EDITORS’ NOTE

Five urgent questions related to regional water governance

Preface

Between the time when the editors’ note below was written and this issue of Regions & Cohesion went to press, Hurricane Otis battered Acapulco and surrounding villages or communities in Guerrero, Mexico, with sustained winds of 266 km/h — and even stronger gusts hitting up to 330 km/h. Regions & Cohesion has published numerous articles on socioenvironmental sustainability in Acapulco, and a research team from the Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero has even published a recent article on resilience to hurricanes (see Lucero Álvarez et al., 2021). Unfortunately, Acapulco was not prepared for Hurricane Otis, which killed dozens of people, destroyed homes and upended lives, causing over one billion dollars of damage. Three weeks after the hurricane, most of the one million residents of the city remain without food and water. With this note, the editors express our heartfelt solidarity with all the affected people during these difficult times and our commitment to your well-being.

Introduction

The articles in this issue all focus on water governance in one way or another. They either examine water quality or they study the distribution of water resources. The editors of this journal have been actively engaging in water governance debates through different conceptual and disciplinary lenses for years. Regions & Cohesion has been committed to publishing articles on water governance since it was founded. It is one of the most important themes addressed by the journal. For these reasons, we have decided to present the editors’ note for this issue in the form of a roundtable discussion, which integrates reflections from members of the journal’s editorial team. The discussion addresses some of the most pressing water-related issues that were raised by the articles that follow, including the importance of water summits (Carmen Maganda and Georgina Vidriales-Chan in the Leadership Forum), regional integration’s potential contribution to innovative water governance (Yoga Suharman, Sadewa Purba Sejati, and Iman Amirullah), transboundary water cooperation...
Five urgent questions related to regional water governance

1.) What is the added value of international summits for water governance, especially when social participation is limited?

Harlan Koff (HK):

In 2016, Carmen Maganda and I published an article (Koff & Maganda, 2016) on Normative Coherence for Sustainable Development which focused on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation. This right includes the following targets:

**Sufficient.** The water supply for each person must be sufficient and continuous for personal and domestic uses. These uses ordinarily include drinking, personal sanitation, washing of clothes, food preparation, personal and household hygiene. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), between 50 and 100 liters of water per person per day are needed to ensure that most basic needs are met and few health concerns arise.

**Safe.** The water required for each personal or domestic use must be safe, therefore free from micro-organisms, chemical substances, and radiological hazards that constitute a threat to a person’s health. Measures of drinking-water safety are usually defined by national and/or local standards for drinking-water quality. The WHO Guidelines for drinking-water quality provide a basis for the development of national standards that, if properly implemented, will ensure the safety of drinking-water.

**Acceptable.** Water should be of an acceptable color, odor and taste for each personal or domestic use. [...] All water facilities and services must be culturally appropriate and sensitive to gender, lifecycle and privacy requirements.

**Physically accessible.** Everyone has the right to a water and sanitation service that is physically accessible within, or in the immediate vicinity of the household, educational institution, workplace or health institution. According to WHO, the water source has to be within 1,000 meters of the home and collection time should not exceed 30 minutes.

**Affordable.** Water, and water facilities and services, must be affordable for all. The United Nations Development Programme suggests that water costs should not exceed three percent of households’ income (United Nations, 2010).
The article that we published analyzed water projects among the European Union’s development cooperation initiatives. Through this study, we explored how the European Union (EU) focused on technical approaches that undermined the normative coherence of its development cooperation with human rights perspectives. This technical approach undermined the legitimacy and sustainability of EU water investments in sub-Saharan Africa.

At the time of publication, most attention to policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) examined how non-development policy sectors were undermining development cooperation (Siitonen, 2016). The emphasis of these approaches focused on the implementation of development initiatives. The aforementioned article re-oriented PCSD away from implementation and steered it toward policy definition. It asked: “How coherent are development policies with core sustainability norms, such as the human right to water and sanitation?” International water summits provide us with these norms, defined as a system of codified principles. Without the Human Right to Water and Sanitation or Sustainable Development Goal 6 (Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all), we would not have benchmarks against which to measure the coherence of transnational, national and sub-national water governance.

The problem with international summits is the top-down approach that they foster as norm definition has led to the specification of objectives, strategies, targets and indicators. Kauffer and Maganda (2022) have shown how national authorities and local policy communities can mobilize against water norms when they are imposed from above. However, the codification of norms through international summits as ideals can provide a plurality of actors with normative language and interest frameworks through which they can articulate their own claims in order to legitimize them within an international water governance system. This can promote normative coherence for sustainable development from below.

