The status quo of research on South Africa's water resource management institutions

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ABSTRACT

The South African water resource management institutional landscape has seen some dramatic changes since the new dispensation came into power in 1994. Not only have legislation and policies changed, but there has also been a significant increase in the number of non-state actors in the policy development process. Water resource governance has therefore become more complex and its regulatory component is being implemented by a number of legislative institutions: catchment management agencies, water user associations, irrigation boards, and international water management bodies. Policy development is influenced by a myriad of non-state actors, scientists included. A comprehensive literature review of research on water resource management institutions published between 1997 and 2011 shows that scientists are focusing predominantly on catchment management agencies and aspects regarding their institutionalisation and organisational functionality. There is much less of a focus on other entities, such as advisory committees, international water management bodies, irrigation boards, the water tribunal and water user associations. What the review has also revealed is that research on water resource management institutions has been conducted predominantly by scientists from the natural sciences. There is therefore an evident need for a research focus on water resource management institutions other than catchment management agencies. In addition, there should be a focus on informal aspects of water resource governance and new theoretical developments, also from disciplines other than the natural sciences, in the fields of water resource governance and politics.

Keywords: Water resource management institutions, literature review, catchment management agencies, water user associations, legislation, irrigation boards, catchment forums, international water management bodies

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's water institutional landscape has seen some dramatic changes since the new dispensation came into power in 1994. Government published the White Paper on a National Water Policy for South Africa (DWAF, 1997), and the National Water Act (Act 36 of 1998) (RSA, 1998) replaced the 1956 Water Act (Act 54 of 1956) (Union of South Africa, 1956; Turton et al., 2004). The National Water Act provides the legislative framework for the management of water resources in South Africa and as such presents an opportunity for the establishment of appropriate water resource management institutions. The institutional setting consists of legislative entities such as catchment management agencies (CMAs), international water management bodies (IWMBs), irrigation boards (IBs) and water user associations (WUAs). In addition, the National Water Act has a strong focus on decentralisation. The Act, contrary to previous water legislation, makes provision for public participation in the water resource management process. Another important element in the National Water Act, which is drawn from the Constitution of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996), is the subsidiarity principle. This principle stipulates that those functions that can be more efficiently and effectively carried out by lower levels of government should be delegated to the lowest appropriate level (Funke et al., 2007a).

The decentralisation tendency in South African water resource management over the past decade and a half has not only taken place within the legislative domain, but also at grassroots level. Prior to the start of the new dispensation, only a limited number of non-state actors, such as industry and the agricultural sector, had been involved in water resource management. This changed after 1994, when a variety of other non-state stakeholders, such as emerging farmers, the epistemic community (other than law professionals) and consultants also started becoming involved in water resource management. The involvement of these actors suggests a broader, dynamic and decentralised water sector where water resource management no longer only takes place at the bureaucratic, engineering or legal level (Meissner and Turton, 2003). Therefore, from a societal point of view, the water resource sector has become ever more complex (Lotz-Sisitka and Burt, 2006): not only has the number of actors in water resource management increased, there have also been substantial changes in the political environment which have had both intended and unintended consequences for water resource management in South Africa.

The purpose of this paper is to assess literature on water resource management institutions published since the promulgation of the White Paper, and to chart the 'landscape' of current knowledge regarding these institutions. This investigation not only discusses the past research agenda but also provides a foundation for future research. A key question formed the basis of the literature review that was conducted: 'What is the state of knowledge about South Africa's water resource management institutions, and where are the knowledge gaps that need to be filled?' The paper starts with background information on

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