

A FLOOD OF INSTITUTIONS? SUSTAINING GLOBAL WATER INITIATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Global efforts in water governance have met both praise and criticism in recent years. In the wake of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and the Fourth World Water Forum in Mexico City in 2006, opinions remain divided over the effectiveness of "megaconferences" (Biswas 2001; Gleick and Lane 2005; Speth 2003). These large, international meetings have been criticized for their enormous costs, unclear objectives, uneven attempts at inclusionary participation, and weak declarations and outcomes. Megaconferences are routinely cast as massive "talkfests:" lots of good conversation, but incoherent structure and few results.

At the same time, global water conferences have been applauded for raising political and media awareness over high profile water issues (Gleick and Lane 2005). For some supporters, these encounters are critical venues to coordinate research and policy, consolidate knowledge of water science and management, and develop strategies for the future (Seyfang, 2003). Information sharing and "mega networking" – important and well liked features of megaconferences – are cornerstones to strengthening institutional development and collaboration (Varady and Iles-Shih, in press; Varady, et al., 2006).

REFRAMING THE DEBATES: WHAT ARE GLOBAL WATER INITIATIVES?

But megaconferences are only one piece of the much larger global water puzzle. In fact, reframing such events as a part of "global water initiatives" generates new understandings of organizational interconnectedness and outcomes. In this respect, global water initiatives (GWIs) can be broadly defined as the institutional frameworks, organizations, and special events that focus on global water-resources management. This definition draws from common notions of institutional sustainability (i.e., laws, policy making processes, and organizations that induce stability and resilience), thus permitting institutions to transcend personal politics, withstand opposition, and preserve legitimacy and authority over the long term (see, e.g., Lewis 2003).

In spite of the prominence and visibility of megaconferences, GWIs are more than just international meetings. They encompass a broader network of organizations and events: professional societies (e.g., the International Association of Hydrological Sciences and the American Water Resources Association), designated time periods (e.g., the International Hydrological Decade and the International Year of Freshwater), organized events (e.g., the Dublin International Conference on Water and Environment and the four World Water Forums), and issue

oriented organizations (e.g., the International Hydrological Programme and the Global Water Partnership). These institutional arrangements – or "initiatives" – overlap at many points; but as nodes in a network, they envelop a constellation of topics, specialties, and knowledges.

Despite clashing viewpoints over the perceived utility and efficacy of megaconferences, the history, perceptions, and effects of GWIs remain poorly understood. How and when have GWIs formed? What epistemological trends were they responding to? What have been their organizational connections? What makes them tick? What have they accomplished? And perhaps most importantly, what role do GWIs play in sustainable water management – in the boardrooms, on the reading shelf, and on the ground?

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A ROADMAP TO GWIS

To appreciate the importance of GWIs in water governance, we address two crucial moments in the development of GWIs. First, it is important to recognize that the concept of water was not always "global." A short history of key organizations, professional societies, and megaconferences reveals a palpable trend toward institutional proliferation and synthesized networks. We argue that it is through these rich veins of organizational affiliations and collaborations that water management has been globalized.

Second, we demonstrate how the institutional diversity resulting from the growth of GWIs is highly productive in terms of sustaining networks. Seen in this light, GWIs have helped set global research and implementation agendas, strengthened international collaborations, and legitimized certain forms of water governance – especially ones that emphasize openness, stakeholder involvement, and sustainable-management strategies such as Integrated Water Resources Management, or IWRM (Milich and Varady, 1999). We draw from the results of a recent survey of water experts to show that, while overlap and proliferation are seen as negative, efforts to "streamline" GWIs are overwhelmingly discouraged (Varady and Iles-Shih, in press).

A HISTORY OF GLOBAL WATER

A historical analysis of water governance shows that water was not always perceived, addressed, studied, inventoried, or managed as a "global" resource. Instead, the concept of water management became globalized through the sequential adoption of new paradigms, each reflecting then current modes of thinking. Figure 1 depicts the progression of different management frameworks. For example, in the early 20th Century, state led development projects and centralized institutions were the norm. Rational actor models of environmental behavior, economics, and decision making rose to prominence with the mid-century advent of the Chicago school. The late 1970s were marked by a radical shift toward models of neoliberal governance, involving components such as structural adjustment programs and sharp decreases in state spending. This period was followed by a rise in the nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector. Sustainable development, public participation, transparency, and decentralization – concepts often taken for granted in contemporary water policy – are relatively new governance paradigms, arising in the late 1980s.

