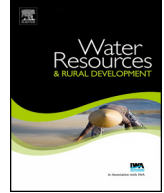




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Decentralised water governance in Zimbabwe: Disorder within order



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ABSTRACT

The Decentralised Water reform process in Zimbabwe has largely been informed by the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) process based on the 1992 Dublin Principles on Water. The attempt to reform one sector (water), under the IWRM rubric, when other key sectors are in disarray (agriculture, energy) and when social and government institutions, in general, are not functioning as they should, made it more complicated. The decentralised water reform process, with support from a number of donors, was perceived to be a technical process which would result in better water management in Zimbabwe. The research in Zimbabwe, however, shows that instead of establishing order within the water sector, the reform process has largely been disorderly since it downplays the political nature of the water reform process. In attempting to change the water legislation, the reform brought out the different and competing interests on water. The economic crisis, the contested land reform process that ensued, resulted in disorder which benefited those who are politically connected. This paper contributes to the scholarship on the need to have a better political economy approach to development interventions such as water reform as they have to play out in political, social and economic contexts which will impact on human livelihoods.

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1. Introduction

We describe how the decentralised water reform in Zimbabwe in the late 1990s resulted in disorder within order. The political instrumentalisation of disorder is the 'process by which political actors in Africa seek to maximise their returns on the state of confusion, uncertainty and sometimes even chaos, which characterises most African polities' (Chabal and Daloz, 1999, p. xix). Although decentralisation was aimed at producing order within the water sector, the political, economic and social context resulted in disorder. The order was intended to be brought about by the water reform process that began in 1998, when Zimbabwe embarked on one of the most progressive water reform processes within the Southern African region, which culminated in the creation of the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) and the passing of the Water Act in 1998 (Government of Zimbabwe, 1998). The ZINWA Act of 1998 was specifically meant for setting up ZINWA as an organisation responsible for implementing the Water Act and raising charges for the use of water. The Water Act provided for the development, management and utilisation of water resources in Zimbabwe. The Act also established catchment and sub-catchment councils, which are mandated to issue water permits. The water reform was initiated by the Government of Zimbabwe with the support of the Government of the Netherlands, Germany, United Kingdom, Norway and Sweden. The primary motivation for water reforms was the need to address inequities in accessing water, which became very evident during the drought of 1991–1992. The drought spurred the establishment of a committee on water reform, which donors saw as an opportunity to introduce Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) based on the 1992 Dublin Principles on Water (Manzungu, 2004).¹ The IWRM structure, it was perceived, would lead to positive outcomes. In other words, structure would help shape the agency of the actors (Chabal, 2009). The Integrated Water Resources Management is defined as "a process which promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources, in order to maximize the resultant economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems" (Global Water Partnership, 2000; Jonker, 2007). Decentralisation is a key attribute for IWRM which advocates for management of water resources from the local sub-catchments, to catchments and river basin levels.

2. Research methods

Following a review of pertinent literature, we conducted key informant interviews in Zimbabwe, in conjunction with the Broadening Access and Strengthening Market Input Systems (BASIS) Project and the Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF) Limpopo Water Governance Project. We engaged also in a participatory research process, in which we attended meetings of the Water User Boards in the Mazowe and Mupfure catchment areas.

3. Chabal's thesis and water reform in Zimbabwe

We draw upon Chabal's thesis that Africa Works and that disorder can be used as a political instrument (*cf.* Booth and Kelsall, 2010), which nevertheless produces outcomes. Chabal (2009) argues that Africa has its own development trajectory, which should not be seen as mimicking the Western world development trajectory or its theoretical underpinning. Chabal (2009) further notes that 'the transplantation of the Western state has failed to take root, implying that it was the wrong model' (p. 6). Despite the defaults and shortcomings of the water reform process in Zimbabwe, it resulted in the re-allocation of water across the unequal power, age and gender differentiated social landscapes. Indeed, Zimbabwe today boasts of having managed to deracialise access to water, unlike South Africa, which is still caught up in apartheid cobwebs (Kemerink et al., 2011). However, this achievement was secured at a great price.²

¹ This should not be seen as unique to Zimbabwe. Water reforms in Africa generally have been externally driven, which has caused implementation challenges (Fatch et al., 2010; Jonker, 2007; Manzungu et al., 2012; Merrey, 2008).

² Currently, only about 30% of the water in reservoirs is being used for irrigation, due largely to the lack of irrigation infrastructure, caused by inadequate investment and maintenance during the past twelve years (Manzungu et al., 2012).

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