**Carmen Maganda (CM):**
The lack of safe and sufficient water for all has always been on my plate. I also understood very soon and very clearly that water crises are predominantly management issues of complex water governance. The international summits on water have tried to address this complexity, since the UN Water Conference in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 1977, up to the 2023 UN Water Conference in NY Summits have done lots of awareness-raising, providing data, campaigns, and bringing together high-level authorities from the member states. But still, they hold little advancement on binding resolutions to provide water for all, grounding commitments on water-health-sanitation, and broadening the diversity of voices from
unheard stakeholders. I am a delighted coauthor of one of the Leadersh-
ship Forum articles on this issue, exactly related to the prevailing needs for local implementation and broader participation in international water fora, based on our participation in the last 2023 summit.

The initial and clear messages at the beginning of the UN 2023 Water Conference in New York, were the unachieved Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on water and sanitation for all and the recognition that business-as-usual approaches for water management are not effective facing the crisis. Hence, the conference aimed to raise awareness of the global water crisis and to make agreements on concerted actions to mobilize all sectors, stakeholders and countries toward the resolution of this global issue. In our contribution (this issue) we offer a reflection on two critical and historical challenges related to these global events: (a) the implementation of global water fora accords from global-to-local governance; and (b) the need for broader and inclusive participation of different stakeholders, with particular focus on water issues.

Local realities are barely taken into account in these summits. With much effort, Latin American local representatives were present at the 2023 UN Water Conference, but they were not listened to in the official sessions. However, they were prepared for this scenario and they co-organized large-scale side events where they presented the Water Manifesto, and opened dialogues with Latina women community water managers. The Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation (among a few other UN delegates), attended these events, and then went back to speak about them and strongly called for attention to them at the official sessions of the conference, in a plausible effort to cover the gap. International summits still face this challenge: if nobody is to be left behind in water provision, then nobody should be left behind in water governance and summits.

Edith Kauffer (EK):
I deeply believe that top-down initiatives must be accompanied by bottom-up processes when building water policies. But international dynamics and politics do not always enable this sort of entanglement to occur. Nevertheless, a wide range of stakeholders are likely to promote links, exchanges, and relations to favor convergences in water policies as well as to share successful local experiences at national and international levels. But maybe the large forums are not the right places to realize such happenings. And one of the biggest questions today is about our role as scholars and water researchers as mediators between top-down policies and bottom-up experiences. And the answers are very much divided according to disciplines, countries, and personal positions.
2.) Can regional organizations promote innovative water governance? Through what mechanisms?

HK:
The question has been a recurring theme for Regions & Cohesion since the journal’s inception in 2010. For the most part, articles focusing on the contribution of regions to innovative water governance have focused on the basin level (see Alvarado & Kauffer, 2023). In fact, most of the scholarship published here on regional institutions and water management have been critical of regional water governance strategies. For example, Dos Santos (2023) has shown how regional institutions have impeded innovative governance in the Niger and Lake Chad River Basins. Furthermore, many regional organizations separate water governance from economic deregulation, privileging the latter (see Yáñez-Arancibia & Day, 2017).

For these reasons, the response to this question would be embedded in the roles of regions within global governance in general. First, regions are actors in service provision, especially in transboundary basins. However, with the exception of the European Union, where the European Water Framework Directive exists to provide guidelines to EU member states, other regional organizations lack the power to enforce regional water regulations. Consequently, direct water governance is not a strong characteristic of contemporary supranational regionalism in most parts of the world.

A second characteristic of regional water governance is actor-focused. Whereas regions defined as organizations do not seem to promote policy innovation, regional systems of actors do often propose innovative solutions from below. Mumme, Ibáñez, and Till (2012) have shown how Type II multilevel governance has led to effective water policymaking along the US–Mexico border by including a plurality of actors in water governance which has improved responsiveness over centralized decision-making. Similarly, Cortez-Lara and colleagues (2019) have indicated that regional integration provided a space through which local actors could pursue common strategies to address water scarcity. In Africa, Meissner and Warner (2021) have shown how regional integration promoted indigenous paradiplomacy, which integrated informal authorities in water management from below.

Finally, regions often present themselves as norm entrepreneurs. Regional organizations, such as the EU or Andean Community profess sustainability principles much like international organizations. In this regard, regions contribute to water governance innovation through norm diffusion. This has been highlighted by Dominguez’s study (2015) of environmental governance in the EU–Latin American relationship. Similarly,
Suharman, Sejati and Amirullah in this issue (2023) demonstrate how regional cooperation around carbon monoxide (CO) pollution in Southeast Asian waters and the South China Sea (SEA-SCS) are necessary for adequately addressing this transnational pollution but also for re-framing security in the region from traditional military viewpoints to environmental security. This article argues that securitizing CO as a threat represents substantial progress in the environmental-political cooperation in the SCS and surrounding waters.

