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Dynamics of change in Iran’s agricultural water governance: Institutional barriers and leverage points for transformative adaptation governance

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Abstract

Amid escalating crises driven by climate change, water scarcity, and institutional inefficiencies, Iran’s agricultural water governance is facing mounting pressure. This study focuses on identifying institutional barriers and leverage points that hinder the transition toward transformative and adaptive water governance in the agricultural sector. This objective, on the one hand, involves identifying entrenched rules, power structures, and institutional practices that resist change and hinder transformation in water governance. On the other hand, it uncovers opportunities for targeted and effective interventions within these structures and decision-making processes. Such an understanding enables policymakers to design transformative pathways tailored to the institutional context, moving beyond superficial reforms to bring about sustainable and meaningful changes in policymaking. This research uses a qualitative case study approach, involving 45 semi-structured interviews with policymakers, experts, and community stakeholders at national, provincial, and local levels. The data were analysed through exploratory content analysis, utilising a multi-level governance framework. The findings indicate that the main barriers to the transition towards transformative adaptation governance stem from entrenched institutional rules, deep-rooted power structures, and policy inertia, which hinder genuine transformation. Additionally, the lack of coordination between institutions and insufficient attention to local capacities have slowed down the process of change. However, the study identifies evidence of potential leverage points and opportunities for intervention in institutional structures and decision-making processes at various governance levels, which could accelerate the transition towards transformative adaptation governance. To achieve this transition, it is essential to place greater emphasis on identifying leverage points within institutional structures and policymaking processes. Beyond these barriers, the creation of new capacities for institutional innovation and the design of multi-level governance models could pave the way for more adaptive, resilient, and future-oriented agricultural water governance in Iran.

Keywords: Agricultural Water Governance, Institutional Change Dynamics, Policy Inertia