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In semi-arid parts of Southern Africa, such as Namibia, water resources are already under pressure, and things will get tougher in future as the climate becomes hotter, drier and less predictable. To help manage water resources, since the 1990s governments across semi-arid Africa have introduced decentralised water reforms.

Decentralisation aims to shift responsibility for water provision and management across levels so that local actors are also involved. In reality, though, decentralisation has not had the desired impacts of inclusive water governance and effective participation.

This is because decentralisation efforts have paid insufficient attention to strengthening the capacity of local actors. Lessons from ASSAR's research in rural villages in north-central Namibia show how decentralised water governance is not effective without proper support for citizens.

Expecting local management and participation without providing support on how to participate can actually make it more challenging for vulnerable communities to access and manage water.

HOW DECENTRALISATION WORKS IN NAMIBIA'S RURAL AREAS

- Since 1997 Namibia has followed a community-based water management strategy which is implemented through the Directorate of Water Supply and Sanitation Coordination (DWSSC) in the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry (MAWF). This means rural communities are responsible for managing and paying for water services.

- In rural communities Water Point Associations run and maintain water points. Locally elected committees, the Water Point Committees, head the associations. Committee members are responsible for opening taps and collecting user fees at water points. The associations are expected to devise their own rules for sharing the costs and benefits of water with support from Water Supply Extension Officers.

- Decentralisation has led to increased participation in water management at the village level but this management strategy remains ineffective. Unfortunately, it has created a situation where many community water points (standpipes) are closed and poor people cannot afford to get water from private taps. When taps shut down villagers have to rely on hand-dug wells to draw free water during the dry season.

WITHOUT SUPPORT VILLAGERS STRUGGLE TO MANAGE WATER

- Water Point Committees consist of volunteers. Most of the volunteers have high levels of illiteracy and live in poverty. They find it difficult to balance their water point responsibilities with doing what they need to survive, like farming. In many villages people were unable to continue volunteering at the water point and water points had to close.

- Water Point Committees don't have the technical and managerial skills to run water points properly. They do not have enough funds for maintenance and logistics.

- When infrastructure breaks volunteers often don't know who they should report this to, or don't have the skills to make repairs themselves. Often, government response is slow.

- A large number of participants said they wanted to voice their concerns with government about water issues but did not know what communication lines they might use to do so.



DECENTRALISATION DOES NOT LEAD TO PARTICIPATION OF EVERYONE

- Most participants in ASSAR's study in Onesi Constituency, Omusati Region, said they had not been part of identifying priorities for water use and allocation in their villages.
- Priorities of local leaders determine the extent of inclusion of the poor and marginalised people, such as ethnic minorities, who are seldom explicitly considered and integrated into water management and village decision-making processes.
- Participation can be tokenistic. While members of local communities can take part in Water Point Committees this participation has not translated into policy influence.
- If local capacity is not sufficiently acknowledged then water resource decentralisation can lead to increased social differentiation. For example, those who are unable to afford a basic fee cannot access water from the standpipes.

EFFECTIVE WATER GOVERNANCE REQUIRES CLEAR DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITIES AND PROPER PLATFORMS FOR COORDINATION

- Centralised decision-making and national priority setting still dominates in Namibia's water sector. Regional stakeholders feel they are not very involved in contributing to the policies and/or regulations enforced by the national government.
- While NamWater, a parastatal, is responsible for bulk water supply, the Directorate of Water Supply and Sanitation Coordination (DWSSC) is responsible for construction and maintenance of water infrastructure in rural areas. There are not enough constituency DWSSC Extension Officers to provide information and support to rural communities. This results in scant follow up and bridging between regional and local actions.
- Water Point Committee members report to DWSSC regional offices for major repairs that can't be fixed locally. But the user fees the committee collects are paid to NamWater to cover some of the water costs. Because of these overlapping functions, holding the authorities accountable for repairs is difficult.
- Regional water decisions often have to wait for funding sign-off at the national level which slows down operations.