CM:
Regional collaborations have played important roles in the recognition of the Human Right to Water and Sanitation. This initiative was originally promoted in the UN by South American countries, most notably Bolivia. It became an issue that developing states in different world regions could rally around, which was a key factor for this initiative to pass (Maganda, 2009). When this right was voted upon by the UN General Assembly in July 2010, the EU’s member states all abstained, thus contributing to the resolution’s failure to pass in the assembly (the resolution was adopted by consensus by the Human Rights Council in September 2010). While the EU remains committed to reinforcing access to water as good management practice and it is committed to improving access to water as part of its anti-poverty programs, it took some years to explicitly recognize the human right to water and water security positions because of their normative implications (Koff & Maganda, 2016).

EK:
Regarding transboundary water governance, we find examples of regional organizations that are trying to implement innovations in water policies and cooperation on transboundary issues. I would like to refer to the Helsinki Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes adopted by the United Nations Commission for Europe (UNECE) in 1992 and the accession of which was opened to all states recognized by the UN in 2016. This opening of the Helsinki Convention to all UN member states has been quite successful mainly in Africa with eight states’ accession, as well as one in the Middle East and one in Latin America in 2023. But this Convention also represents an interesting normative tool because it evolved from a traditional perspective regarding “transboundary watercourses” to the notion of “transboundary river basins” as stated by the UNECE’s most recent published documents. Furthermore, this regional organization is also working at regional scale out of Europe through multi-actors’ dialogue to promote transboundary
water governance and to build regional water conventions. Panama’s accession to this convention in 2023 is part of the results of this bottom-up multi-actors’ dialogues in Central America. And this is also a concrete example of direct contribution to the SDG 6, especially focusing on target 6.5 about “integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate”. The UNECE as a regional organization has enhanced a new global water law more flexible than the UN Watercourses Convention also known as the Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses (United Nations, 1997), which entered into force until 2014, when 35 states accessed, that is, 17 years after its approval by the United Nations General Assembly. This example of an innovative regional organization regarding high politics and a sensitive issue such as transboundary water governance illustrates that success implies step-by-step processes and the involvement of diverse stakeholders.

3.) Can cooperative responses for water management be promoted in political systems where power inequalities are a defining characteristic?

HK:
This is a difficult question. The scholarship presented here would suggest that cooperation cannot overcome power inequalities. Conde (2014) explains how hydro-hegemony persists in state relationships with Kurds as part of an encompassing exercise of power over this minority in Turkey, Syria and Iraq. Similarly, Puerta Silva and colleagues (2020) indicate that reinforcement of the border between Colombia and Venezuela has further marginalized the Wayuu ethnic group, leading to water access problems among other crises suffered by these people.

Economic actors also establish power inequalities in water governance systems. Perry and Barry (2016) have illustrated how infrastructure development represents a source of hydropower in Costa Rica within the framework of globalizing tourism. Rodríguez Rodríguez and Guzmán Mendoza (2019) studied local referenda (consulta popular in Spanish) in Colombia and how they failed to block extractive industries from influencing water policies to the detriment of local environmental resources.

The broader question, which has been addressed in previous editors’ notes, asks: what is the objective of contemporary regionalism? So far, most regional integration is explained as a means to expand political influence in geopolitics or increase wealth as a pillar of globalized
economies. We, the editors, have written about the need for responsive regionalism, which would address power inequalities in cross-border regions such as those described earlier. We have also proposed the notion of resilience regionalism, which reinforces development strategies aimed at preventing and responding to external shocks. Mass development, which includes infrastructure and extractivism, undermines resilience and contributes to inequalities. Establishing cooperative water governance within these frameworks is difficult to imagine. What is missing is the notion of a regional social contract through which regional citizenship can develop. Without a strong sense of citizenship, there is little incentive for institutions to be responsive.

EK:
Cooperative responses for water management always must be promoted in all political systems and above all when social, economic, and power inequalities are at the core of the problem because we are all humans and our daily life depends on water, as a “common resource”, a “communal good”, a “shared social property”, the conception of which depends on the place, the people, and the local customs.

I consider cooperative initiatives, even when they are unsuccessful, to be potential contributions to our understanding that power inequalities and their consequences create deeper inequalities that threaten life when access to water and sanitation is not guaranteed by the State, nor by local mechanisms.

