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Appreciating Institutional Complexity in Water Governance Dynamics: A Case from the Murray-Darling Basin, Australia

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Description / Abstract

Water managing systems are becoming more complex as new institutional arrangements are created in response to a changing climate. Our inquiry centred on the ‘water managing system’ within a nested set of Australian water governance regimes, including relevant local, regional, state and national governance regimes. New institutions in national and state systems, seemingly intended to reduce complexity through centralisation or integration, only increase complexity by adding to the existing mix of institutional arrangements. This complexity can reduce the effectiveness of water managing organisations by increasing administrative burden, creating high costs of entry for new staff and leading to confusion in communications with external stakeholders. Regional water managers deal with this complexity by drawing on relational capital built from long-term engagement in the water managing system. However, relational capital is difficult to build and easy to destroy, thus this ‘soft’ capacity is under threat from shifts in decision making power and of resources out of regional water governance systems. Institutional innovation is therefore required to create opportunities to build relational capital in order to effectively manage natural resources at the regional level as coupled socio-ecological systems.

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