

Sophie Erfurth
Doctoral Researcher
Department of Geography and the Environment
University of Oxford



Trust, hope and leadership in water user groups: Configurations of social norms for outcomes of collective action in fragile settings

Conflicts among resource users or vandalism is common in groundwater governance groups in Tunisia. What are the conditions that drive collective action (or lack thereof) in the given fragile political context? This paper studies how hope, trust, and leadership interact to cause cooperation and conflict in groundwater user groups in the Tunisian governorate of Kairouan.

Groundwater plays a key role in water-scarce regions acting as an important buffer to drought - a process exacerbated by climate change. As the reliance on groundwater resources grows, pathways of unsustainable water use and embedded social interdependencies crystallise - and consequently tensions rise. Frequent conflicts between water users pose a deleterious threat to agricultural production systems and the communities that depend on these systems for their livelihoods. Based on and expanding on the theory of collective action, this paper explores how water user behaviour and resulting agricultural livelihood opportunities are mediated by social norms particularly with respect to the systemic erosion of trust. In a fragile political context, where values and rules are not necessarily given or consistent, what drives decision-making and the ability to long-term plan? While patterns of conflict and cooperation are commonly studied in the context of international/transboundary water governance, there is an academic (as well as practical) need to explore intranational power relations and the pathways through which local and regional tensions arise and subside. Drawing on the literature of historical institutionalism, this paper grounds local decision-making in the Tunisian water sector as the continuation of the lived realities of an authoritarian past. The resulting erosion of institutional trust are explored in terms of their social configurations for water user behaviour (both human-human and human-environment relationships). Empiric data from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in the Tunisian governorate of Kairouan are processed using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). QCA reduces causal complexities of social norms, i.e. trust and leadership, into a limited set of outcome-relevant conditions: Outcomes of collective action, namely cooperation and conflict. This project will produce an in-depth understanding of on-the-ground configurations of de facto water use. It seeks to shed light on local patterns of decision-making so as to gain insights of how actions on the part of individuals translate to collective results regarding groundwater management. Results provide answers to why cost- and labour-intensive investments of development agencies have largely failed to produce significant impacts and sketch out alternative routes of involvement.