The real question for me is not if cooperative initiatives can be promoted but how, where and when they must be enhanced. The article by Berkhour and Warner (this issue) addresses hydropolitics around the Itaipu dam, focusing on the relations between Brazil and Paraguay from a hydro-hegemony perspective, going beyond traditional analysis that deals with conflict or cooperation viewed in terms of opposition. Based on interviews with local stakeholders, the authors argue that Brazil’s hydro-hegemony in action through the binational dam’s ownership company can be analyzed as a consensual hydro-hegemony that significantly depends on national politics to understand transboundary water relations between both countries and explain Brazil’s steering in this transboundary issue.

CM:
I agree this is a difficult question, but these reflections on geopolitics, extractivism, power inequalities and resilience are highlighted in the contribution of Miss May and Monzón Alvarado on the environmental impacts of swine agroindustry in karst zones. Pork production uses a large amount
of farmland, and among the environmental impacts and deterioration resulting from the development of these agroindustries are the scarcity of natural resources, pressure on water resources, and inequality in the distribution of costs and benefits, also associated with land dispossession, the violation of the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples and the global right to a healthy environment. This context generates clashes between actors with different visions of the territories where these agroindustries are developed. Environmental deterioration produces degradation and elements that characterize socio-environmental problems.

4.) What is water corruption, and how can it be combated?

HK:
Water corruption is not a common theme in this journal. Only Islas and colleagues (2023) have addressed it directly. This article focuses on insufficient provision of services in the Tres Palos lagoon in Guerrero, Mexico combined with insufficient monitoring and application of laws as causes of water corruption. This term is framed as the provision of water-related services for self-enrichment among public officials. In fact, water corruption as defined through this lens could refer to the unethical sale of water resources by public officials, distribution of water through a system of “favors”, or widespread clientelism through which public services are viewed as commodities.

In my opinion, there is another form of corruption, which makes combating this system so difficult. Water management is often dominated by technical visions of service provision. This is in my opinion a corruption of our notion of democratic governance. When technicians decide upon service provision, rational economic logics prevail, which contribute to frameworks for water corruption. Instead, we need to focus on the underlying principles of water governance. Rights-based approaches such as those discussed earlier need to be reinforced. With rights come responsibilities. Citizens should be more involved in water governance mechanisms, especially monitoring and evaluation. The contribution by Carmen Maganda and Georgina Vidriales in this issue highlights their RISC-RISE Consortium funded project, which aims to generate dialogue between citizens and local water authorities. Democratization of water provision would entail simultaneously improving access for citizen participation, reinforcing water governance norms and improving transparency by enforcing the rule of law surrounding water resources. At the moment, these objectives are difficult to pursue in policy environments where water is distributed by officials through a technical vision.
EK:
Corruption in the water sector is complex and understudied by academics because it could be a dangerous issue. It negatively affects the construction of democratic water management. It mainly occurs when a group focuses on particular interests in water management. A group could be a political party, a guild, a family with economic power, an alliance of business interests, or other interests such as oligarchies or a hydrocracy.

The mechanisms of corruption work beyond rules and laws and should be entangled in the objectives of water policies, in their instruments and their implementation as well as through political tractions.

The results of water corruption can be seen through inefficiency and incoherence of water policies, loss of resources, inadequate, inefficient, unusable infrastructure, poor access to water and sanitation services, fragmentation of the local social ties, increasing conflicts, environmental deterioration, and increasing scarcity.

Water corruption is also the result of political negotiations with various groups to favor electoral interests, and it negatively affects the construction of democratic water management.

CM:
Water corruption has many faces, some of them hidden in the way of construction permits in protected natural areas, gravel extraction, mining projects, bridges and even railway construction with implicit deforestation, often carried out outside the regulation of legal norms. All this is happening in different areas in Mexico (and the world) as I write it. Also, it is frustrating to see how some official judgments are rendered in favor of territorial or environmental defenders, but inspection and sanction capacities are either weakened or easily circumvented by project promoters. Moreover, the world is witnessing threats and sometimes violence against environmental defenders or journalists. All these actions affect water quality and quantity, and the citizen confidence for transparent environmental governance. At the same time, no reader should finish reading this text without hope.

Some defenses do not stop abuse of the environment or even gain supporters in wider political circles, but the eyes of environmentally aware citizens are watching. There are environmental debates now in school classrooms, and there are sustainability projects that aspire to have local impacts. A new crop of political leaders with sincere concern for water may yet emerge, and we, as citizens, may demand even greater accountability on water issues as our exposure to these questions improves. In short, the point of no return on water corruption may still be far away as citizens become more involved in water management.
5.) Does increased social participation automatically promote transparent and effective water governance? If not, what pre-existing conditions are necessary?

