

Is there a role for traditional governance systems in South Africa's new water management regime?

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Abstract

The transition to democracy in South Africa in 1994 catalysed new forms of governance in all sectors of society including water resource management. This paper examines the extent to which traditional governance systems have been acknowledged and incorporated into these new water management institutions and approaches. The research focused on understanding the cultural, religious and customary practices and rules relevant to water resource management as well as the roles of traditional leaders in 2 water user associations in the Eastern Cape Province. Findings from the research reveal that both state governance systems and traditional governance systems are relevant to water resource management in the study areas. However, management is predominantly guided by state-driven strategies which are based on statutory legal systems. Yet, traditional governance systems, including customary laws and cultural and religious practices, have an important role to play in achieving the purposes of the water user associations. Failure to acknowledge and incorporate aspects of these traditional governance systems may undermine the ability of government to achieve the objectives of the National Water Act.

Keywords: traditional governance systems, cultural, religious, customary practices, water user associations