Global water institutions, through organizational networks and encounters, have played critical roles in legitimizing governance paradigms throughout history. The earliest efforts at formal organization were professional scientific societies. Beginning in the 1880s with the International Navigation Association, these had formed among professionals of various stripes to construct common intellectual spaces, share expertise, and stimulate and promote research. By the mid-1950s, water scientists, engineers, and managers had established respected, well subscribed organizations, each pursuing its members' interests; no fewer than a dozen important professional water societies currently function (Varady, 2003).

These societies have played a key role in explaining the global water cycle and helping diffuse new knowledge. But they were not instrumental in elevating public awareness of the value of water. That consciousness arose after the Second World War, whose end engendered strong multinational approaches to avoiding new wars. Recognizing that many of the world's problems transcend borders, the newly created United Nations (UN) advocated broad multilateralism and acknowledged that the roots of military conflict could be addressed only by improving human conditions.

The convergence of these principles – concerted multilateralism and an integrated view of the causes of conflict – spawned the establishment of a family of UN agencies to tackle health, nutrition, education and science, economics, and human rights. During the 1950s and 1960s, these agencies spearheaded the earliest global resources initiatives, such as two pioneering and influential designated time periods: the International Geophysical Year (1957 to 1958), and the International Hydrological Decade (1965 to 1974) – which at its conclusion became the International Hydrological Programme, housed at UNESCO.

The post-war period was a time of boundless confidence in the ability of science and technology to transform society and adapt the landscape to human needs. Nowhere was this new impulse more manifest than in the realm of water. The era was marked by ambitious, large scale waterworks such as dams, barrages, irrigation schemes, and hydroelectric plants; river diversions and interbasin transfers; and wetlands-drainage and land-reclamation projects. Heralded as signals of 20th Century progress, these enterprises underlined the centrality of water to society.

For a time, the International Hydrological Programme was the main water related organization (not including professional societies) with a global purview. The

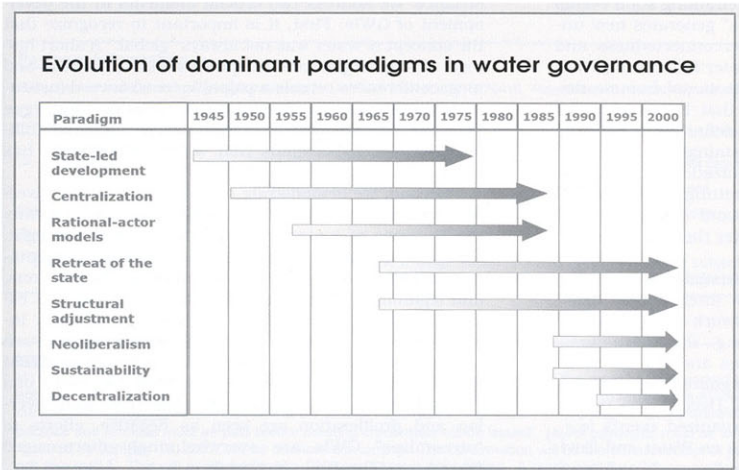


Figure 1. Evolution of Dominant Paradigms in Water Governance.

late 1980s witnessed a rapid increase in the number of such organizations, a trend that accelerated further in the 1990s. Among the groups born during that time were the World Water Council, the Global Water Partnership, the World Water Assessment Programme, and the HELP (Hydrology for the Environment, Life, and Policy) Initiative, to name just a few. Many of these groups are leaders in promoting more recent concepts in water management, such as decentralization, public participation, and institutional cooperation at the "global" level.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKS AND INSTITUTIONAL DIVERSITY

Given the burst of new GWIs across sectors and regions, it is useful to explore the concept of "institutional diversity." Social scientists show that institutional diversity is highly productive in terms of sustaining networks: setting global agendas, legitimizing certain forms of governance, and strengthening international collaborations (Seyfang, 2003). Yet the question remains: When are GWIs a cacophony and not a crescendo of institutional resources, time, and efforts?

