

Multiple uses of water resources in the CRV: Lake Abijata (saline wetland and sanctuary to birds) (left); Commercial winery farm (middle); commercial floriculture (right) (Photo: Amare B, 2020)

Water Governance Problems in the Central Rift Valley, Ethiopia

Policy Messages

- There is need to accelerate the approval and implementation of the newly revised water use policy to accommodate the emerging uses and interests of the different actors.
- Due attention is required to harmonize laws and practices of customary institutions with statutory laws in order cater for the needs and interests of women.
- There is a need for collaborative engagements among both inter and cross-sectoral institutions in order to avoid mandate overlaps and confusions in water resource governance, considering hydrological and administrative boundaries at scale.
- Contested voices in water governance narratives need policy attention to harmonize the interest of all and make fit for the current development derives of the country.
- Water governance financing should include not only budget for water supply but also budget for water management and infrastructure.
- In order to alleviate the problems of water governance and insecurity at grassroots level, there is a need to have water extension workers.

Key issues

- Water governance problems in the Ethiopian Central Rift Valley (CRV) are a consequence of complex set of various global and local level socio-political, economic, and ecological drivers.
- There is a growing demand of water uses mainly because of the emergence of multiple water users and claims. This is aggravated by the occurrence of scarcity water resources, environmental degradation, climate change impacts and population increase among others.
- Such multiple and competing water users and uses necessitate the revision of our water policy in line with the emerging new developments.
- There is little attention for water governance financing, allocations of experts in the field and experienced personnel as compared to other sectors.
- The actors in water governance are identified by actors' mapping and analysis framework with their power relations which are characterized by power asymmetries, ambivalent relationships, conflictive relationships and harmony of interests.

Study Design and Approach

The research approach was based on the theoretical framework for collaborative water governance (CWG) including stakeholder mapping and analysis, participatory processes and social network analysis (Ansell and Gash, 2008), focus group discussions, key informant interviews, survey and critical document reviews related literatures. The different stakeholders were identified for stakeholder analysis aiming at obtaining three CWG-related groups namely, the productive sectors in the area such as agriculture, agro-industry, floriculture, fisheries, hotel and tourism industries; the state agencies at woreda and zonal level with competencies in water governance; and the academia, social and non-governmental organizations are some of the identified groups targeted during the field work.

Figure 2: Focus group discussions during field work

Critical Issues in Water Governance and their Policy Implications

1. Crisis of water governance, power relations and multiple uses vs competing claims

Historically, the CRV area was known for its pastoral production system but shifted to multiple production systems. The shift from single based to multiple and competing forms of production systems with the introduction of market based policy and strategy aggravated the competitions for water and land resources for a varieties of uses such as irrigation, horticultural production, floriculture, and among others mainly for export purposes. The management of these different claims and competing interests is one of the pressing challenges of water governance in the CRV sub-basin. Water governance has a number of policy implementation challenges such as power imbalances and lack of coordination mechanisms among stakeholders; funding, time and institutional constraints; and lack of good governance that questions the issues of transparency, accountability and authority (Harrington, 2017, Stringer et al, 2017 and Ananda and Proctor, 2013). The history of multiple uses and competing claims on water resource goes back to the 1960s when Ethiopia adopted a market based economic development strategy as the central and overarching national development strategy which promotes investments by the intensification of agriculture

Water crisis is basically a crisis of governance. Water insecurity problems in the CRV emanates not only from water shortage (scarcity) but also mainly from the problems of water governance. There is a lack of attention for proper and fair allocations of water governance financing or budget, allocate well trained and experienced personnel and experts in the water sector at various levels compared to other sectors. In other words, the allocated budget for water is only for water supply which are mostly poorly connected where the majority have not yet properly connected to safe water.

There is a blurred distribution of powers, duties, and responsibilities bestowed to the different players at federal and regional level. For instance, the regional states shall have the right to manage natural resources within their jurisdiction, but for those shared by more than one state, the federal government will act. However, this does not indicate where exactly the inter-regional states water flow starts because the trans-boundary streams first originate as small streams and tributaries in the uplands. In fact, water sources are upland, and so the conservation of these areas is necessary. Any degradation in these uplands has serious consequences for the water flow downstream. The same issue can be raised with respect to groundwater, whose flow directions may not coincide with the surface watersheds.

