

# Capturing Water Resources for Agriculture and Human Development in Swaziland

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The Lower Usuthu Smallholder Irrigation Project (LUSIP) is an irrigation-for-development scheme, which involves the construction of an off-stream reservoir and canal system to irrigate roughly 11,000 hectares of farmland in the lowlands of Swaziland. The targeted beneficiaries are approximately 2300 local subsistence-farming homesteads. The goal of the project is the elimination of extreme poverty through agricultural intensification and livestock commercialization. The project is loan-financed by nine international donors and development banks, and is being administered by a parastatal of the Swazi government.

The main focal activity of the project is the assembly of suitable land controlled by clusters of smallholders into cooperatives for the purposes of growing sugarcane on an equity-share basis. Also, two supplemental and complementary activities are being carried out: a home garden program of vegetable production for enhanced domestic food security and cash income, and homestead delivery of potable water to address persistent health concerns over the quality and quantity of domestic water supply. The coverage of the home garden and potable water programs reaches every homestead in the project area to widen the scope for benefit distribution even when soil conditions are determined to be unsuitable for participation in a sugar cooperative.

Concurrent to the start-up of LUSIP is the commencement of decentralized water management across Swaziland. The Water Act of 2003 reflects in detail the principles of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), an internationally agreed framework for the governance of water resources. The Act specifies the gazetting of five River Basin Authorities (RBAs) across Swaziland and the formation of increasingly decentralized management committees empowered to decide issues such as water permitting, water resources development, water-for-conservation planning, etc. It is this participatory model of decentralized governance that



has been given the responsibility to manage and distribute the new water captured by the LUSIP development. The Swazi government has taken an active role in capacity-building members of the public to take on their new administrative functions, and sensitizing the general public as to their new legal and financial responsibilities for improved water management.

My case study of LUSIP provides a unique window into the application of a definitively western governance model, IWRM, in a sociopolitical context featuring a monarchy, an agrarian bureaucracy, and feudal chiefs. The social transformations implicated by the conversion to cooperative estate farming and the relationship and management of water on (neo)liberal terms are practically and psychologically disturbing to local inhabitants. The competing logics or governmentalities at work in the interface between LUSIP and IWRM are speaking to larger questions about postcolonial development. I am

centralizing the political question of who this water development is for to uncover how the resulting structural transformations are directing benefits relative to the rural poor. Further, the research considers what the role and relationship is of IWRM in this process. The history of IWRM is littered with failures to achieve its intended social outcomes. It is my position that IWRM may be acting as an anti-politics machine to obscure the benefit capture away from the rural poor under a veil of good governance.

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