

WATER GOVERNANCE

Corruption and exploitation

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Credit: Jeremy Woodhouse / Getty

Water resources are easily overexploited, a particular challenge in drylands. Water-related conflicts have a long history in the Chihuahuan Desert, which straddles northern Mexico and the southwestern United States. Understanding what norms and institutions help to sustain wise water management here is vital.

Gabriel Lopez Porras, of the University of Leeds, and colleagues studied how governance regulates water access in the Chihuahuan's Rio del Carmen watershed, Mexico, which has experienced conflict between upstream Mennonite farmers and downstream traditional farmers. The authors conducted 27 semi-structured interviews of key stakeholders, identified via stakeholder analysis, to illuminate legal and institutional features that could promote successful adaptive water management. The interviews suggested a neglect of formal rules and their application by water managers and users, who have promoted water mismanagement, overexploitation and conflicts over water access, for example by accepting false water rights. Legal breaches and corruption by officials seems commonplace, and some farmers have institutionalized this corruption to access water, reinforcing maladaptive dynamics. However, this process showcased the potential of stakeholder engagement, perhaps through formal networks, to promote collaborative acceptance of formal institutions for better water use.

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