

Edited by
Dave Huitema • Sander Meijerink

THE POLITICS OF RIVER BASIN ORGANISATIONS

Coalitions, Institutional Design Choices
and Consequences



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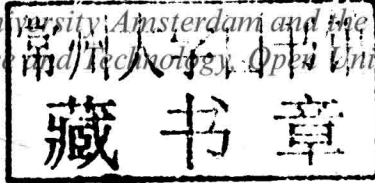
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The Politics of River Basin Organisations

For four especially important members of a new generation,
Laia and Max, Carlijn and Jasper

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Dave Huitema
Sander Meijerink

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1. The politics of river basin organisations: institutional design choices, coalitions and consequences

Dave Huitema and Sander Meijerink

1.1 SHIFTS IN WATER GOVERNANCE

Water and human development are inextricably linked. Human settlement tends to concentrate along rivers and coasts. This is because water offers fertile soils, opportunities for irrigation, and possibilities for transport and trade. To use the possibilities of the water as much as possible and to reduce the risks associated with human settlement close to water, social organisation and systems of governance are required. Arguably because water is such a crucial element in societal development, many ancient societies had to make decisions about their water management organisations early. The degree to which organisations founded for water management influence later traditions of governing is under debate. Some have claimed that the organisation of water management, which can be centralised and focused on large-scale infrastructure or, alternatively, decentralised and focused on local management, determined the governance system of entire empires (Wittfogel 1957). But others suggest that it is rather the other way around, in the sense that societies with accomplished hierarchical governance structures were better able to develop centralised infrastructures for managing water and thus to control their water environment.

Whatever the protracted history of water management and its importance for broader historical patterns of governance that have emerged since ancient times, the advent of the nation state (depending on the country in question, this took place in most cases in the eighteenth, nineteenth or twentieth centuries) was a significant development, and in most cases a serious break from the traditions of the past. The nation state, built upon concerted efforts to change social cultural preferences ('nation building') through the crafting of new bonds of affiliation and a retelling of history, implied a 'nationalisation' of responsibilities that were previously at the local level, and has, since this took place, shaped the division

of responsibilities at what we now appropriately call the 'international level'. Water management was fully implied in the process of nation building. In many countries, new water works served to make fragmented countries more integrated by physically connecting previously separate parts. Various such projects became focal points for nation building by showing highly developed engineering skills. New organisations for water management were founded that operated at the national scale. In the process of nationalisation, previously established communal and private elements of the governance system were overhauled. In many cases this effectively meant an expropriation of rights from private owners to state bureaucracies, which often started using their decision power to further certain economic interests, be this newly emerging industries which were allowed to use the pollution assimilation capacity of water for the release of their waste materials, or agriculture, which today consumes enormous amounts of freshwater for irrigation, often without being fully charged for the costs.

The process of nation state building had two elements that are worth mentioning here. The first is that when it took place government institutions were often designed on the basis of a 'classical modernist' design (Hajer 2003), embedded in respective constitutions. This implied that government tasks and responsibilities would be divided over respective layers of government, usually three or four. Most of these government layers were assigned a wide set of responsibilities (general-purpose governments) and because the boundaries were relatively clear cut, a certain level of jurisdictional integrity was created. Nation states differ in many ways; they can be federal or unitary states, the level of centralisation can differ, the formal leadership can be presidential or monarchical, the role of the judiciary can be expansive or limited, and so on. In many cases, however, water management tasks were allocated to general-purpose government layers, and thus became part of the 'normal' government apparatus. Special-purpose organisations such as river basin organisations (RBOs) did not fit easily in this scheme, although in some cases, such as the Netherlands, the water boards that had existed long before the modern nation state were given a constitutional status equal to that of municipalities. A second element worth mentioning here is that in almost any new nation state, issues of control loomed large. Democratic control, especially in the form of representative democracy, has almost universal appeal and has thus become the norm. There are, however, multiple models of democracy (Held 2006), and some of these models actually convey very little direct citizen control over government institutions. Regardless of the model of democracy that is applied by the elite in the new nation states, the quest for democratic control has almost always been a struggle, as has achieving the adoption

of important democratic principles such as transparency, accountability, and the replacement of leaders by the polity.