HK:
There is no doubt that social participation in water governance needs to be improved. This is the basis for the social contract referenced in my response to the previous question. We have published various articles that highlight the importance of social participation in water governance. Medina-Valdivia et al. (2021) examined how social participation can give value to ecological services, while Koff et al.’s (2022) proposal of participatory PCSD reorients this tool’s focus toward the sustainability needs of local stakeholders thus rendering it more responsive. Covarrubias et al.’s (2022) study of Acapulco, Guerrero, Mexico, suggests that democratic participation can highlight the need for environmental principles and attention to the needs of marginalized groups in urban planning. In this issue, Morales Ruano’s contribution to the World Family Portrait highlights the importance of local contexts on mobilization by providing a visual narrative on the socio-ecological perceptions of vulnerable local communities around flood risk in Coyuca de Benítez, Guerrero, Mexico. The images denote the impacts of flooding on economic activities, such as tourism, and how communities collectively respond to disturbances.

I question the presence of the word “automatically” in the query presented here. Social participation is a necessary characteristic of democratic water governance, but I do not believe that it automatically leads to transparent and effective management. As mentioned earlier, Rodríguez Rodríguez and Guzmán Mendoza (2019) showed how public consultation did not necessarily lead to transparence in natural resource management in Colombia. Transparence and effectiveness are two qualities that I relate more to rule of law than to participation. In Maganda et al. (2016), the authors illustrate how misinformed citizens participated in irresponsible mobilization for water resources, which actually contradicted the legal regulatory framework for water in Mexico. Citizens of Puebla invaded and sequestered water infrastructure in order to prevent this resource from being distributed to the State of Veracruz. The problem is that water is a national resource, which is not governed by states but is distributed by a national water authority.

I would actually contend that rule of law is just as vital as social participation in water governance if not more so. Political scientists consider political systems to include both actors and institutions which place necessary limits on the range of acceptable actions permitted in competition for resources. If institutions, in this case, rule of law, are weak then actors
can abuse their power in order to obtain valuable water resources. This is alluded to earlier in the question related to water cooperation amidst power inequalities. Unfortunately, rule of law is weak in many water governance contexts, which actually undermines social participation. It also allows local water authorities to reject important water norms, such as the human right to water and sanitation (see Kauffer & Maganda, 2022). Social contracts must reflect citizens’ viewpoints, but they also need ethical bases and institutional transparency. This can only be achieved through partnerships between social participation and rule of law.

CM:
At least in Mexico there is certain urgency to develop environmental projects with strong local impact, and that aim requires social participation. But there is no participation and therefore no incidence without ethics. Therefore, I would like to relate the issue of social participation on water with a focus on ethics and local impact.

Social participation is always desirable to reinforce democratic processes in environmental management, but coming to the foregoing questions, we cannot assume that people feel attracted to participate if the international summits for water governance have limited spaces for social participation or if there are power inequalities in water management that contribute to injustices.

We cannot invoke social participation without first introducing some onto-epistemological reflections such as: Why participate? What good will my participation do? For whom do I participate or develop a participatory project? What ethical considerations am I sharing with the people about the actual project I am working for?

Very few water projects and programs consider involving people from the beginning or design of a project, and even fewer consider that active participation in water management, can become an element of personal growth and self-realization for the participating population. Cayo et al. (2022) argue that participation is not simply an end in itself but also a means: a possibility to understand and address territorial complexities in Latin America, which include local practices and ancestral conventions beyond frameworks based on economic environmental trade-offs.

Social participation is also a matter of rights. We have the right to good and democratic environmental governance, and therefore we have the right to participate directly in public decisions on water management and on the management of all natural resources that affect us. In particular, we have the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation (2010 UN-HR) and the human right to a healthy environment (2022 UN-UN-EP-HR). It is and will still be necessary to keep monitoring these rights.
in the face of some participation limitations such as lack of information about these rights, monopolistic actions in decision-making, limited or little accountability, corruption, abuses of power, impunity, and low credibility of national anti-corruption policy. But as I said earlier, the conditions may change in the near future.

EK:
Increased social participation does not automatically promote transparent and effective water governance because it depends on who is participating, when and where the scenarios for participation are created, and by whom. Pre-existing conditions depend on the history of water policies, on local conditions of infrastructure, on water availability and sensitivity to the effects of climate change, and above all, on the characteristics of each political system. In this regard, water research in different locations plays a major role because it opens and crosses perspectives from all over the world, comparing and contrasting findings, spreading social science knowledge, and eventually contributing to local, national, and international discussions on water governance as proposed by this issue of Region & Cohesion.

The Editors
Harlan Koff, Carmen Maganda, and Edith Kauffer

REFERENCES


