

A cultural theory of drinking water risks, values and institutional change

Rural water sustainability is a global challenge as policy often separates communities from the state and markets. This policy brief explores institutional relationships combining government, communities and the market in a pluralist arrangement. Testing the approach in rural Kenya, results indicate pluralism may produce more sustainable outcomes and create value in operational and financial performance.

Key Contributions

Global progress towards the goal of universal, safely managed drinking water services will be shaped by the dynamic relationship between water risks, values and institutions. The contribution of this work is a theoretical and empirical case to consider pluralist institutional arrangements that enable risks and responsibilities to be re-conceptualised and re-allocated between the state, market and communities to create value for rural water users. Risks are reduced through networking different management cultures at scale in a pluralist arrangement in the form of a professional maintenance service provider. This research draws on Mary Douglas' cultural theory of risk, which argues that there are four cultures along the grid (social regulation) and group (collective representation) axes (Fig. 1). These apply to waterpoint management as follows:

- **Community**-managed waterpoints are most common in the rural water sector – promoted

since the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, 1981-1990.

- The **individualist** culture includes privately owned waterpoints, whose owners sometimes engage in entrepreneurial activities. It also comprises self-supply approaches.
- The **bureaucratic** culture is composed of waterpoints managed by schools, clinics and religious institutions.
- The **fatalist** culture includes user groups around waterpoints with a long-term management failure, whose members have turned to alternative sources.

Individually, each culture often struggles to establish a reliable and cost-effective maintenance arrangement. A key insight is pooling individual waterpoint risks at scale in a **pluralist** maintenance service provider that allows the local waterpoints to retain their management structure.

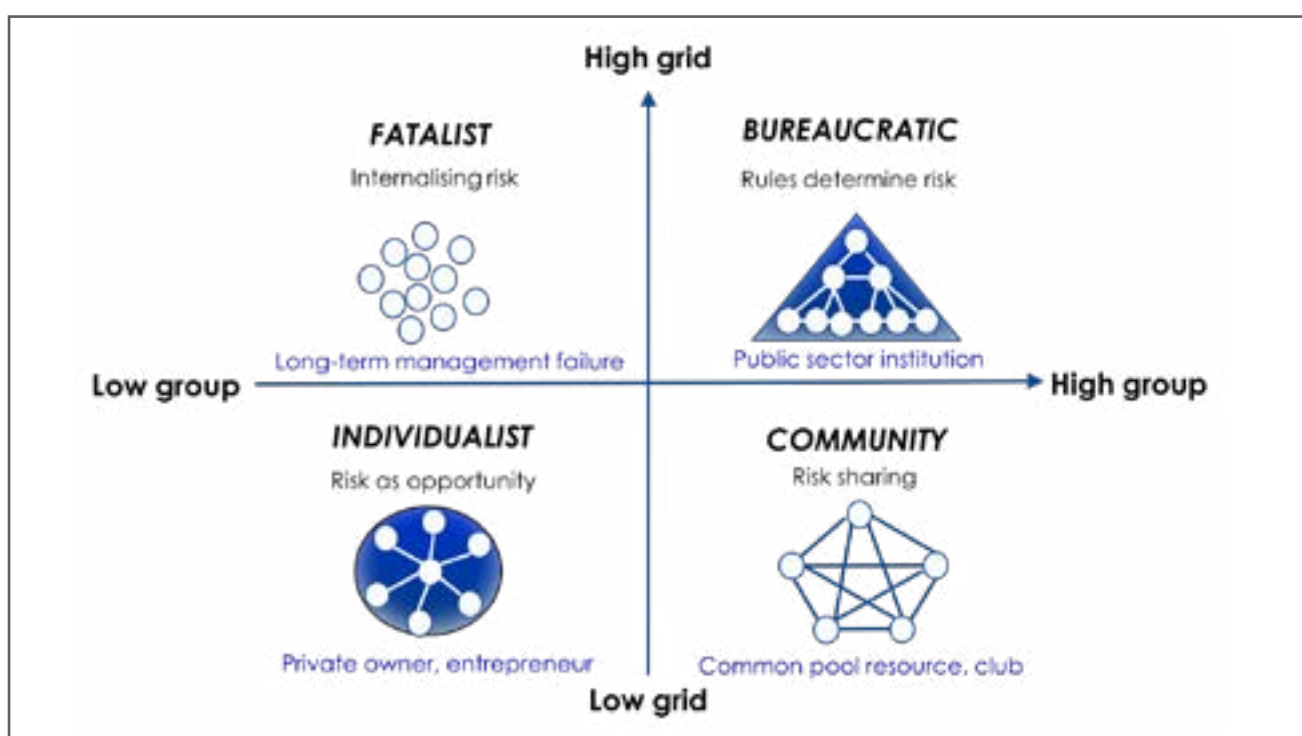


Figure 1: Reframing cultural theory for waterpoint management (Koehler et al., 2018)

