Water Policy – Water Politics
Social Engineering and Strategic Action in Water Sector Reform

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Abstract The contribution maps the ‘politics of water’ as a field of research. Water control is understood as politically contested resource use. Contestation is mapped along two axes: (1) different levels or domains of water politics; (2) issue-networks encompassing processes of contestation within or across levels and domains. The four domains are: the everyday politics of water control, the politics of national water policy, inter-state hydropolitics, and the global politics of water. These have different space and time scales, are populated by different configurations of main actors, have different types of issues as their subject matter, involve different modes of contestation and take place within different sets of institutional arrangements. Some of the most important questions in water policy and water politics involve the interlinkages across domains, around certain issues. Among the plethora of issue-networks of concrete water politics policy, the chapter focuses on two main ‘sticking points’ in present-day water policy reform processes. (1) The internalization of ‘new concerns’, notably environment and human development, into the mainstream water sector organizations’ professional practice, and (2) the transformation of state-centered water resources policy processes into society-centered policy processes. The chapter provides a critique of the dominant social engineering approaches to institutional transformation, and argues that unless a self-consciously political strategic action approach to institutional transformation is taken, the deadlock in water sector reform may continue for some time.

1 Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to map the ‘politics of water’ as a field of research. Such mapping logically has two parts. The first is an explanation of what is meant by politics and what could be the overall conceptual approach for analyzing the politics

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of water – the formal part of the mapping. The second part of the mapping is the substantive dimension: what are the concrete issues and questions around which research on water politics could be organised? While the first part can have a single answer, the approach one prefers to take, the second is an in principle endless list of relevant and interesting topics for concrete investigation, each with their own specific conceptual and methodological demands. Selection within that list follows primarily, at least in this chapter, from an assessment of what are pertinent policy questions in (a certain part of) the real world of water resources management.1 This chapter focuses on the issue of water sector reform in developing and transition countries, particularly the reform of the public organisations that manage agricultural water. Agriculture is the dominant form of water use in most developing and transition countries, and changes in water resources management towards a more ‘integrated’ approach require quite fundamental changes in how agricultural water management is done. The need for a more integrated approach to water resources management is taken as the context for the argumentation in this chapter, though ‘integration’ is by no means a clear, single ‘thing’, but a contested concept.2

Given this demarcation, I summarise the two main concerns and research foci regarding the politics of water that this chapter wants to elaborate as follows.

1. The internalization of ‘new concerns’, notably environment and human development, into the mainstream water sector organisations’ professional practice.
2. The transformation of state-centered water resources policy processes into society-centered policy processes.3

The suggestion is that these are two crucial questions for those interested in furthering reform in the water sector, because they are ‘sticking points’: issues that hold up the reform process, where there is a need for new analysis to inform strategic action.

The mapping exercise is organised in three sections. The first presents a framework for water politics analysis (Sect. 3), followed by two sections that discuss the two main foci mentioned above (Sects. 4 and 5). Preceding these three sections is

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1 The alternative approach for defining concrete research foci would be from an academic starting point: the pursuit of certain theoretical or methodological interests with the water resources domain as the area of enquiry. Water resources management is the generic term used in this chapter as the broadest reference to all activities related to water governance, management (in the narrow sense), use, finance, and other aspects.


3 In a recent volume on the politics of irrigation reform, Mollinga and Bolding (2004, 302–306) suggest the following three research fields as in need of more research attention: (1) the resilience of irrigation bureaucracies, (2) the role of international development funding agencies, and (3) the capture of irrigation reform policy in implementation. The two foci of this chapter are formulated at a higher level of abstraction, and include the three fields just mentioned, and more.