Drivers for collective groundwater management: The case of Copiapó, Chile

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Collective action has had positive results performing surface water management. However, the scenario is less optimistic when it comes to groundwater. The study analyzes a successful experience regarding collective groundwater management in northern Chile. Its purpose is to bring lights on how to enhance the development of communities and how to establish multi-stakeholder negotiations, in places with extreme depletion and water conflict.

The approach adopted as a methodology involves the narrative analysis of the case study combined with the application of the IAD framework. The latter explores which institutional structures support arrangements to manage common resources in a sustainable way.

The Copiapó basin is an interesting case study since it represents groundwater conflicted basins. It is located in a highly productive area, with a situation of extreme over-extraction and serious conflicts. Also, it presents high heterogeneity of the actors involved, including representative of different economic activities; a context of high government's bureaucracy and trust issues. All these elements are commonly found in other intra-national water basins that undergo scarcity issues.

Currently the basin is fully organized in groundwater communities with representative boards, nested under surface major water users associations, and the aquifer is starting to restore.

The analysis shows the relevance of three elements: first, the existence of neutral and technical mediators that acted as third party; second, the identification and empowerment of good leaders; and thirdly, the limitation of the administrative authority in the community's decisions.

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