process. However, the similarity in the outcome of the reform processes in terms of water resource configurations points to a more structural rather than random process.

The question remains why the water reform policies in four different countries were framed within normative understandings that aligned with those of historically advantaged actors, allowing them to strengthen their position within the waterscapes, despite progressive political ambitions to redress the colonial legacy, at least in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Connecting policies with the outcomes

The water reform policies are largely constructs produced by a particular epistemic community within a decontextualized setting rather than an outcome of rigorous formulation processes at the national levels in which policy narratives are verified and policy models are scrutinized. National governments thus do not have full control within policy arenas, yet perhaps even more worrying, they seem to have internalized market mechanisms as the norm for distributing water and water related rights, risks, responsibilities and income.

The water reforms largely followed a neoliberal normative frame that catered for market oriented producers who have access to hydraulic infrastructure that allow them to rigorously control the water flows, excluding the far majority of citizens who rely on communally owned rustic infrastructure that does not allow for full control of water or on rainfed subsistence farming. The political nature of the marginalizing process initiated by the adoption of this policy model has been concealed by 'progressive' indicators, or perhaps I should rather use the term vindicators leaving out the most relevant, and thus most political, barometer, namely the actual (re)distribution of water and water related incomes in society. This research thus shows a disjuncture between the policy objectives and the selected policy instruments to achieve these objectives since large parts of the water legislation enacted under the reform processes is not attainable for the majority of the agricultural water users because they lack access to land and (adequate) hydraulic infrastructure.

Once ratified, public policies are not easily replaced or abandoned and especially when they are aligned with the interests of the elite and rolled out through seemingly neutral or even 'progressive' policy models. For instance, South Africa recently try to reformulate implementation strategies and it proves difficult to change the course of the reforms as the predisposition is deeply rooted in the policy model on which these reforms are built. I must therefore also conclude that policies only to a limited extent can contribute to progressive societal change, especially in this neoliberal era.

Recommendations for policy practice

I would like to suggest three points that could help in revisiting the current policies within the agricultural water realm in the hope it will contribute to redressing historical inequities, namely:

1. The *'political'* needs to be brought into the policy making process. This refers to embracing the political nature of reform processes and making this explicit within the formulation, implementation and evaluation of public policies. This includes, amongst others, a need for a more profound and interdisciplinary understanding of policy issues, explicitly stating the assumptions made for the required simplification of reality, making explicit political choices and formulating realistic policy objectives, dissecting biased policy models and their origins, carefully selecting policy instruments and implementation approaches, and monitoring and adjusting policy interventions by measuring the objectives rather than the means of the policy reform. This is perhaps difficult to achieve within the existing status-quo as it requires sufficient human resources, both in terms of quantity and quality, within national and local government agencies, something in itself that is highly political. Since the epistemologies and interests of scientists and private consultants are not necessarily aligned with those of governments, outsourcing these activities is also problematic. Perhaps a starting point could be to focus on the next generation by revising educational programmes so that graduates, including future government employees, are better prepared to guide, monitor and respond to the formulation and implementation of reform processes. For water related programmes this could for instance

entail that, beyond teaching subjects related to physics, engineering and planning, students will be exposed to the fundamentals of political sciences, learn how to critically evaluate governance frameworks, practise policy analysis methods and develop conflict mediation skills with the emphasis on social inclusion. This requires breaking away from a positivist epistemology still dominant in most water related programmes and focusing on nurturing critical thinkers, capable to reflect on their own viewpoints and practices.

2. The *'context'* needs to be brought into the policy making process. This starts with recognizing that policies, just like institutions, are the outcome of uneven processes of bricolage in which existing arrangements and styles of thinking from other domains or other localities are pieced together into 'new' policy documents. In other words, policies are not 'holy grails' but build on vested interests and ad-hoc improvisation and as such might, or might not, or might partly, achieve the set objectives. Moreover, policy on paper requires a generalized and simplified model of reality, while they are implemented within comprehensive, diverse and continuously changing contexts. Reforms can thus not be obtained through single and straightforward policy interventions but require profound processes of trial and adjustment. This means space is needed within the implementation processes to engage with the multifaceted, plural and contested nature of society and requires flexible and sensitive approaches that are guided by, and respond to, actual outcomes (e.g. the distribution of water and water related incomes) rather than lists of predefined tortuous indicators. It also requires policy makers and implementers who are aware of their role as bricoleurs, actively using both policy rhetoric and existing institutions if and where appropriate and critically reflecting on their own practices. Considering socially embedded institutions and practices is especially crucial when engaging water users in decision making processes, but it also applies for other policy interventions. After all, injudiciously enforcing water use permits and payments for water use, because the policy narratives appear coherent and consistent on paper, might not be the best implementation strategy. Instead policy makers could scrutinize how these measures unfold within a particular catchment depending on the existing water resource configurations and then assess if licensing and/or charging fees accomplish what they aimed for. The necessity for this modest approach becomes even more evident realizing that in most catchments policy makers know little about the actual available water and the amount of water already in use. Furthermore, such a dynamic and context-sensitive approach requires policies that go beyond empty buzzwords and policy makers who are cautious with using dichotomized demographic categories such as rich/poor, man/women, commercial/subsistence, black/white, irrigators/rainfed farmers, and urban/rural. Within the agricultural water realm tracking physical changes in waterscapes through widely available satellite images and critically analyzing the causes and implications of these transformations can aid policy makers to understand how water users respond to the reform processes and how it affects the water resource configurations.
3. The *'physical'* needs to be brought (back) into the policy making process. This refers to recognizing the 'agency' of non-human nature, including ecological processes and hydraulic infrastructures, in shaping policy outcomes. This starts with the need to gain more knowledge of the physical environment in which the policy interventions will take place, amongst others the availability of and variability in water resources, the main soil properties, the state of the aquatic ecosystems and the capacities and locations of dams and water intake structures. This might entail investment in studies to acquire this data and monitor changes during the policy implementation. Remote sensing might be useful for assessing the water resources available within ungauged catchments. Furthermore, it would require not treating water resources in isolation but explicitly linking it with other natural resources and spatial planning processes in general. This calls for coherent strategies and multi-sectoral management structures across policy domains such as land tenure, water, agriculture, forestry, environment and spatial planning. For example, it would mean integrating water, land and agrarian reform policies and discontinuing the establishment of new platforms that are geared towards dealing with a single resource such as water users associations. And perhaps more importantly, it means shifting away from the neoliberal inclined mainstream public policy approach with its partial focus on institutional processes towards a more comprehensive and inclusive approach that, amongst others, incorporates technological policy instruments such as government investment in, or subsidies for, the development of hydraulic infrastructure for marginalized groups, especially in countries that need to redress a colonial legacy.

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