

**Promises Under Construction:
The Evolving Paradigm for Water Governance
and the Case of Northern Mexico**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mexico stands as an important developing world leader at the forefront of national water policy transition. In 2006, Mexico hosted the Fourth World Water Forum and proudly displayed its modernized water sector to the global community. Fifteen years after its sweeping 1992 transition to a new water policy based on an emerging international governance paradigm, Mexico finds itself in a mature phase where the honeymoon has faded, and the country now faces the urgent prospect of consolidating the decentralization and sustainability principles embedded within its water governance framework. This paper takes the pulse of Mexico's water policy transition today, utilizing four key indicators associated with successful water policy reform: efficiency; decentralized management; participation; and equity/sustainability, and evaluating them in the context of three specific sectors that have been subject to dramatic transformation: urban water services, irrigation districts, and river basin councils. These cases focus on northwestern Mexico, a globally-integrated region of relatively high resource assets where the water modernization program should have been expected to thrive.

The paper advances three main arguments: first, that Mexico's wedding of marketization and decentralization has been an uneasy marriage that must be constantly mediated and negotiated if Mexico is serious about achieving its desired goals. Mexico is left with functioning market institutions but has stalled out in its decentralization and sustainability initiatives. Second, that Mexico's democratic transition has, paradoxically, led to a more fragmented national and regional politics that has made it more difficult to push a unitary decentralization agenda forward. And, third, as Mexico's experiment with marketization and decentralization enters a mature phase, it bears witness to the temporal and spatial challenges of water transition—that it may be more difficult to sustain a multi-faceted transition over decades and across regions than to launch the transition in the first place. Since markets are notoriously poor at addressing social inequities, it is important to develop decentralized, sustainable processes not only as a counter to market excesses, but representative of a democratizing shift in the social relations of power and control over water. The question at this moment is whether Mexico has the will and the capacity to fulfill these 'promises under construction,' or whether the full promise of the national water policy transition will remain unfulfilled.