To address this question, we draw from a recent survey of global water experts. Overall, results indicate that while institutional overlap and proliferation are negatively viewed, efforts to "streamline" GWIs are overwhelmingly discouraged (Varady and Iles-Shih, in press). For example, 75 percent of survey respondents thought institutional overlap – defined as the duplication of institutional objectives and efforts – was prevalent in global water governance (about 50 experts responded to questions on overlap and proliferation). Half of the raters considered overlap to be a significant occurrence, and 58 percent characterized overlap as a negative trend. Regarding GWI proliferation (i.e., institutional propagation), 56 percent of respondents thought proliferation was significant. Attitudes toward proliferation were even more negative (64 percent) than toward overlap (58 percent).

These results reflect a particular impression of the institutional landscape: GWIs have boomed in the spaces of global level governance, though not without replication, crowding, and competition. Despite views from water experts that overlap and proliferation are negative attributes, 82 percent preferred *guiding these trends instead of stopping or limiting them*. In other words, a flood of GWIs may exist in the global sector, but experts resoundingly reject efforts to police proliferation or streamline overlap. Alternatives, such as flexible management or improved avenues of communication, were suggested instead.

These empirical insights provide a much needed context to debates over global water management. GWIs, for all their faults, are seen as a wellspring of institutional diversity: the rich patchwork of rules, norms, objectives, individuals, and collective efforts to manage water. The insertion of GWIs into the global sphere has not come without problems, yet the institutional diversity of the GWI field may prove to strengthen governance. In this view, improvements in governance can arise not only via

increased opportunities to voice concerns in international forums (the megaconference "talkfests"), but also through sustaining connections and creating new collaborations among organizations and individuals. Such a process keeps global agendas open to fresh ideas and goals, and to legitimizing governance in a democratic, albeit hectic, setting.

STRENGTHENING NETWORKS AND ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY IN GLOBAL WATER GOVERNANCE

How can the reframing of GWIs inform water policy and management? On one level, the history of GWIs prompts us to reconsider fundamentally the "global" spaces of water governance. In fact, global efforts to influence governance are constituted through increasingly important but very particular venues, places, and networks. Global governance is not characterized by an even or smooth distribution of power, decision making, and policy across space. Rather, global water governance occurs in specific places (e.g., Paris, Stockholm, or Tokyo), through particular networks of knowledge transfer and communication (e.g., the referee system of water journals, and recognized educational centers such as UNESCO's Institute for Water Educations), and in specific venues (e.g., the cafeterias and corridors of the World Water Forums).

That these various endeavors are connected by active affiliations through networks, rather than via formal, predetermined linkages, diminishes the significance of actions taken in isolation. Accordingly, to see conferences as be-all, end-all events is unproductive. The more fruitful question is not "Are megaconferences good or bad?" but "How do we keep GWI networks sustainable?" In other words, the question of achieving sustainability in governance is intimately linked to the health of networks.

This reframing holds important considerations for policy at multiple levels. For example, many programs that support "institutional development" tend to concentrate their efforts on strengthening individual institutions (often through funding or training) without making allowances for their ties (or lack of ties) to related institutions. Some GWIs – such as the Global Water Partnership, the HELP Initiative, and FRIEND (Flow Regimes from International Experimental Network and Data Sets) – offer excellent illustration of how such networks can connect scientists, managers, and stakeholders in widely dispersed basins across the globe.

The question of achieving sustainability in governance therefore starts with the need to see GWIs as existing and operating within vital networks. To maximize the effectiveness of GWIs in water governance requires strengthening and enhancing the resilience of this set of interconnected institutions. Some of this process takes place organically in the busy hallways of megaconferences, some of it is disseminated in publications, and some of it arises from awareness raising periods such as the current "International Water For Life Decade." The ensemble holds promise for laying the ground work for sustainable global water governance.

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