

**ESRC-funded Seminar Series**  
**THE WATER CONSENSUS – IDENTIFYING THE GAPS**  
**Launch Seminar, Bradford, November 18-19, 2004**

Water governance features prominently in international development policy making and considerable efforts have been made to develop a world water 'vision' which propounds key principles for better water management. Amongst these are ideas about the desirability of integrated water resource management, increased participation of users (especially women) in financing and management and a larger role for the private sector. Such principles can be seen to represent an international 'consensus' on water governance.

Insights emerging from research and practice critique international water policy for being narrowly underpinned by neo-liberal principles, dominated by technical and managerial concerns and informed by limited methodologies and empirical data. NGOs and campaigning groups have questioned the pro-privatisation focus of the 'consensus', the neglect of ecological concerns and equity issues.

The first of the ESRC-funded seminar series of seminars 'Water Governance – Challenging the Consensus' was held in Bradford 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> of November. The aim of the seminar was to characterise the 'consensus' from different disciplinary viewpoints, identify gaps of inconsistencies in international policy and set out the agenda for the work of future seminars. The key note address was given by Peregrine Swann, DFID's senior Water Adviser.

**Overview of the launch seminar**

Discussion at the seminar largely focussed around three interconnected themes: the nature of the consensus, deconstructing water governance and the complexity of understanding relationships between poverty, pricing and rights.

Debate ranged around whether a dominant body of international policy was vital to achieving strategic direction and political impetus for global action, the extent to which dominant policy discourses can be translated to the local level and the absence of alternative views and dissenting voices in international forum. Questions were raised about whether cooperation and coordination is more productive than consensus building. Some policy discourses (for example about the desirability of community participation) were felt to be more hegemonic than others, and participants queried the relative roles of various actors (public/private sector) and different disciplines in shaping the consensus.

The meaning of better water governance was scrutinised in relation to governance more widely. The imbalances of power in partnerships between governments and non-state actors, the ability of governance

mechanisms to resolve water conflicts and crises and the construction of governance as a 'technical' rather than political solution were all questioned. The need to proactively identify unheard voices in shaping water policy, to understand the role of culture and social institutions in local water governance, to reflect the inter-linkages between water and land in livelihoods were noted. Balancing the interests of different sub-sectors in governance arrangements was also identified as an area requiring further work.

Achieving poverty goals through good water governance was a theme which was repeatedly addressed in the seminar. In particular concerns were raised about how poor people could realise their water rights in the context of policies promoting cost recovery, and how the water priorities of the poor get lost in policy formation. Suggestions for further work in these areas included the need for better understandings of the costs to the poor of accessing water, improved knowledge of non-monetary values for water, and a greater focus on penalising luxury and environmentally damaging water use.



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## Tom Franks, Water Governance – What is the Consensus?

The paper reviews the theoretical background to the concept of water governance by reference to three recent publications. It finds some common ground in the definition of the concept, in its 'principles' and in the issues and challenges which are identified in its application. However in practice these often seem to be reduced to a focus on integrated water resource management (IWRM) for governance of water resources, and financing mechanisms for water supply and sanitation.

The search for an institutional framework for governance of water resources in the Usangu Basin in Tanzania and the Hadejia-Jama'are Basin in Nigeria is described. These two basins show many similarities, particularly in the range of competing demands on the available resources (municipal, agricultural, environmental). However there are also some

important differences, for example in the acceptance of shared knowledge, and in the political context within which the institutional framework is being developed.

Bringing together the theoretical concepts and the evidence from the field, the paper suggests that there are two key issues to be addressed. There appears, firstly, to be a lack of focus on mechanisms for decision-making on water allocations between competing uses. This emphasises the political nature of water governance, an aspect which receives comparatively less attention than its administrative and economic aspects. Secondly, there is a need to support political processes for water governance by developing systems of knowledge and communication which allow stakeholders to exchange ideas and reach common understandings.

## Frances Cleaver, From the local to the global: does the micro-level matter in policy making for the Millenium Development Goals?

