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## Inclusive governance: the role of knowledge in fulfilling the obligations of citizens

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### Abstract

Inclusive governance and citizen engagement in governing water is important in enhancing service delivery. Good citizens endorse their obligations alongside their respective rights. To date, much focus has been on the rights approach to fulfil basic human needs. There has been commendable progress in this regard. However, water resources are experiencing increased pressures from increased population, urbanization and industrialization in a time when climate change is manifesting recurrent extreme events and increased temperatures. In this paper, we present the point of focusing on citizens' responsibilities and obligations alongside the rights approaches. We also make the submission that for citizens to recognize and act on their obligations, they need to be capacitated around water matters. Through social learning, enhanced collective action is expected with an outcome of improved decision-making.

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### 1. Introduction

The context for freshwater management has radically changed in the past 25 years. Better and more accessible information can shed greater light on ineffective water management practices. However, some positive developments

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have rung in new challenges. Decentralization, for example, has resulted in opportunities to customise policies to local realities, but in many instances has created more institutional fragmentation, making it harder to resolve regional or national problems, such as flooding or water pricing. However, there is an increasing realization that bottom-up, inclusive decision-making that involves a range of stakeholders is the best way forward.

In terms of the kinds of global changes we face today, as well as the development discourse, there has never been a more opportune moment to rethink the way we ‘do water governance’ in development. It is high on the policy agenda and hardly a day goes by without reference to the crucial role that institutions, politics and power play in determining water and development outcomes. Yet to seize this opportunity, we need to ‘do things differently’ in the governance field itself and (radically) rethink our ways of working.

How then can we improve inclusive governance and what would this form of governance look like? There was much debate on this at the Stockholm International Water Week in 2015. Here, there was an underlying – and sometimes uncomfortable – feeling that we need to innovate and change if, as a community of practice, we are to make a real difference. People-centred policies that govern the management of water resources reflect the need to explore innovations based on social theory and practice, in order to better understand the stakeholders’ collective role in better managing our water resources.

In defining the role of citizens, to date much focus has been on the rights-based approach to enhance access to water, while not enough focus has been on the role of good citizens in fulfilling individual obligations. This paper focuses on developments in enhancing citizen participation in the governance of water in an attempt to better understand collective as well as individual obligations.

Inclusive governance and stakeholder engagement in governance hold specific importance because in practice water this is a highly decentralized and fragmented sector, with multiple, interdependent players operating at different levels and scales. The idea behind engagement is to involve stakeholders to thus reduce conflicts and improve outcomes. In return, water users or stakeholders need to accept shared responsibility for inventing ways to meet the conflicting interests of multiple groups at the same time, given legal, financial and other constraints (Susskind, 2013).

One of the challenges with collaborative action or stakeholder engagement is in creating structures that allow for and enable it at relevant levels. As far as formal structures are concerned, participation platforms are ways for stakeholders to give input into governance processes that influence water resource management decision-making and implementation (Bouman-Dentener & Devos, 2015). However, it is important to note that collaborative action can also occur outside of formal structures, and therefore it is important to understand how and when this does or can occur.

The premise for public participation is the growing desire of the public to be involved in decisions that will affect them, and this has influenced the need for greater openness of decision-making processes. In this sense, public participation can counter public mistrust of government and expert-led decision-making processes, since it results in an understanding of problems by varied stakeholders who can negotiate trade-offs, make more informed decisions, seek consensus and take shared ownership of solutions, and set common priorities for all parties involved in an issue (Yee, 2010).

While there are benefits to effective stakeholder engagement, this must be balanced with the potential challenges to sharing information, consulting varied stakeholders, making joint commitments and sharing responsibility for implementation. Representation at meetings does not guarantee substantive and meaningful contributions, that is, active participation (Brown, 2014). The danger of the more powerful sectors/stakeholders capturing the process and unduly influencing the outcome also needs to be considered. Effective engagement requires that citizens be informed

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