2. Multiple water uses, competing claims and its induced conflicts

Regarding water competitions and its induced conflicts, local residents in the basin witnessed the scarcity of water resources and its subsequent competitions among the divergent water users. Surface and ground water abstractions for irrigation, industrial and domestic use is continuously increasing in the CRV. The continual withdrawal of such surface and ground water exacerbates the competitions for water resources among the different claimants unless there are possible intervention mechanisms. The access to and the competitions between the upstream and downstream water users create conflicts. Geographical locations are considered as an advantage for the upstream water users that enables to hold power and control the downstream water flows while the downstream water users are powerless in monitoring and controlling the water flows. Conflicts over water can range from minor intra-household disagreements to major forms of confrontations over the use of water for agricultural and industrial purposes. The competing claims on resources involve complex situations where fear and uncertainty is very high and where different values of water resources and stakeholders' interests are at risk.

Figure 3: Multiple uses of water

3. There are not always conflicts but cooperation in water governance

In the CRV context the principle of cooperation in water governance is applied particularly in the governance of communal community ponds and community springs. In the management and utilizations of commonly owned community ponds and other water bodies need cooperation rather than competitions. The existence of cooperation on resource governance instead of competition is so important for various reasons. Cooperation over shared water is a critical aspect of water governance and considered as a symbol of peaceful interaction between different actors and water users, or a type of unwavering exchange (Axelrod & Hamilton 1981).

4. Women are marginalized in water governance systems because of the existence of power imbalances

Power here refers to the ability to influence others and impose interests. Women generally lack legal awareness regarding their rights to and control over household assets including land ownership. The government authorities at kebele level are also very much hesitant to enforce the legal rights of women. The customary practices in all aspects of socio-cultural and economic issues (including property rights disputes and its resolution practices) are still prevailing in the community. Customary institutions in the study area prohibits women to inherit and own land so that they don't have land certificate by their names (except for female headed households and first wives in polygamous marriages) which is against both the Federal and Oromia regional state constitutions. This prohibits women to be member of WUAs and water committee members which in turn impacts on water distributions.

5. Contested water governance narratives and discourses

There are several interlinked discourses, narratives, and debates on water resource management in the context of overall natural resource management and its implications for water governance. The discourses are: decentralization, water-centred development, market-led natural/water resource development, land/water resource degradation, water scarcity, and weak water resource governance. The narrative/discourse-holders range from local residents to international actors with diverse interests and powers. These actors, by way of their discourses and voices, have the potential to influence policymaking. The presence of varied discourses and narratives implies the need to understand water resource development from multiple perspectives (resource base/endowment, socio-political arena, equity, market, and capacity) and from varied interests that need to implement a systems approach in the attempt to resolve the issue of water governance. A "proliferation" of competing discourses and narratives reflects the actors' power dynamics and their struggle to influence water governance in the CRV and in the broader socio-political context of Ethiopia (Amare B. et al, 2023). The governance of natural resources in a wider context is an important consideration to improve the water security of the sub-basin amid alarming climate change, a growing population, and the rise in water demand from different sectors. Strengthening the capacities of institutions for resource governance in terms of budget, human resources, operations, and maintenance capacities is essential, as are clear and explicit laws, when seeking to improve water governance for sustainable development.

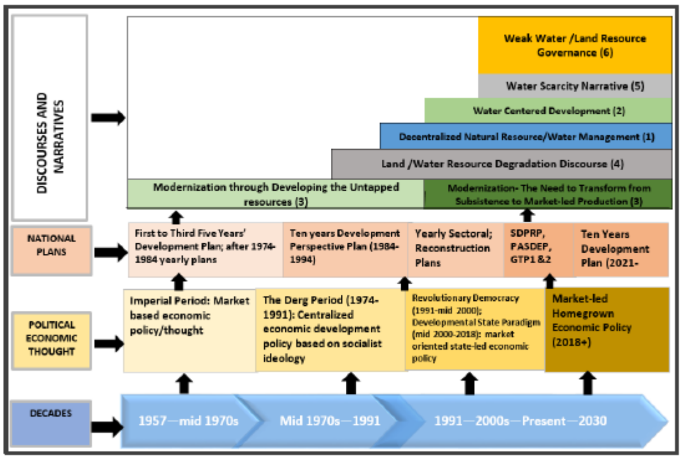

Figure 4: A sketch showing a timeline of water resource management discourses and narratives in Ethiopia, which are shaped by different political and economic systems of the period.

Source: Amare B. et al, 2023

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Acknowledgement: This project is supported by the Water Security and Sustainable Development Hub funded by the UK Research and Innovation's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) [grant number: ES/S008179/1].

Citation:

Bamlaku Tadesse, Amare Bantider, Adey N. Mersha, and Gete Zeleke. 2023. Water Governance Problems in the Central Rift Valley, Ethiopia. *Research Evidence for Policy.* Water and Land Resource Centre, Addis Ababa University (WLRC, AAU): Addis Ababa

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