This paper analyses the Millennium Project Interim Report on Task Force 7 on Water and Sanitation (UN 2004) - one of the most recent attempts to create a shared global water vision. Whilst some aspects of the report (a focus on access, the need for special provision for the poor) are welcome, there are some fundamental weaknesses which echo aspects of other global policy statements.

Firstly, there is an absence of recognition of the micro-level social processes which shape access to water. Secondly, there is a tension inherent in trying to achieve both efficiency of water provision *and* promoting equity of access, through the same strategies.

These tensions are apparent in a number of areas.

'Getting institutions right' is seen as key to ensuring local participation, representation of felt needs, the equitable distribution of resources and sustainability. More informed understandings are needed of the 'limits of community', the workings of non-formal and formal institutions, the exercise of power and authority in water matters and the costs of participation. What exactly are the *effects* of

different kinds of institutional arrangements on access to water?

The benefits of *all* users paying for water, and the *ability* of all to contribute to this are frequently asserted in international policy statements. However, both payment and access are often mediated through inequitable social relationships. Payments (cash, labour, materials) can be disproportionately costly to the poor. Better understandings of the livelihood constraints of poor households, of the inequities of intra-household command over labour, cash and other resources and the difficulties the poor face in shaping tariffs set at community level, are needed.

International policy includes a focus on gender primarily for reasons of efficiency, secondarily for empowerment goals. Policies advocating the benefits to women of involvement in water management overlook the restrictive social structures within which many women negotiate their livelihoods. The working of patriarchy, class, caste and age relations mean that improved water supplies impact on different women in very different ways. If gender equity is to be promoted through water interventions, then greater consideration of the inclusive/exclusive effects of local institutions and norms is required.

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## **Tom Slaymaker, Aiding Water Governance? PRSP experience in sub-Saharan Africa**

Tom Slaymaker gave a presentation reflecting on the challenge of water governance in the context of wider shifts in aid policy, drawing on evidence from DFID-funded research on WatSan and PRSPs. He noted that although the term *governance* is now used widely by aid agencies, its actual meaning often remains rather poorly defined, and that its popular usage tends to suggest a *consensus* which is not reflected in the reality of policy implementation. While the idea of *good* governance has universal appeal there is little agreement on how this might be achieved. At the same time the very notion of consensus serves to emphasise certain universal aspects of governance while denying the complex forms it takes in particular contexts. It was argued that the current narrow technical interpretation of water governance in aid policy serves to depoliticise what is essentially a highly *political* process.

The principles which inform PRSPs, a specific initiative to improve governance in highly indebted poor countries, are broadly similar to

those which underpin the so-called consensus on water governance. However analysis of progress in their implementation in Malawi, Zambia, Uganda and Tanzania revealed frequent discontinuities between stated priorities, objectives and actions. The challenge for donors interested in improving water governance is to move beyond the current narrow technical focus on administration, resource management and market regulation, to develop effective means of supporting processes of public policy making. This involves engaging stakeholders to ensure genuine ownership of sectoral strategies, building consensus around the 'logic' of reform and adjusting lines of accountability downward to beneficiaries instead of upward to donors. It is important to recognise that (good) water governance may take many forms, the particular ways in which general and local governance processes interact to produce different outcomes in different localities is a key area for further research.

## **Martin Walsh, Against Consensus? Anthropological Critique and the Deconstruction of International Water Policy**

A series of concerns have been raised about ongoing efforts to develop a global water 'vision' and coordinate international policy on water governance. This paper provides an anthropological perspective on the policy debate, examining the role of anthropological critique and suggesting how it might contribute further to an understanding of the issues that the contested 'water consensus' raises. Recent developments in theory and in particular the anthropology of policy provide ways of approaching policy making that can be readily applied to international water policy. These 'postmodern' positions are not restricted to anthropology as an academic

discipline: they originated outside of it and are already being applied to global water discourse by development theorists and practitioners. They are, however, formulated most clearly in the anthropological literature, as are some of the problems that are associated with their application. This paper shows how, rather than merely filling 'gaps' in the 'water consensus', anthropological critique can be used to interrogate the rhetoric of the consensus and engage with the practices that underwrite and embed it in the wider discourses of international development and global policy making.