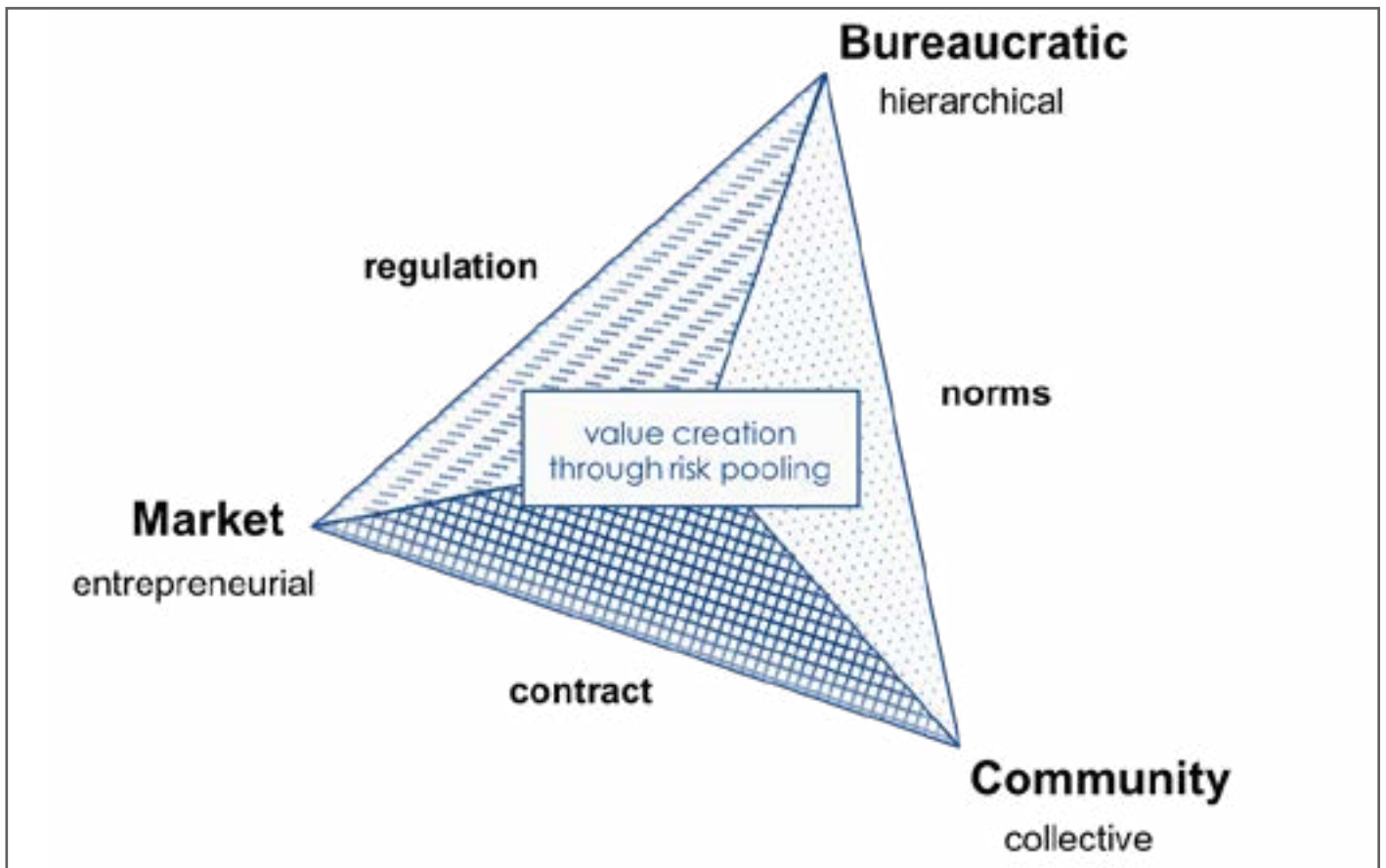


Figure 2: A pluralist institutional network to recognise cooperative management cultures (Koehler et al., 2018)

Policy Recommendations

1. Performance-based contracts link communities with a maintenance service provider operating at scale and reducing downtimes to less than three days. Mobile monitoring and payments can increase accountability in rural water services.
2. Water legislation for rural water services should take pluralist arrangements into account, which support market approaches in addition to community management and ensure local government support and coordination of rural water sector activities.
3. Pluralist arrangements provide the potential to link informal rural water institutions with formal water regulation. Since fatalists may be excluded from the pluralist arrangement, oversight and social protection schemes are important to ensure no one is left behind.

Contact and Acknowledgements

This policy brief summarises a new journal article in the Journal Global Environmental Change. The cultural theory framework is empirically tested drawing on a longitudinal study of 3,500 households in coastal Kenya, an area that typifies the challenges faced across Africa in providing rural communities with safely managed water.

If you would like to learn more or cite this research, please refer to the journal article:

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