



Topic 3

Collective action and multi-actor processes: pathways to sustainability?

Groundwater is not visible, making it difficult for actors to measure the consequences of the degradation of the groundwater resource. Users -and in particular agricultural users- do not necessarily link their individual use to water-table drawdown. Government institutions do not always react soon enough to regulate the exploitation of the resource.

Individual and diffuse access to groundwater makes it virtually impossible to control its exploitation through regulatory instruments only. In other words, a solid legal framework for groundwater management is necessary, but often not sufficient, to "tame the anarchy". Several factors are responsible for the difficulty in applying official regulations including the very rapid development of mostly "illicit" diffuse tube wells, making it difficult for agencies to even stay informed about groundwater access, let alone control it; the importance of groundwater for farmers' livelihoods, which makes it politically difficult for policy makers to stop "illicit" groundwater use; the low capacities of local institutions in several countries; and the limited scientific information available about aquifer dynamics and groundwater use.

However it is often in a situation of water stress or in the case of other complicating factors (land tenure, access to credit, etc.) that local stakeholders initiate collective action to try to find suitable ways to gain access to groundwater or even to deal with over-exploitation through community management and "groundwater dialogue" between actors. Such collective action is often informal, and can change rapidly, depending on agricultural and water related dynamics.

The aim of this session is to discuss conditions that enable collective action in different contexts, and how dialogue between institutions and actors on groundwater use allows progress in groundwater regulation.