WITHOUT SUPPORT LOCAL ACTORS FAIL TO REAP BENEFITS OF DECENTRALISED WATER GOVERNANCE

Namibia's experience with decentralisation over the past 20 years offers valuable insights into how a push for local governance of water does not necessarily address the needs of local people, unless they have enough capacity to effectively participate in that governance.

Research shows that people living in rural villages in Namibia's Onesi Constituency, in the Omusati Region, are struggling to manage and access water under the current community-based management model. In the villages water point associations, headed by a locally elected committee, run and maintain water points. The committee works voluntarily and collects fees from people for water usage.

Numerous challenges related to a lack of financial support and the absence of technical skills and ability to get assistance from higher tiers of government have led to many of these committee members relinquishing their positions, or going on strike. Many of the water points have closed or are not functional.

"People are now applying for private offtake, where you can take your water from the mainline to your house," said a respondent from the Directorate of Water Supply and Sanitation Coordination (DWSSC).

"We are now in the process of setting up a way to remove those water point committees. Because right now, the committees are not working at all. They are on strike. Some they are working, some are not working. Because they want to be paid."

The ASSAR study shows that although participation of local actors is a key tenet of decentralisation, in reality this participation can be tokenistic or non-existent. People in the Onesi Constituency said that oftentimes those in positions of power, such as village headmen and their assistants, participated in decision-making around water, excluding the voices of the most vulnerable. They were not aware of the communication lines they might use to raise their concerns and bemoaned the lack of opportunities to meet with leaders to air their grievances.

Decentralisation is a complex process. This example from Namibia illustrates the pitfalls of pursuing decentralisation and participatory governance without investing adequately in strengthening the capacity of local actors. When not equipped with the knowledge, financial resources and technical support from upper tiers of government local actors struggle to effectively manage water resources. Decentralised governance of water resources, in itself, will not be effective unless support is provided to strengthen capacity of local actors.

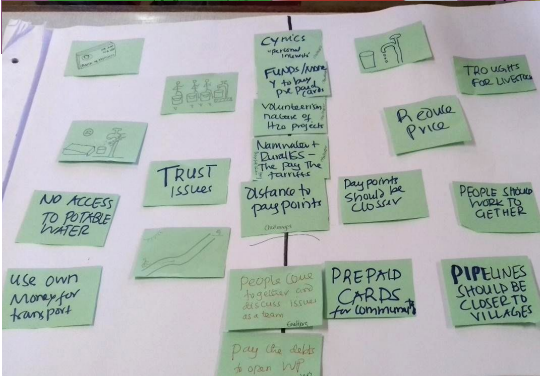
IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- Governments need to find appropriate and inclusive ways to manage a resource as scarce and susceptible to change as water, especially since future climate conditions are set to put more pressure on water resources.
- Decision-makers need to understand the unique context of each community. There needs to be a clear understanding of all actors who have a stake in water governance and a plan for finding a balance between supporting engagement and empowerment. Stakeholder mapping and analysis of where power lies can be used to shift towards more integrated planning among groups with different interests.
- Participatory processes demand inclusion. But in reality they often exclude significant groups of people. Policymakers and practitioners need to pay attention to social differentiation and who is able or unable to participate in governance, with particular consideration for the poor and marginalised. This requires an understanding of how factors like gender, age, wealth, education level, and ethnicity impact people's ability to take part.

- If the capacity of local actors is not carefully assessed and strengthened before introducing decentralised reforms, these reforms will have a high chance of failing.
- Technical solutions to adaptation problems often have an important role to play. But to be implemented successfully they need to be paired with effective participation from local actors. It is important to understand the feasibility of technical solutions, how the local context affects their uptake, and how to enable people to use them properly.
- New approaches to governance are needed to support effective participation of different groups that might contribute to more sustainable use of water resources. Such approaches require the creation of platforms that enable people, especially those typically excluded, to have their say about decisions that affect them and allow for input on whether solutions to water challenges meet their expectations. For people who take part in managing water resources to do so successfully they need to be supported and empowered to fulfill their responsibilities.

PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL: UNDERSTANDING DAY-TO-DAY WATER ACCESS IN USE IN THREE VILLAGES IN ONESI CONSTITUENCY

To better understand how people living in rural villages in north-central Namibia access water and find out whether or not they take part in local water governance, ASSAR researchers used participatory research methods. These methods play an important role in enhancing participants' understanding of issues, creating a positive learning environment that prompts people to imagine creative solutions to water governance challenges. They help researchers to understand local people's perspectives and the complexities of governance in terms of forms of participation, perceived influence, and the capacity of citizens to participate in water governance at the community level.



GOVERNANCE WALK¹

In this exercise participants responded to a set of questions with yes or no answers about whether they are involved in identifying priorities for water use and allocation, have an opportunity to influence policy, and have any strategy to get government to consider their concerns and get things done. This exercise highlighted how people most involved in identifying priorities tend to have individual positions of power in existing governance structures. They were members of water point committees, village headmen, or part of the tribal authority.

STORY WITH A GAP²

To help participants visualise the steps to a better water future researchers asked them to use pictures to fill in the gaps between their current and future scenarios. This exercise prompts people to translate a negative situation into a positive one. It highlights the steps and resources needed to make the shift, along with the associated challenges. For example, a 'before' scene could be broken taps with a long queue of people waiting for water. People can then discuss why this happened and what steps the local community might take to create an 'after' scene where the taps work and people don't have to wait for ages to get water.

¹ Koelle, B., Oettle, N and Parring, S. 2014. Experiential Learning for Adaptation, Facilitation Cards. Indigo development and change, Cape Town.

² Narayan, D. and Srinivasan, L., 1994. Participatory development tool kit: training materials for agencies & communities. Banco Mundial. The World Bank.



LIFE OF A WATER POINT COMMITTEE VOLUNTEER IN ONESI CONSTITUENCY

BY LEONIE JOUBERT

Every morning, Maria Petrus* needs to be at the communal water tap in her village in Onesi constituency, in northern Namibia. She will unlock the tap for about two hours while her fellow villagers collect their day's water. Later that afternoon, she will be back for another two hours, overseeing more water collection.

The 46-year-old is a member of the village's water point committee, made up of volunteers. She will keep a record of how much water individual households collect over the course of each month — there are about 70 households in her village — and, come month-end, the committee's secretary will collect payment for the water.

To do this job, Petrus and her fellow committee volunteers must be able to read and write, and they must be in good enough health to get to the site each day. Volunteering comes with its own risks: it can keep volunteers from their crops and livestock, the bread-and-butter of this farming-dependent community. They'll also have to handle the difficulties that arise when people arrive late to collect water, after having walked long distances to get their daily allocation. Or they'll have to deal with possible conflict when cash-strapped families — often their friends or neighbours — can't service their debt.

In a village like Petrus's, the water point committee is made up of about seven members, who need a range of skills. Researchers with ASSAR found that many committee volunteers responsible for managing water distribution and payments did not have the skills, time or capacity to do the job effectively.

* Not her real name.

ABOUT ASSAR

ASSAR uses insights from multiple-scale, interdisciplinary work to improve the understanding of the barriers, enablers and limits to effective, sustained and widespread climate change adaptation out to the 2030s.

Working in seven countries in Africa and South Asia, ASSAR's regional teams research socio-ecological dynamics relating to livelihood transitions, and the access, use and management of land and water.

One of four consortia under the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA), ASSAR generates new knowledge of climate change hotspots to influence policy and practice and to change the way researchers and practitioners interact.

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This briefing note is based on a forthcoming research article by ASSAR researchers Salma Hegga, Irene Kunamwene, and Gina Ziervogel.



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