I present a study of how water users, namely farmers, choose to participate in new institutions for irrigation governance in Tajikistan. Since the late 1990’s, the government of Tajikistan and international organizations established over 400 formal Water User Associations (WUAs). WUAs are non-governmental organizations that aim to increase the participation of local water users, namely farmers, in the management of irrigation systems through institutions (i.e., rules used in a governing system). While some new WUA institutions in Tajikistan have increased water user participation in WUA activities, water users in other WUAs have failed to sustain WUA activities beyond initial WUA establishments. What contextual features of a place drive whether water user are more likely to adopt or not adopt new WUA institutions in Tajikistan?

Based on theories of institutional change from political science and evolutionary economic geography, I proposed a conceptual model for how endogenous and exogenous contextual features of a place are associated with the adoption of new institutions. I hypothesized that water users in WUAs that 1) are located closer to urban centers, 2) more dependent on local food production, 3) have greater frequencies of interactions with government officials, and 4) have a limited history of irrigation governance are more likely to adopt new WUA institutions. I conducted ordinal logistic regression analyses to evaluate the relationships between these contextual features and WUA adoption (i.e., water user participation in WUA decision-making processes). Data from 2016 includes 159 structured interviews with WUA leaders along three 100km rural to urban gradients. I corroborated my quantitative analysis with semi-structured interviews with government and international organization stakeholders.

I show that WUA adoption across the three study sites was associated with both endogenous (i.e., distance to urban centers and dependence on local food production) and exogenous variables (i.e., frequent government officials’ visits to WUA service areas). Implications of my study empirically demonstrate why there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to building new institutions for sustainable development. Rather, the policy and design of sustainable development institutions should identify what endogenous and exogenous contextual features of a place will influence the adoption of new institutions.