



The politics of river basin planning and state transformation processes in Nepal



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ABSTRACT

Since the late 1990s, river basin planning has become a central idea in water resources management and a mainstream approach supported by international donors through their water programs globally. This article presents river basin planning as a function of power and contested arena of power struggles, where state actors create, sustain, and reproduce their bureaucratic power through the overall shaping of (imagined) bureaucratic territory. It argues that river basin planning is not an antidote to current 'dysfunction' in water resources management, rooted in overlapping jurisdictions, fragmented decision making, and bureaucratic competitions between various government agencies. On the contrary, it illustrates how river basin planning becomes a new 'territorial frontier', created and depicted by different government agencies as their envisioned operational boundary and as a means to sustain and increase their bureaucratic power and sectoral decision-making authority, amidst ongoing processes of federalism in Nepal.

1. Introduction

With the introduction of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) concept globally (Biswas, 2008; Chikozho, 2008; Dombrowsky, 2008; McDonnell, 2008), water resources management policies in both developed and developing countries have been geared towards river basin approaches, while positioning the basin as the envisioned scale for integrated water resources planning, development, and management (Merrey, 2008; Molle, 2008). Supported both discursively and financially by major international donors such as the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as well as international organizations such as the Global Water Partnership, river basin approaches have become the dominant flagship and mainstream approach of global water programs (Butterworth et al., 2010; UNEP, 2012; UN-Water, 2008; van der Zaag, 2005). In Nepal, the idea of river basin planning was first initiated by Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (Suhardiman et al., 2015) and later also supported by other international donors including the ADB, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Government of Australia.

This article looks at river basin planning processes in Nepal and how they are shaped and reshaped by state actors' sectoral development interests and strategies, while placing it within the wider trend to

rescale environmental governance (Cohen, 2012; Cohen and Bakker, 2014; Harris and Alatout, 2010; McCarthy, 2005; Reed and Bruyneel, 2010). Cohen and Bakker (2014: 129) argue that this trend is driven by "the desirability of 'depoliticizing decision making through alignment with ecological (rather than jurisdictional or geopolitical) boundaries'". Scholars have discussed this move towards 'watershed' approaches and its challenges in terms of accountability, public participation, and integration (Cohen, 2012; Cohen and Davidson, 2011). They have also brought to light how the current conceptualization of river basin planning views and positions river basin boundaries as natural boundaries, impenetrable by power relationships and power struggles (Allan, 2003; Blomquist and Schlager, 2005; Gyawali et al., 2006; Venot et al., 2011; Wester et al., 2003). Referring to these neglects of power structures and processes, scholars have urged the need to recognize that water resources management decisions are made based on political choices and contestation (Cohen and Bakker, 2014; Warner et al., 2008; Wester et al., 2003).

Building on this literature, we argue that while the idea of river basin planning and management fits with the need for better coordination and integration in water resources management (e.g. irrigation, hydropower, water supply infrastructure for domestic use, navigation, among others), rescaling the governance unit, in this case to basin level, would not automatically resolve the fundamental political

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questions. As stated by Blomquist and Schlager (2005, p. 102): “*The watershed does not resolve fundamental political questions about where the boundaries should be drawn, how participation should be structured, and how and to whom decision makers within a watershed are accountable.*” Drawing institutional boundaries is indeed a political act: “*Boundaries that define the reach of management activities determine who and what matters*” (p. 105).

River basin planning processes are shaped by power structures and relationships, manifested in bureaucratic competition between sectoral ministries, as well as overlapping operational boundaries between government agencies working across the different administrative levels (e.g. national, provincial, local). Linking river basin planning with state transformation processes in Nepal, this article shows that basin planning is not an antidote to current ‘dysfunction’ in water resources management, rooted in overlapping jurisdictions, fragmented decision making, and bureaucratic competition between the different segments of governments. On the contrary, it illustrates how river basin planning becomes a new ‘territorial frontier’, created and depicted by various government agencies as their envisioned operational boundary, amidst ongoing processes of federalism. Most importantly, it shows how government ministries’ preference for basin planning approaches is rooted in their interest to preserve and increase their bureaucratic power and sectoral decision-making authority, through the framing of basin scale as the scale where the country’s water resources should be governed, vis-à-vis ongoing processes of federalism to transfer decision making authority to provincial and local government bodies.

Building on Molle’s (2009b) analysis on how the concept of river basin has been used by particular social groups or organizations to strengthen the legitimacy of their agendas, this article positions river basin planning as a function of power, contested territorial boundary, and arena of power struggles (Molle, 2009a; Warner et al., 2008), where state actors create, sustain, and reproduce their bureaucratic power through the overall shaping of (imagined) bureaucratic territory. As stated by Molle (2009a: 484): “*Beyond its relevance as a geographical unit for water resources development and management purposes, the river basin is also a political and ideological construct, with its discursive representations and justifications*”. Here, river basin planning processes become an arena where government ministries compete for influence, jurisdiction and responsibility. Consequently, the basin becomes the newly envisioned, albeit overlapping, bureaucratic territory.

