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Beyond Social Engineering: A Strategy for Fostering Institutional Creativity in Developing Country River Basins

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Session: Learning to Innovate



WHICH WAY TO EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES?

Key Message

The institutional landscape of river basins, from local to transnational levels, is complex and subject to multiple drivers. Using over-simplistic formulas to promote change introduces more problems than solutions, because the reality is that institutions evolve through complex creative processes that adopt and adapt diverse ingredients—rather like making a stew. We propose following an organic creative approach to building river basin and other water management institutions based on the concept of “institutional bricolage”.

Summary

Water, food and poverty are linked through social processes and institutions. Poverty and food insecurity are essentially institutional problems, for which there are no universal panaceas: “social engineering” has an abysmal track record. Institutional “design principles” offer little guidance on how to promote institutional innovation, largely because they over-simplify human motivation.

We build on earlier work by Cleaver and others, taking an adaptive approach to institutional development called “institutional bricolage”. Social processes involve active, creative adaptation of norms and social arrangements to fit new purposes. They reflect and are shaped by existing power structures and creative actors’ deeply embedded unconscious principles. Bricolage stresses that new institutions emerge by borrowing and integrating from existing sources i.e., from institutions, styles of thinking, social identities and social relationships. Individual change agents are “do-it-yourself bricoleurs”, not “institutional engineers”.

This perspective has profound implications for promoting social learning, and institutional innovation, and underlies the findings of the N1 project.