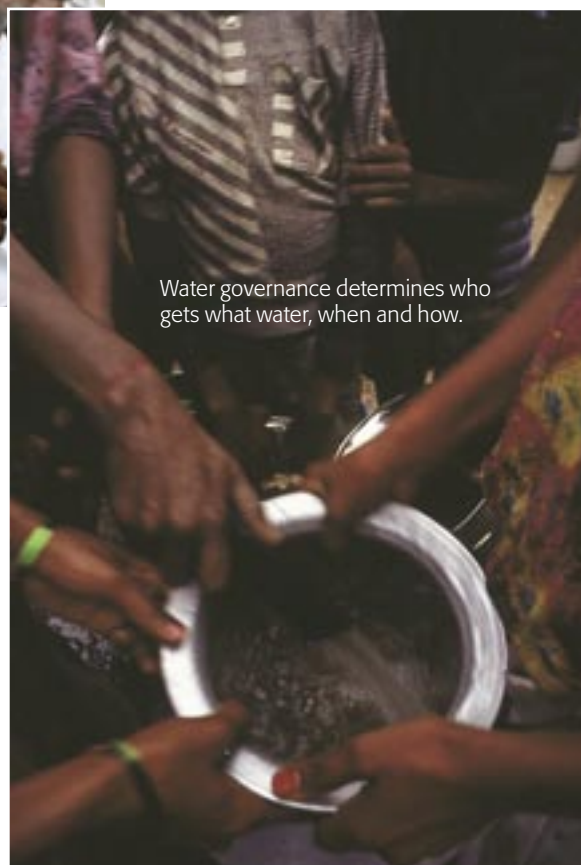


Developing Water Governance Capacities



“Water troubles are governance troubles”

Mokhtars from Abu Ghrayek, 1 of 15 subdistricts of the Babel Governate in Iraq, listen to a description of the basics of democracy and the selection process that will allow for delegates to select 20 members from their communities to a new district council.



Water governance determines who gets what water, when and how.

In many places of the world, a staggering 30 to 40% or more of the water in pipes and canals goes unaccounted due to leakages and illegal tapping. The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) has estimated that the overall water-use efficiency for irrigated agriculture in developing countries averages 38%. The Indian-based Centre for Sustainable Development recently provided figures for Bangalore showing that the upper middle and middle classes receive on average over 200 litres of water per capita per day (lpcd), while slums only receive some 66 lpcd on average. Other figures suggest that slum dwellers in other Asian cities sometimes get as little as 5-10 lpcd. Similar trends of mismanagement and unequal water distribution have also been noted for irrigated agriculture, where small-scale farmers get relatively less water than the more powerful large-scale farmers.

Water governance picking up speed

The importance of governance has recently picked up significant meaning and speed in the water sector. Within the international political arena the concept has evolved from being (nearly) a political taboo in the North-South development cooperation dialogue to being more widely accepted as a critical issue to be addressed if unsustainable development and poverty are to be tackled. The water sector has undergone similar changes as other development sectors regarding, for example, decentralisation and privatisation, yet uniquely the water sector has lagged behind in addressing explicitly governance challenges.

To a large extent, the sector is still driven by technocrats with a strong focus on water supply driven infrastructure. But framing

water challenges as governance challenges has allowed for a broadening of the water agenda. It is now becoming more and more acceptable to scrutinise processes of democratisation, corruption and power – particularly imbalances between rich and poor countries and between rich and poor people. Governance and politics have truly been recognised as part and parcel of the water crisis, as well as a part of its solution.

Photos: USAID (far left) and Centre for Science and Environment (left)

The meaning of governance

Though no universal definition of governance exists, the differing definitions exhibit very similar features. Governance is seen as processes of interaction. It is based on accommodation rather than domination. It includes both public and private organisations and their relationships. Governance is also many times considered as facilitating action since it involves activities for resolving common problems. Governance also puts emphasis on networks, flexibility and informal institutions. The governance fabric is dynamic since governance takes place from the very local to the global.

This way of capturing governance is useful since it reinforces that governance is something very concrete which determines who gets what water, when and how. Governance manifests itself, for example, in daily interaction between local public officials, citizens, communities and organisations. How water is governed is thus critical for reducing poverty. From the viewpoint of practitioners and private and public decision makers, governance means more when tied to the common good and to resolving common problems.

Working with governance in practice

The operationalisation of governance should be intensified and more systematic. Discussions of governance to date have been too theoretical and esoteric. Often, it is used loosely but without substance in many development circles; meaningful content and guidance of how it can be applied by water managers is rarely provided.

Recent thinking emphasises that governance is about working with processes of how decisions are made and implemented. Importantly, governance deals with the behaviour of people and organisations and how individuals and organisations relate to each other. The old notions of governance emphasised the role of the government and bureaucracy and their more hierarchical control and enforcement of rules and regulations. The new notions of distributed governance emphasise, for example, horizontal linkages and bottom-up approaches regarding dialogue, partnership and negotiation. This implies that water decision makers and managers should take centre-stage in governance issues:

- The strategy and day-to-day management of more inclusive processes of decision making, such as dialogue, partnership formation, networking, negotiation and mediation with water stakeholders.
- The strategy and day-to-day manage-



Women in Guinea discussing village priorities, including the construction of mini-dams to regulate the flow of water into and out of the rice fields.

ment of responses to situations characterised by change, complexity and uncertainties.

The conventional modes of water governance typically remain rigid and favour the status quo for water resources and services allocation and distribution. The challenge is to develop poverty reducing governance frameworks and institutions that are inclusive, responsive and adaptive to changing social and hydrological conditions.

Water governance ahead - developing new capacities

Many water decision makers and managers are not equipped to deal with new forms of governance issues, such as conflict mediation, mobilisation of communities, partnership formation with civil society and private sector actors, managing processes of stakeholder dialogue and negotiations. The technology- and supply-driven water sector has favoured capacity and knowledge generation that focuses on managing “things”, and which is orientated toward infrastructure development. This type of conventional technocratic knowledge and capacity will continue to be important and required among water agencies and decision makers, but their ability to absorb and implement new forms of governance will require different sets of knowledge and capacities. What is needed is knowledge and capacity for managers and decision makers to be effective parts of social-steering and co-governance. It includes:

- Inclusive management of people and processes.
- Process-orientation towards network-

ing, partnership formation, negotiation and mediation.

- Knowledge and information sharing.
- Multidisciplinary knowledge based on understanding of society and nature that can facilitate integrative approaches.
- Enhanced production of socio-economic information and knowledge pertaining to, for example, income levels and consumption patterns.

In practice this means that while water managers need to continue to be skilled in managing water resources and services “hardware”, there is a concurrent need to step up significantly the capacity for managing people and regarding knowledge of production and management, participation, negotiation and mediation. What we have learned the hard way during the past few decades is that it is not sufficient to drill wells and install pumps. Technologies must also work for people in the long run. The application of any “hardware” will be futile unless the proper “software” is provided that runs and governs the “hardware”. This lesson must be kept in mind, especially as international lending institutions currently are stepping up their investments in water infrastructure.

*By Dr. Håkan Tropp, SIWI,
e-mail: hakan.tropp@siwi.org*

Editor's Note: Dr. Tropp manages the UNDP Water Governance Facility at SIWI (www.watergovernance.org) and was lead author of the World Water Development Report 2006 chapter on the Challenges of Governance. For more information on the report, visit www.unesco.org/water/wwap/wwdr2/.