Based on a review of policy documents and legal frameworks, as well as series of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with respectively 12 government officials from various government agencies at the national level, 3 international donor representatives, and 5 civil society organizations, we highlight the central positioning of river basin planning approaches in different government ministries’ policies and legal frameworks in Nepal. Next to these national level interviews conducted in Kathmandu, we carried out 11 semi-structured interviews with officials from the different government and non-government agencies at various administrative levels (provincial, district and municipality) within the boundary of Karnali and Mahakali basin as our study area. Through these interviews, we gather information on how the different actors perceive current challenges in water resources management and how they view river basin planning approaches as part of their strategies to cope with these challenges. Both series of interviews took place from December 2016 to March 2017. Interviews were transcribed word-for-word. Each transcription was coded using predefined nodes, including nodes defined by the first author before the fieldwork, and new nodes for information that emerged during the interviews. The coding process was done manually and designed in line with NVIVO 10 tool.

2. River basin as new territorial frontier for sectoral egoism

Scholars have highlighted the political characteristics of scale, and how it can be used to shape and reshape power structure and power

relationship (Delaney and Leitner, 1997; McCarthy, 2005). Marston’s (2000) conception of the politics of scale shows that scale is neither natural nor given, but is constantly shaped and reshaped as a result of contestation and power struggles by various actors. Or as stated by Newstead et al (2003: 486): Scale is usually defined as “*the temporary fixing of the territorial scope of particular modalities of power*”. Similarly, Molle (2009a) shows how the choice to focus on specific scale (e.g. basin level) resembles not only the interests of those in power, but also the process of inclusion and exclusion. Cohen and Bakker’s (2014: 131) define scales as “*fluid rather than fixed, constructed rather than pre-given, and political in both construction and function*”. Scale has also been understood as an important dimension of the political opportunity structure available for political agents and social groups to resist (Staeheli, 1994).

This is in line with Harvey’s modern adaptation of space, which reinforces ‘spatiality’ as not just a representation of human rationality but also as a tool for asserting particular rationalities (Hubbarb and Kitchin, 2011: 237). Like scale, space is therefore, “not absolute, ... [but something that] depends on the circumstances” (Harvey, 2004: 3). Or, as stated by Lefebvre (2009: 186): “*These circumstances involve subject positions, or actors, who permeate and support the spatial constructs that designate social interactions*”. Policy actors conceive of space in terms of their socio-economic, cultural and political positions within that space. Shome (2003: 40) asserts that space is neither a “metaphor” nor “backdrop” for these subjects but a flexible construction that emerges from human interactions, while simultaneously molding these interactions into a kind of spatialized reality.

Drawing upon the concept of the politics of scale and spatialized reality, this article presents river basin as (imagined) bureaucratic territory, shaped and reshaped by national government ministries’ sectoral development interests, strategies, and changing perceptions of power. It illustrates how river basin planning as a concept has evolved from a holistic approach to integrate and coordinate sectoral ministries’ development plans and activities in water resources management (e.g. irrigation, industry, drinking water, environmental conservation), to become a new territorial frontier, bureaucratic means and arena of power struggles.

The article contributes to the current discourse on river basin planning and rescaling governance in two ways. First, it shows how river basin planning could serve as a new territorial frontier for sectoral egoism, amidst the ongoing process of federalism and despite the conceptual contradictions. Many have brought to light sectoral egoism, resembled in bureaucratic competition between the different government agencies as one of the key drivers behind the current ‘dysfunction’ in water resources management. Centering on how international donors have promoted the idea of river basin planning, by conflating river basins with IWRM (Cohen and Davidson, 2011), basin planning has been presented as the antidote to address such ‘dysfunction’. Our Nepal case study shows, however, how bureaucratic competition and sectoral fragmentation prevail within the very context of river basin planning processes, thus proving not only the ineffectiveness of such antidote, but also how it has become a means to extend sectoral egoism, following the country’s political move to federalism. Unlike before where sectoral ministries view river basin planning as potential threats to their sectoral decision-making authority and bureaucratic power that comes with it (Suhardiman et al., 2015), river basin planning has now become an integral part of sectoral ministries’ strategies to sustain, reproduce, and justify their role in water resources management vis-à-vis provincial and local level governments’ to be defined roles and responsibilities.

Second, it reveals how river basin planning processes are more closely linked with conflicts than integration. Following the country’s move to federalism, different sectoral ministries sustain and expand their bureaucratic operational boundary and respective sectoral decision-making authority, while relying on the centrality of river basin planning approaches. Here, the prevailing sectoral egoism results in

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