## **Laurence E.D. Smith, Water as an Economic Good – a Work in Progress**

The multiple and complex economic characteristics of water use and the pervasive incidence of 'market failure' require analysis and policy instruments that are integrated, well matched to location specific conditions and appropriately regulated. Water resource management, economic policy instruments and specifically water pricing must account for the complementarities and trade-offs between the goals of equitable access to water supplies, efficiency in resource use,

environmental sustainability and the financial sustainability of service provision. The concepts of the 'full economic value' and 'full economic cost' of water can, particularly when supported by empirical estimates, guide the long term evolution of improved and sustainable water management. For the short to medium term, a more pragmatic application of economic concepts leads to the recommendation that water pricing should focus on 'full supply cost' recovery. The aim is

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to ensure the quality and extended coverage of service provision, thus contributing to equity, efficiency and environmental objectives. Meeting access objectives in cases of genuine constraint to ability to pay requires particular attention to adaptation of tariff structures, other means of income

support, and governance and regulatory structures. The 'international consensus' on water management is on the right lines from an economics perspective but must make prescriptions based on detailed analysis of local conditions and not simply 'market economics doctrine'.

### **Dave Tickner, Pandas, Taps and toilets: Why WWF is interested in water governance**

Dave Tickner's presentation made the case that the crucial issue of scale has yet to be adequately addressed in the current debate about water and that Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) should be mainstreamed as the framework for water governance and policy.

In the past decisions about water management have been made primarily at scales dictated by political boundaries such as the national scale or the municipal scale. More recently, NGOs, governments, aid agencies and others have paid more attention to practical actions with communities at the local scale to improve water infrastructure. But recognition of the river basin - the basic hydrological scale - remains limited in water policy and governance.

The results of this oversight have been drastic and threaten the future viability of, and services provided by, freshwater ecosystems. Lack of integration in decision-making at the river basin scale has meant that dams and reservoirs have bent the mightiest rivers to human purposes, leaving few major river basins untouched. Massive canal and pumping projects have straightened rivers and changed their courses, disrupting natural cycles of flooding, reducing flows, draining wetlands, cutting rivers off from their

floodplains and inundating riparian habitats. At the same time, land uses such as urban development and agriculture draw massive amounts of water out of river systems, returning runoff laden with pollution and eroded soil. Unsustainable timber harvesting threatens the forests that nurture fragile headwater areas where rivers are borne.

According to WWF's Living Planet Report, the Freshwater Species Population Index - a measure of the health of freshwater ecosystems around the world - fell by more than 50% between 1970 and 2001. Across the planet, 50% of wetlands have destroyed or heavily damaged. The UN estimates that more than 1 billion people do not have access to clean water and over two billion do not have adequate sanitation services. The annual death toll from water-borne diseases is estimated at three million. Flooding and drought, often exacerbated by poor management of rivers and their basins, claim thousands of lives and cost economies and communities billions of dollars in damage. As the World Water Council stated in 2000: "There is a water crisis today. But the crisis is not about having too little water to satisfy our needs. It is a crisis of managing water so badly that billions of people - and the environment - suffer badly."

These issues and others raised in the papers presented at the launch seminar will be addressed through the seminar series.

There will be four further seminars:

<b>Seminar 2</b>	<b>Poverty, access and social exclusion</b>	<b>March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005</b>
<b>Seminar 3</b>	<b>Politics, institutions and participation</b>	<b>May 2005</b>
<b>Seminar 4</b>	<b>Scarcity, vulnerability, and environmental change</b>	<b>October 2005</b>
<b>Seminar 5</b>	<b>Overview - beyond the consensus</b>	<b>February 2006</b>

A full set of resources for the launch seminar, together with further background details for the seminar series, can be found at our website,

[www.bradford.ac.uk/acad/bcid/seminar/water](http://www.bradford.ac.uk/acad/bcid/seminar/water)