In the period from the Second World War until roughly the start of the 1980s, the role of governments in many societies across the world expanded, often for reasons associated with development of a welfare state, but usually also because this was an era of confidence in the power of centralised, planned and rational problem solving. And the concept of the nation state, to the chagrin of some who see the nation state's sovereignty as a hindrance for addressing many of the world's problems, is still very much a key aspect in developing responses to water problems. However, the power of most nation states is eroding and power is diffusing to other actors. This change, often described as a shift from government to governance, started taking place around the 1980s and is depicted in Figure 1.1.

The reasons behind these shifts in governance are often debated. There is a strong ideological element, in the sense that neoliberal ideas, which emphasise market initiative and government failure, gained currency in the 1980s. But in the same decade another influential wave of thought emerged: on community governance and self-governance. Both waves of thought have academic roots in economics and the political sciences, and affected each of the shifts signified here in one way or another. Authors

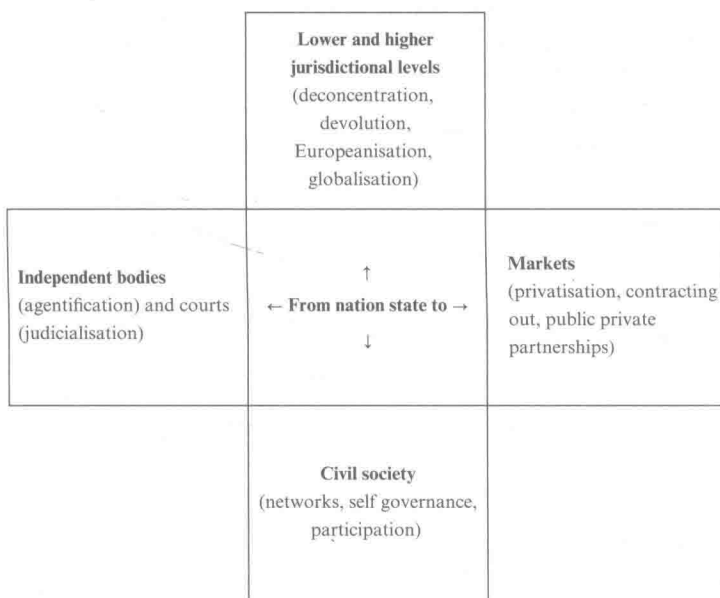


Figure 1.1 Shifts in governance since the 1980s

who write about governance (e.g. Pierre and Peters 2000) also suggest a less prosaic explanation for these shifts: mainly that the nation state had grown too large to sustain itself much longer. Especially in some European countries, public spending amounted to more than half of gross domestic product, and the functioning of the ensuing 'big government', often founded on central control and planning, was considered suspect at best in many areas. 'Red tape', regulations and excessive bureaucracy became rallying cries in the battle to 'hollow out the state' (Rhodes 1996).

The increasingly global discourse on water governance (see e.g. Gupta 2009), bears several traces of these shifts in governance. The central guiding concept of integrated water resources management (IWRM), for instance, suggests greater private sector involvement in water management, and the establishment of pricing mechanisms; it assigns a large role to independent experts by suggesting the greater use of decision-making tools such as cost-benefit analysis, suggests more international collaboration whilst at the same time indicating the possibility for local control, and shows sensitivity to the need for greater public participation and stakeholder involvement. IWRM is often also seen as a corrective to the errors of the 'hydrological mission' (see also Jaspers and Gupta, Chapter 2 in this volume), the spawn of large-scale engineering projects that went hand in hand with nation building and the subsequent growth of nation states and big government. The 'integrated' aspect is often interpreted to denote more attention to the ecological and societal impacts of water management activities, including the typical large-scale projects. It also denotes a geographical emphasis, in the sense that water managers should start paying more attention to the interlinkages between upstream and downstream interventions by working on the river basin scale and founding RBOs.

1.2 THE GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THIS BOOK

IWRM is clearly a multifaceted concept and implementing each of the aspects may require an extensive job of 'translation' (Mukhtarov 2009) and weighting. Obviously not all aspects are equally important to water managers. It has been suggested that the 'river basin approach' (also called the 'water systems approach', see, for example, Teclaff 1967; Lundqvist et al. 1985; Mitchell 1990; Mostert 2000) is the key innovation that the water governance community is after and preferably in a form that takes away power from 'normal' governments. Schlager and Blomquist (2008: 1) observe: