

Good Water Governance: Could Stakeholder Participation Reduce Water Insecurities in River Basins in Asia-Pacific?

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Abstract

This article focusses on water governance at a river basin level and the role of coordination, participation and partnerships between multiple stakeholders to reduce water insecurities they are facing. Water-related risks are attributed not only to escalating global and local changes, but to a high extent to failures in good water governance in river basins or their sub-basins. The key finding is that river basins in the Asia-Pacific region vividly demonstrate the emerging trend of state-centric governance evolving towards encompassing multi-stakeholder approaches. Broadening engagement, interaction and consolidating partnerships between public, private and civil society actors appears to be among the effective tools in good water governance. One of the messages is that stakeholder participation, related opportunities and barriers is a very ‘context’ oriented issue being dependent on existing specific national and local socio-economic, cultural, political and sustainability priorities. The article explores and compares stakeholder involvement and partnerships in water management in river basins in Australia, China, Russia, Thailand and Viet Nam. Findings are aggregated and contrasted to worldwide trends.

Keywords: *stakeholder participation, partnerships, water governance, river basins*

Introduction

Pervasive land-use and water-use changes are being compounded by changes in global climate to fundamentally alter water insecurity in all river basins across the Asia-Pacific region – in developed and developing countries, and in transition economies. Water risks include common challenges of shifting flood regimes, seasonal water shortages and multi-year droughts, deteriorating water quality, and problems of access to safe drinking water and sanitation. There is a growing recognition worldwide that poor water governance is among the major factors underlying aggravated water problems and risks. Inadequacies of existing water governance systems and mechanisms through which they currently perform in river basins, explain to a high extent the vulnerabilities of societies to water insecurities.

Today, new trends and patterns in water governance are emerging in Asia-Pacific countries. In many places, water governance begins to shift from strongly state-centric approaches towards more inclusive and participatory modes with greater opportunities for interactions between stakeholders. It becomes clear that success depends on multi-scale efforts not only by governments, who remain critical players, but also on the roles of other actors having an interest, or capacity, to act.



The present article presents the findings of a comparative and synthetic study based on gathering of new empirical data and new analyses of responses to reduce water-related risks with a particular focus on how stakeholders are engaged in water governance in river basins. It looks at the new trends and lessons learned about stakeholder participation in basin water management in five Asia-Pacific countries: Red and Mekong in Viet Nam; Amur in Russia, Salween in China, Ping-Chao Phraya in Thailand, and Latrobe in Australia. Opportunities and constraints for stakeholder participation and lessons learned about success and failures are discussed.

Material and Methods

The research method was based on a *comparison* and *synthesis* of results from river basins in five Asia-Pacific countries, including findings related to (i) responses to water insecurities and their impacts¹, (ii) roles and engagement of multiple stakeholders, and (iii) opportunities and limitations for stakeholder participation/partnerships in water governance. Three major clusters of stakeholders were compared within the country studies: government authorities at various levels, business, and civil society.

This was a country-based and river basin/sub-basin-based analysis and empirical data collection. The studies were undertaken in sub-basins of Latrobe in the Gippsland region of Australia, in northern sub-basins of the Nu-Salween and northern Mekong in China, Ping-Chao Phraya in northern Thailand, Red and Mekong in Viet Nam and in the Russian provinces of the Amur. Analytical exploration and data compilation about stakeholders' participation in river basins were organised according to a common format applied by each country case study. Aggregation of results from case-studies and comparing them with worldwide trends was also part of the research methodology applied.

Results

Our research shows that states in the Asia-Pacific river basins tend to respond to water-related insecurities with increasingly sophisticated institutional frameworks. This is a worldwide trend. A variety of water governance arrangements² are in place in all five countries under study and, taken together, they potentially provide substantial capacity to address water insecurities and to adapt to global change. But practices and their actual performance demonstrate many limitations, weaknesses and gaps (Kotov, 2009). There are a number of priorities for reforms and innovation, including, for example, application of integrated water resources management (IWRM) and basin-level planning and coordination, and adaptation to global change.

¹ The set of risks analysed includes (1) water quality, especially the quality of drinking water, (2) water supply and water availability for agriculture; (3) floods, (4) water in urban areas. Exploring possible insecurities associated with global climate change is emphasised.

² Existing arrangements include, for example, legislation, programs, water administrations and river basin organisations, pollution and flood control institutions, water services, management of hydro technical facilities, as well as bilateral and multilateral arrangements in shared rivers.

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Reducing Water Insecurity through Stakeholder Participation in River Basin Management in the Asia-Pacific

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Research Highlights

- Diversified water governance systems are in place in many Asia-Pacific countries: potentially providing substantial capacity to address water insecurities and to adapt to global change.
- Water governance in the region is gradually shifting from strongly state-centric approaches towards more inclusive and participatory modes with greater opportunities for interactions between stakeholders.
- Success in water-related risk reduction depends on multi-scale efforts not only by governments, who remain critical players, but also on the roles of other actors having an interest, or capacity, to act.
- Stakeholder participation and partnerships between state and non-state actors is a good tool in dealing with water-related insecurities.
- Stakeholder engagement is a very 'context' oriented issue that is dependent on existing specific national and local socio-economic, cultural, political and sustainability priorities.

Today, water governance begins to gradually shift towards more inclusive and participatory modes with greater opportunities for interactions between stakeholders. They include state and non-state actors. The synthesis shows that a variety of different stakeholders are involved in water management in river basins. Interests, capacities, influence and power of stakeholders vary widely across problem domains and scales (Nikitina *et al.*, 2010).

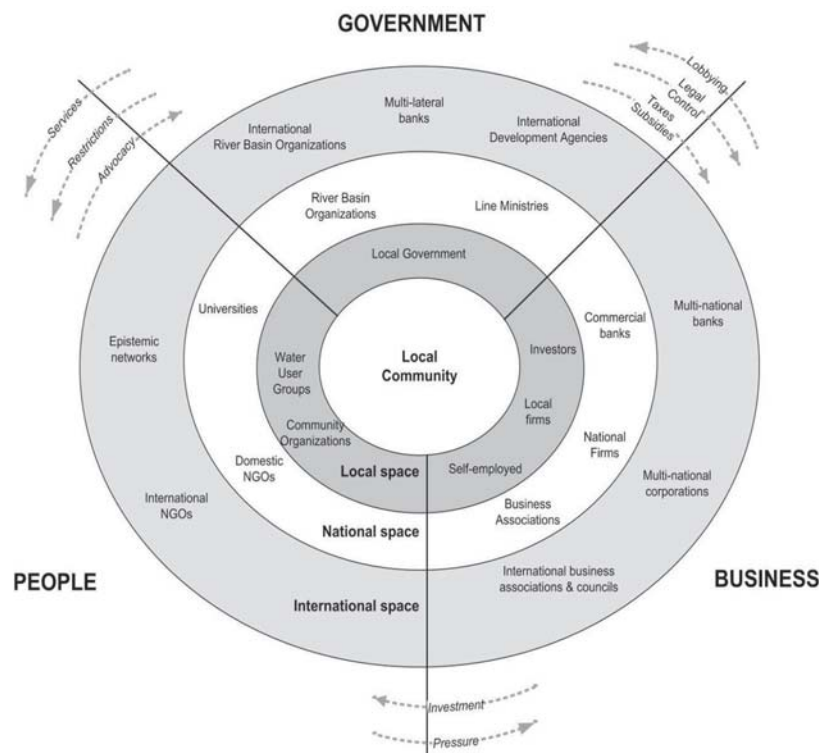


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for thinking about different types of stakeholders at different levels

While discussing the issues of stakeholder participation it is often perceived that stakeholders mainly include actor groups representing the public. But, we suggest a wider approach that encompasses the multiplicity of stakeholders, including, for example, government authorities, river basin organisations (RBO) and intergovernmental international bodies and the private sector. Close interactions between them is a key to good water governance. Aggregated findings from river basins indicate that stakeholders can be classified into three main actor groups- government authorities, business and people- at different levels (Figure 1). The stakeholder meta-class ‘people’ in this framework is also described as ‘civil society’ or ‘non-profit’ or ‘the public’ by others.

There is a number of common features of stakeholder involvement in river basins in the Asia-Pacific: (i) in all countries and river basins stakeholder engagement is an underlying trend during the last decade; (ii) although forms of public engagement vary significantly - from dialogues and discussions on water planning, or better flood protection, to regular participation in activities, river basin councils their set is typical for major river basins; (iii) the role of the government, river basin authorities in water management remains high in all countries; (iv) the increased role of various businesses is a new trend; (v) public participation is widely touted as critical to gaining public acceptance for policies and projects; (vi) in developing countries and transition economies the role of international agencies and organisations in mobilising stakeholder involvement is high; and (vii) relationships between actors are critical and success depends on the ability to develop mutual trust between actors: when government agencies are committed and play active roles to promote increased partnerships, it increases the chances for successful outcomes (Lebel and Sinh, 2009)

Discussion

Integrated approaches to river basin water management imply more frequent engagement with a broader diversity of stakeholders from within government, business and public spheres. One of the messages from our studies is that stakeholder participation needs to be further supported and promoted through various incentive mechanisms and capacity building, through enhancing awareness-based approaches, information sharing, dialogues, consultations, constructing state-private partnerships, organising campaigns for rehabilitation of river sites and joint actions in flood risk reduction at the locales.

Cross-country comparisons indicate that the extent of public awareness and participation in water management varies significantly across cases and river basins. Public participation as a social norm is more extensive in Thailand than in either Russia or Viet Nam. Here, the domestic non-governmental organisations and various advocacy networks regularly challenge state policies and decisions on water-related infrastructure with critiques in mass media and well-organised protests and campaigns. In Russia, environmental awareness of the public and responsibility to take water-related actions are low, and the public still heavily relies on ‘paternalism’ of government authorities; environmental awareness had been subdued during the communist regime (Nikitina *et al.*, 2009). In Australia, with its well developed democratic traditions, civil society involvement is much higher.

Detailed pathways and mechanisms through which stakeholder participation and coordination reduce water insecurities deserve further investigation. Potentially important mechanisms include: (i) making interests, capacities and risks of the most vulnerable groups,

otherwise marginalised from assessment and planning procedures, more visible within and across national boundaries; (ii) wider sharing and better understanding of knowledge and practices, critical for the reduction of disaster risks; (iii) social learning around risks and vulnerabilities leading to new management goals and more opportunities for collective responses, linking where appropriate domestic and international efforts; and (iv) higher public acceptance of policies and measures proposed by governments or under international agreements (Lebel *et al.*, 2009).

The study provides a great deal of evidence about good practices and useful lessons learned from experiences in stakeholder participation and partnerships in the countries of Asia-Pacific on how to deal with water-related insecurities (Lebel *et al.*, 2010). More attention should be given in the future to selecting mechanisms and tools for exchange of good practices across countries. At the same time, in many cases direct automatic transfer of national experiences without their prior adaptation to natural, socio-economic, cultural and political specifics of the recipient river basins of the Asia-Pacific region does not always provide for expected results. Thus, 'transfer and adaptation' of good practices and experiences should go hand in hand; analysis and assessment of related problems and challenges is among one of the important avenues for future action.

More theoretical and practical thinking needs to be given to assessing particular roles and influences of each stakeholder group in the river basins under study, and to understanding how stakeholder participation-partnerships are, or will be, embedded into water governance regimes and in future institutional innovations.

Conclusions

Institutional reforms undertaken in the water sector are frequently unsuccessful in meeting mandates and targets. Constraints and limitations for good water governance include: (i) shortages in public policies and their performance, (ii) weaknesses in identifying clearly water-related risks and respective response options, (iii) inadequate coordination (horizontal and vertical) between actors, (iv) poor support and incentives for stakeholder engagement, (v) weak respect of the rights of indigenous groups and those actors who have 'long-standing relations with a river,' (vi) limited use of scientific and traditional knowledge, and (vii) fragmented adaptation by stakeholders to climate change. These are regarded as common gaps in addressing water insecurities through existing water management systems in river basins under study. They are compounded by specific problems and 'situational factors' in particular places.

Stakeholder participation is expanding in all river basins under study, although the scales and forms vary across basins. More intensive and diversified lies in those countries with developed economies and democracies

(Australia), while in transition societies (Viet Nam, China, Russia) it is more limited for various reasons, including the heritage of the centrally planned systems and lower public awareness. The importance of non-state actors across all river basins is growing. Multiple local stakeholders such as business, indigenous people organisations, households, non-governmental organisations, river councils and sub-national units of government, are starting to play increasing roles in reducing water-related insecurities. The role of the government and river basin authorities in water management remains high in all countries.

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