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Challenges to Water Management in Ecuador: Legal Authorization, Quality Parameters, and Socio-Political Responses

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Description / Abstract

Ecuador has historically had a unique experience with water law, management, and policy as a result of its constitutional declaration of water access as a human right. In this paper, the legal, environmental, economic, and social aspects related to water management in Ecuador are analyzed. In doing so, the incorporation of local governance structures such as water users' associations (WUAs) are characterized within a national model of authorization under SENAGUA, Ecuador's former water agency, highlighting the importance of integrated management for meeting the country's geographically and environmentally diverse needs. Additionally, the role of anthropogenic activities such as crude oil production, artisanal and small-scale gold (ASGM) mining, agriculture, sewage discharge, and domestic practices are evaluated in the context of policy implementation and environmental quality concerns. Finally, individual and community-level responses are explored, highlighting the importance of geographically specific perceptions of water rights and quality in the adoption of coping strategies. In these ways, a multi-faceted analysis of Ecuadorian water policy shaped by community-level engagement, geographic diversity, and influential economic sectors is developed. This study highlights the need for increased financial and legislative support around extractive and polluting industries such as agriculture, ASGM, and sewage treatment for long-term safety and sustainability of water access in Ecuador. Additionally, increased efforts to educate industry-specific workers, local management boards, and individuals about potential solutions to water-related challenges will help improve the efficiency of current legislation. Finally, this study underscores a need for additional research related to water quality and sustainability in Ecuador, as well as for the social, economic, and environmentally specific factors that influence water security outcomes in the country.

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