



# The Value Base of Water Governance: A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective



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## ABSTRACT

Some scholars promote water governance as a normative concept to improve water resources management globally, while others conceive of it as an analytical term to describe the processes, systems and institutions around the management of water resources and water supply. Critics often highlight how specific water governance scenarios fail to deliver socially desirable outcomes, such as social justice or environmental sustainability. While water governance is often perceived as a technical matter, its conceptual and practical components are in fact based on multiple values that, nonetheless, often remain implicit. The present paper seeks to uncover this value base and discusses existing research on values from multiple perspectives, using material from economics, philosophy, psychology, and other social sciences. In different disciplines, values can be understood as fundamental guiding principles, governance-related values or as values assigned to water resources. Together, they shape complex relationships with water governance, which from an analytical perspective is understood as a combination of policy, politics, and polity. Introducing a new conceptual framework, this study seeks to provide a theoretical foundation for empirical research on water governance processes and conflicts.

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## 1. Introduction

Water governance is being promoted, at least since the 1990s, as a normative concept to improve water resources management globally, with a focus on increased stakeholder engagement, flexibility, and less hierarchical forms of interaction between the state and society. At the same time, water governance is subjected to continuous criticism for not being sustainable, equitable, or democratic. Water governance, as well as its criticisms are heavily influenced by value judgments of all the actors involved. This value base, however, usually remains implicit and is rarely investigated (Glenk and Fischer, 2010; Groenfeldt and Schmidt, 2013). This paper aims to develop a theoretical foundation for investigating the role of values in water governance processes.

Research on the value base of water governance is complicated by the complexity of water governance and value concepts. This paper therefore proceeds by discussing various meanings of water governance, before introducing multiple perspectives on values, a term that is of central importance to economists, philosophers, psychologists and other social scientists. Water governance may refer to a theoretic

ideal which prescribes that government organisations should jointly tackle water management issues with stakeholders and civil society, rather than act by themselves in a top-down manner (Castro, 2007; UNDP, 2004). In the literature, this perspective is known under the headline of “the shift from government to governance” (Walker, 2014). Alternatively, water governance describes an analytical approach to researching water management processes, which is more generally concerned with state-society relations within water management. Values can be understood as guiding principles or abstract goals that people seek to uphold in decision-making. In relation to natural resources, values can also be understood as expressions of the importance and meanings that are assigned to them. This paper proposes a new conceptual framework for investigating value-governance relationships. The framework, which is also relevant to other areas of environmental governance, integrates these multiple strands of theory on values and water governance into one interdisciplinary approach.

## 2. Water Governance as a Normative and Analytical Concept

There are several competing understandings of the term ‘governance’ and, consequently, of water governance. Governance may firstly be understood as a *normative* concept, which advocates that government organisations should work with stakeholders and society in political steering processes (Hill, 2013). It represents a ‘shift from government to governance’ (Walker, 2014), that is, from rigid forms

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of rule enforcement to more flexible and interactive mechanisms of public engagement and supposedly shared decision-making. It is thus normative with regard to the decision-making process itself, without making any claims about the content of such decisions. This conception of governance has been developed in the context of liberalising state reforms in reaction to persistent criticism of the failures of the previous model of public administration associated with Fordist policies (Ioris, 2014) and is therefore opposed to hierarchical forms of interaction between the state and society which are perceived as outdated and inefficient. In the policy arena, governance is a concept often associated with 'Integrated Water Resources Management' and the Dublin principles, which also place public participation at the heart of the agenda (Benson et al., 2015).

There is considerable overlap with the intrinsically normative term 'good governance', which describes desirable properties of governance systems, such as strong public participation and consultation, efficiency, transparency, the absence of corruption, accountability, legitimacy, justice, and the rule of law (Tortajada, 2010). Both governance and good governance are being promoted by international organisations in the water context, e.g. the OECD (2013) water governance initiative.

Governance may alternatively be understood as an *analytical* concept, generally concerned with the relationship between state intervention and societal autonomy in political steering processes (Héritier, 2002) to understand public decision-making processes. Several different modes of governance have been discussed in the literature, ranging from hierarchical modes to networks and market mechanisms (Schneider, 2005). These modes differ with regard to the level of state intervention versus societal autonomy, with market-based governance being the most autonomous and decentralised form of governance. An analytical understanding of governance is widespread in political science. Governance has three different dimensions: polity, politics, and policy, i.e. institutional aspects, power relations between political actors, and the mechanisms and instruments used to achieve certain outcomes (Treib et al., 2007).

