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# Interactive institutional design and contextual relevance: Water user groups in Turkey, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan

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## ABSTRACT

Institutional design for water governance assumes the possibility of intentional introduction of policy innovations into the new contexts or amending existing institutions. Such institutional design has been common in the water sector and examples include participatory irrigation management, integrated water resources management plans and water privatization programmes. With increasing application of institutional design across various political, socio-economic and cultural settings, the importance of the context is increasingly accepted. The key question is therefore how to reconcile institutional design and contextual variability. Based on our research on the introduction of water user associations in parts of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, we conclude that a top-down institutional design implemented nation-wide and not involving multiple stakeholders and engaging their views, is doomed to failure. As an alternative, we offer *interactive institutional design*, which is based on collaborative approaches to institutional design and treats design as works of assemblage.

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## 1. Introduction

International efforts on institutional design for better natural resources management are ubiquitous today. At the same time, reconciliation of institutional design and the specificity of a policy context remains a challenge (Brugnach and Ingram, 2012; Lejano and Shankar, 2013). With the growing homogeneity promoted by policy models spreading across the globe, calls for contextual relevance acquire ever-greater urgency and importance. We discuss three vignettes from our research on water user associations (WUA) in Turkey, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. In all three countries, international organizations, such as the World Bank (WB), the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) have been important drivers behind the introduction of WUAs. Our goal with this analysis is to illustrate the pitfalls of externally driven institutional design, and discuss possible ways of dealing with the complexity involved in these cases.

We argue that conventional approaches to institutional design are ineffective in inducing socio-ecological change, but remain dominant in the circles of donors, policy-makers and international consultants. The power of universal models as 'panaceas', assumptions of the linearity of the policy process, rationality of actors and the possibility of a consensus between various actors are the major challenges confronting policy-makers engaged in conventional institutional design.

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Relying on the concepts of collaboration and assemblages, we propose an alternative approach to institutional design. This paper consists of six sections. Section 2 discusses the conventional literature on institutional design and WUAs and outlines our methods. Section 3 presents three vignettes on institutional design around WUAs in the country contexts. Section 4 provides a comparative discussion of the vignettes, and Section 5 advances the idea of *interactive institutional design* as an alternative to conventional design. Section 6 summarizes and concludes the paper.

## 2. Institutional design and contextual relevance

One defining characteristic of water policy reform in countries such as Turkey and those in Central Asia and the Caucasus is an externally driven reform agenda dominated by donors, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and consultants (e.g. [Rahaman and Varis, 2008](#); [Mukhtarov, 2013](#)). These transnational actors ‘recycle’ models used in other countries to new countries with little or no prior consideration of the context ([Ingram, 2013](#)). Much has been written about such models, which acquire a life of their own (e.g. [Molle, 2008](#)). The emerging literature on water governance has emphasized that ‘panaceas’ do not work (e.g. [Ingram and Lejano, 2010](#); [Pahl-Wostl et al., 2012](#)), and that ‘context matters’ ([Brugnach and Ingram, 2012](#); [Sehring, 2009](#)). However, policy scientists still need to figure out ways to achieve a context-sensitive institutional design. [Lejano and Shankar \(2013: 99\)](#) call this task as devising a ‘fit’ between a policy model and a policy context, and declare the “exercise of describing mechanisms of fit, in concept and practice, to be an important research agenda”. Below we discuss the literature on the joint consideration of institutional design and contextual sensitivities in the area of irrigation management.

### 2.1. Institutional design and policy context

Institutional design is a relatively recent stream of new institutionalism and seeks to study ways to amend the formal and informal rules of interaction in a society ([DiMaggio and Powell, 1991](#); [Ostrom, 1990, 2005](#)). [Alexander \(2005: 213\)](#) defined institutional design as “the devising and realization of rules, procedures, and organizational structures that will enable and constrain behaviour and action so as to accord with held values, achieve desired objectives, or execute given tasks”. In this paper, we understand context in its multiple forms such as “the political and institutional contexts, the cultural and economic contexts as well as the biophysical and geographical contexts” ([Özerol et al., 2013a](#)). In the field of water resources planning, the criticism of conventional institutional design is based on the argument of strong context-relevance of natural resource management ([Brugnach and Ingram, 2012](#)). [Pahl-Wostl et al. \(2012: 25\)](#) summarized this criticism as follows, “(t)o promote progress, expert voices have stressed the need for a radical paradigm shift to avoid the failures arising from not paying sufficient attention to complex interdependencies, human behaviour and social institutions”.

Whether defined as “policy adaptation” ([Ingram and Schneider, 1990](#)), “policy translation” ([Freeman, 2009](#); [Mukhtarov, 2014](#)), “policy re-design” ([Bobrow and Dryzek, 1997](#)) or “implementation as evolution” ([Pressman and Wildawsky, 1979](#)) institutional design is always contingent on the policy context. However, the debate has raged since the 1980s whether such modification is the result of poor design from ‘the top’ or the courtesy of poor implementation ‘on the bottom’. Some authors have emphasized the role of the state and policy designers in policy success or failure ([Pressman and Wildawsky, 1979](#)), and others emphasized the importance of street-level bureaucracy in modifying designs and thus causing success and failure ([Lipsky, 1980](#)).

### 2.2. Institutional design and irrigation management transfer

In post-Soviet countries, irrigation reform is often linked to the changes of political regimes or government priorities for farm restructuring and privatization of previously state owned farms. The process of creating and developing WUAs originate from the ethos of irrigation management transfer (IMT), and is intended to devolve responsibility for operation and management of irrigation infrastructure from public agencies to non-governmental or private institutions ([Garces-Restrepo et al., 2007](#)). If such organizations are non-governmental, they are often called water user associations or water user groups, and involve farmers in maintaining infrastructure and water distribution at the level of on-farm irrigation canals. The irrigation reform, which targets active participation of farmers in irrigation water management alongside the devolution of responsibilities over infrastructure, is called participatory irrigation management (PIM) ([Garces-Restrepo et al., 2007](#)). Water user associations are introduced for a variety of reasons, some of which include, taking off the financial burden from the state, putting in place democratic institutions, and improving the state of infrastructure through direct engagement of water users, who are expected to take greater care of the systems once they bear the costs of repair and maintenance. Finally, there is much external support to WUAs in the form of grants, loans, advice and career incentives from donor organizations which makes this model attractive to national policy elites ([Molle, 2008](#); [Rap, 2006](#)). In this paper we are concerned with both IMT and PIM and view them as closely intertwined ([Garces-Restrepo et al., 2007](#)).

The scholars focused on IMT have emphasized the importance of the policy context in the success or failure of IMT (e.g. [Wegerich, 2010](#)). Among important factors necessary for IMT to be successful, [Vermillion and Sagardoy \(1999: 12\)](#) mention the local capacity to take over management, support from the bureaucracies and local elites, irrigation infrastructure in good shape and designed in a way manageable by smaller organizations such as WUAs. [Meinzen-Dick et al. \(1997\)](#) also mention physical, technical, policy and legislation as well as social and economic factors as influencing the success or failure of transfer. The IMT literature states that if the context is not appropriate, then IMT should be either deferred until the context has been improved, or if not possible, IMT policy for this particular scheme should be dismissed (e.g. [Vermillion and Sagardoy, 1999](#)). Similarly,

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