Polycentric Governance and Irrigation Reform in Kenya

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Abstract

In Kenya, as in many developing countries, centralized control over water resources was implemented to improve agricultural productivity. By the 1980s, however, Kenya's postindependence policies of bureaucratic control were in disarray, and conflicts over water use were common. More recently, Kenya has embarked on a series of reforms that create a polycentric approach to water governance, in which decision making about water resources is shared among multiple, overlapping local, regional, and national authorities. Drawing on archival and field research, we examine these reforms in their historic context and argue that whereas centralized control was poorly adapted to the Kenyan context, polycentric governance is better suited to Kenya's variable social and ecological conditions and the available resources of its administrative agencies.

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