It is important to be aware whether an analytical or a normative perspective is applied. For example, the normative understanding of governance is conceptually close to the network mode of governance, given that networks are seen as a form of joint decision-making among public and societal actors (Schneider, 2005). While a normative stance on governance would advocate that governance should be characterised by joint decision-making, applying an analytical perspective would imply describing and analysing patterns of joint decision-making without commenting on their desirability.

In human geography and related disciplines, environmental governance and water governance have been frequently criticised because in their normative conception they contain highly simplistic, utilitarian claims about the expected benefits and alleged advantages (Ioris, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2005). While acknowledging that state reforms have created novel institutional arrangements within which political decision-making processes are performed, some scholars criticise a democratic deficit of these 'new' forms of governance, despite the fact that they are supposed to achieve greater inclusiveness and empowerment (Swyngedouw, 2005). Given the absence of well-established rules on participation in a society with marked asymmetries (Hajer, 2003), state actors may cooperate disproportionately with stakeholders who are more favourable towards government policy anyway (Swyngedouw, 2005). From this perspective, governance is thus perceived merely as an array of new 'technologies of government' that is part of the conservative modernisation of the state apparatus.

Furthermore, much criticism is directed to cases in which particular governance arrangements have been used to exclude parts of society from public services, such as urban water supply, creating social injustice. Case studies have been conducted from a political ecology perspective for example in Lima (Ioris, 2012) or Mumbai (Anand, 2011). Ioris

(2012) claims that water scarcity is artificially created and preserved by political elites using neoliberal water governance reforms, with the intention to perpetuate social inequality. In the case of Mumbai, its municipal water corporation has been allegedly systematically discriminating against Muslim settlers by providing only unreliable water supply to their settlements. Both cases highlight the political dimensions of water governance and how conflicts and injustices may persist despite institutional reforms. For political ecologists, water governance is rarely simply a set of neutral and objective tools.

Finally, neoliberal water governance as one common type of water governance has been attacked for its failure to produce socially and environmentally sustainable outcomes, often within a broader critique of neoliberalism, and the associated impacts of privatisation. Furlong and Bakker (2010), for example, found that neoliberal reforms within Canadian municipal water utilities seeking to increase the distance between government and management may reduce incentives to work towards social and environmental goals. However, they argue that conventional government-led service delivery may face other trade-offs, and thus call for "strategic (rather than ideological) improvements in governance" (ibid.: 349). Budds and McGranahan (2003) make a similar case in arguing that water governance problems in developing countries may be related to land tenure issues rather than public versus private water supply management.

In many cases, critics of water governance may not offer any resolution of the problems raised, especially if water governance is criticised on very fundamental, philosophical terms (e.g. Bustamante et al., 2012). The normative work of authors who focus on political aspects of water governance, e.g. citing a lack of democracy or equity, can be interpreted as part of a political and ideological struggle against the foundations of the dominant international water governance agenda, which in their opinion represents the interests of small political and economic elites in charge of water management reforms.

The normative defence of water governance and criticisms of particular water governance arrangements, such as neoliberal water governance, have something in common: they are both based on values. Values are sometimes listed explicitly as properties of 'good governance' (see e.g. Tortajada, 2010), but are mostly left implicit. Where authors criticise a democratic deficit, for example, they may be appealing to values such as social justice, transparency, fairness, and equity. The recurrent criticisms of neoliberal reforms in water governance do not stem from a general opposition to needed political and economic reforms, but should be interpreted as value conflicts; neoliberalism may violate values of equity for the sake of efficiency, for example. Or in more applied terms, cultural or ecological values of water may be sacrificed for economic values, for example where a river is straightened to facilitate navigation to support economic development, with detrimental impacts on river ecology and traditional livelihoods.

### 3. Values – A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective

This section seeks to shed light on and bridge competing understandings of the term 'value' with a heuristic discussion from different perspectives. It introduces understandings of value and their interrelations across a very diverse set of disciplines and discusses approaches towards the measurement and analysis of values. Due to limitations of space, not every discipline that deals with values (e.g. anthropology) has been discussed here and we leave an inclusion of other disciplines for further consideration in the future. At this point, our review focuses on the following four disciplines: environmental and ecological economics, whose concepts are pervasive in environmental governance more generally; philosophy, which has the longest history of discussing values and provides the foundations for all other disciplines; psychology, whose understanding of values is highly relevant for decision-making and has significant overlap with sociology and political science;

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