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Incentives and informal institutions: Gender and the management of water

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Description / Abstract

In this paper I consider the contribution that theories about common property resource management and policies relating to participation can make to our understanding of communal water resource management. Common to the theoretical and policy approaches are the ideas that incentives are important in defining the problem of collective action and that institutions apparently offer a solution to it. The gendered dynamics of incentives and institutions are explored. This paper briefly outlines theoretical approaches to institutions as solutions to collective action problems and indicates the linkages with policies regarding participation in water resource management. It suggests that, whilst offering considerable insights, such approaches are limited and may result in policy prescriptions that do little to involve or empower women. In particular, I argue that the modeling of incentives is impoverished in its economism and its abstraction of the individual from a life world. I suggest that the conceptualization of institutions is primarily an organizational one, which, whilst alluding to the role of norms, practices, and conventions, focuses primarily on formal manifestations of collective action; contracts, committees, and meetings. Where women's participation is concerned, I illustrate that incentives to cooperative may be devised from reproductive concerns and the minor exigencies of daily life (as well as from productive concerns) and that alternative models of institutions may better reflect the way in which decisions are made and implemented within a social context.

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