

Community participation in water resource management through water users associations in the Wami-Ruvu Basin, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Community participation through Water User Associations (WUAs) is intended to support sustainable water resource management in Tanzania, yet its effectiveness remains uncertain, particularly in the Wami-Ruvu Basin. This study investigates the extent and quality of participation across five stages of water management: identification, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Using Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation and Participatory Development Theory, a cross-sectional design was applied to 385 WUA members, supported by household surveys, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. Data were analysed using a Linear Mixed Model. Findings indicate that participation is generally low and largely symbolic rather than empowering. Engagement is highest during identification activities but declines significantly in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation stages ($p < 0.001$). Major barriers include limited time, weak communication systems, restricted opportunities for input, and elite capture by dominant individuals. The results reveal a gap between policy expectations of participatory governance and actual practice within WUAs. The study concludes that WUAs, while structurally designed for inclusivity, do not yet facilitate meaningful or equitable participation. Strengthening institutional capacity, improving communication, and adapting interventions to local socio-cultural and economic contexts are recommended to enhance effectiveness and transform WUAs into genuine platforms for community-driven water governance systems.

KEYWORDS:

Community participation, Water resource management, Community members, Water user's association