

Scalar Politics in Sectoral Reforms: Negotiating the Implementation Of water Policies in Ecuador (1990–2008)

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Summary. — In Ecuador neo-liberal reforms in the 1990s transformed the water and irrigation sector at different scales. We analyze how these neoliberal reforms were implemented from the top-down by the World Bank and the national government, as well as how from the grassroots water users negotiated these policies and their implementation at local and national level. We show that these sectoral reforms were politically contested as it changed roles, responsibilities, and authority at different scales of governance. This is evidenced by the fact that locally the relationships between water users, differently scaled state agencies, and broader networks greatly determined how water users associations negotiated the irrigation management transfer program as well as the development of new water policies. Our analysis highlights how the alliances that differently positioned actors create to navigate water policy implementation shape the scalar and the political dimensions of sectoral reforms. It shows that actors need multi-scalar networks of support to develop political leverage, overcome opposition, and materialize projects in the water governance domain.
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Key words — irrigation reforms, decentralization, water user associations, grassroots struggles, ecuador

1. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, repeated waves of water sector reforms have been implemented since the 1980s (Merrey *et al.*, 2007; Suhardiman & Giordano, 2014). These reforms are embedded in the broader international agenda established in the “Washington Consensus” (Andolina, Laurie, & Radcliffe, 2009; Bebbington, 1997; Perreault, 2006). Many of these reforms - including those of the water sector- were initiated and financially backed by major international donor agencies and lending institutions such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), among others (Molle, Mollinga, & Wester, 2009; Mollinga & Bolding, 2004; Suhardiman & Mollinga, 2012; Trawick, 2003; Wilder & Romero Lankao, 2006). In these reforms, slimming down and decentralizing state institutions to open more space for local governments, organized civil society, stakeholder participation, markets, and the private sector hold a central place (Boelens, Hoogesteger, & Baud, 2015; Perreault, 2005; Wester, Merrey, & de Lange, 2003). In the irrigation sector, the principal objectives of these reforms were reducing government expenditure in irrigation system administration, operation and maintenance (AO&M), increasing cost recovery through irrigation fee collection, improving infrastructural viability and irrigation performance, and restoring productivity levels (Rap, 2006; Vermillion, 1997). To achieve this large and costly irrigation bureaucracies were transformed to open more space for water users’ associations (WUAs),¹ local governments and the private sector in irrigation system AO&M (see Mollinga & Bolding, 2004; Rap, Wester, & Pérez Prado, 2004). The most commonly used policy instruments to achieve these goals were far-reaching legal and institutional reforms coupled to Irrigation Management

Transfer (IMT) programs (often also referred to as Participatory Irrigation Management programs: PIM).

Although many of these reform processes have been analyzed and described (Oorthuizen, 2003; Rap, 2006; Rap & Wester, 2013; Suhardiman, Giordano, Rap, & Wegerich, 2014), little is known about how the reform processes are shaped by—and affect—the relations that emerge at different scales between donors, state agents, and the water users/irrigators. It is therefore not surprising that Suhardiman and Giordano (2014) call for a deeper exploration of precisely these relations and importantly the way water users relate to the state in, during, and after reform processes. This article aims to contribute to a better understanding of these relations and their implications using the analytical concept of geographical scale (Marston, 2000) and, based on this concept, the notion of *scalar politics* (MacKinnon, 2011).

Ecuador offers an interesting lens through which to analyze sectoral reform processes. In the early 1990s, under pressure of the World Bank, the government radically transformed the legal and institutional arrangements within the water and irrigation sector. The state institutional framework was decentralized and slimmed down through rescaling. These reforms included IMT, which consisted of handing over the AO&M tasks in public irrigation systems to newly created WUAs (see Vermillion, 1994). IMT was introduced in 35 out of 73 state-managed irrigation systems during 1998–2001 (Cremers, Ooijevaar, & Boelens, 2005). Today, WUAs man-

*We thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editor for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. Part of this research was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research division of Science for Global Development (NWO-WOTRO) project numbers W 01.65.308.00 and W 01.70.100.007. The usual disclaimers apply. Final revision accepted: April 30, 2017.

age formerly state-managed irrigation systems and have become important political agents at different scales of the Ecuadorian water sector (Hoogesteger, 2016, 2017; Hoogesteger & Verzijl, 2015). Therefore, the Ecuadorian case offers a valuable opportunity to understand how, through top-down and user-based bottom-up scalar politics, irrigation reform processes shape the sector and the relations within it.

This article is based on the first and the second authors' fieldwork and secondary data, complemented by insights from the third² and fourth authors. The first author's fieldwork focused on understanding how, since the early 1990s, state policies have facilitated the consolidation of WUAs and how, through WUAs, water users navigated these policies and were able to develop political agency at different scales (see Hoogesteger, 2013a). The data were collected in 13 months of fieldwork during 2008–13. The second author's fieldwork focused on unraveling the Ecuadorian IMT process and its aftermath by examining the case of the Pisque irrigation system and the bureaucratic reform process (see Tiaguaro-Rea, 2012). These data were collected between July and September 2011. For data collection, both authors relied on participant observation, open and semi-structured interviews with: (1) water users, (ex-)leaders of WUAs and WUA federations in Ecuador's Central Highlands; (2) (ex-)staff of the different state organizations in the Ecuadorian water sector; (3) (ex-)staff of non-governmental organizations engaged in the Ecuadorian irrigation sector. Secondary data were collected through literature research and, importantly, from the respondents; many of whom provided valuable documents and unpublished studies. Additional insights into research data and their interpretation were gained through the direct experience of the second and fourth authors' work in the irrigation state bureaucracy since 2012, at the National Irrigation Institute (INAR) and the National Water Secretariat (SENA-GUA), respectively.

In the next section, we expand on the concepts of scale and scalar politics, which, as we explain, form a valuable entry point to understand sectoral reform processes in natural resources governance; in this specific case, the irrigation sector. Then, we present how top-down scalar politics shaped the legal and institutional reforms that reconfigured the Ecuadorian irrigation sector during 1990–2001. To do this, we first analyze how the state institutions in the water sector were rescaled and transformed during 1994–98. Subsequently, we scrutinize the scalar politics that shaped the Ecuadorian IMT program. In section five, we show how, from the bottom up, water users (through their WUAs) played an important role in molding the outcomes of the IMT program in Ecuador. Next, we show how the creation of WUAs as new autonomous scales of irrigation management changed the relations that exist between water users, the state, and other actors. In the conclusions, we return to our main contention and reflect on the value of studying sectoral reform processes through top-down and bottom-up scalar politics.

2. SECTORAL REFORMS AS SCALAR POLITICS

In human geography, the concept of geographical scale has received much attention as a background against which human interactions take place (Brenner, 2001; Cox, 1998a; Delaney & Leitner, 1997; Howitt, 2007). Essentially, scale is a “socio-spatial level of analysis” (Perreault, 2003, p. 98) that is used to better understand “the processes that shape and constitute social practices at different levels of analysis” (Marston, 2000, p. 220). The central questions that motivate the inquiries

into scale are, first, to better grasp how and why scales, as expressed through an apparently fixed series of nested levels (i.e. the body, the local, the regional, the national, and the global), are important for social, political, and environmental processes. Second, how do these scales enable or constrain the agency of specific actors; and, third, to what extent can local actors overcome these scalar constraints to agency?

In our analysis of the Ecuadorian irrigation sector, we start from the notion that scales are socially constructed by the outcome of the tensions that exist between the practices of human agents, structural forces, and nature (Marston, 2000; Neumann, 2009). Institutional, legal, and water user-based scales, among others, exercise agency at any given moment through their temporal stability (fixation) and the practices that emerge from them (Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). In doing so, scalar fixes organize hierarchies binding political, socio-economic, and socio-environmental activities that organize social practices; in this case, those relating to the irrigation sector. These become organizing elements of human interactions according to established hierarchies and related power structures. Therefore, actors create, recreate, control, or challenge and transform specific forms of scalar fixity to advance their interests (Cox, 1998a; Swyngedouw, 1997).

Based on this notion, our main concern is to understand how different actors create, transform, challenge, and navigate scales to advance their political projects. In this, we espouse the notion that the flows of power and agency in scalar verticality operate in either direction; from the top down (global to local) and from the bottom up (local to global) (Leitner & Miller, 2007). From this perspective, jumping scales cannot be reduced to simply moving from the local to the global as it also and importantly includes moving from the global to the local. Therefore, as Cox (1998b) points out, it is important to understand the ways in which, through networks, actors become engaged, constitute, transform, and transcend different scales. We pursue this by building on MacKinnon's (2011) concept of scalar politics, which establishes that scale itself is not necessarily the prime object of contestation; rather it is “specific processes and institutionalized practices that are themselves differently scaled” (p. 22–23). Therefore, we focus on the strategies by which actors aim to transform institutionalized practices through engagements with differently scaled actors and networks and how, through these engagements and the creation of alliances, actors create, navigate, and transform different scales (McCarthy, 2005). The framework presented by MacKinnon (2011) offers a valuable entry point to investigate these scalar strategies of actors and rests on the following four principles:

- (1) *Scalar politics are not per se about scale*: This principle rests on the premise that initiatives and political projects have scalar aspects and implications. Therefore, scale is regarded as an important dimension of political activity rather than its prime focus. This recognizes that political projects of actors that aim to challenge or transform specific processes and institutionalized practices have scalar implications for particularly scaled legal, institutional, and political fixes and related power relations.
- (2) *Scalar path dependency*: Social and material scalar fixes build on existing and historically structured scalar arrangements and in themselves create path dependency by exercising agency. Therefore, existing scalar fixes create a particular historical process of continuity in practices and relations that project and inform new scalar arrangements and configurations of domination and subordination (Brenner, 2001).

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