PARTICIPATION IN TRANSBOUNDARY WATER MANAGEMENT - FOSTERING ADAPTIVE CAPACITY?

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Water management in transboundary river basins is often a highly complex and contested matter, due to a variety of reasons. First, asymmetries in terms of power positions between different riparian states exist and are played out at the transboundary level. Second, issues leading to conflicts with regards to water management occurring on local levels are aggravated at higher levels, as here relevant actors are faced with increased uncertainties regarding management options and water management strategies.

These uncertainties derive to a large extent from the main challenges in water management -water pollution and scarcity - irrespective of the level at which they occur. It has been shown over the past years that these problems are by no means static, but occur in inherently complex and dynamic systems, which are increasingly driven by global environmental change, not only influencing water resources management, but rather the earth system as a whole. Important drivers in this context include climate change and population dynamics, as well as economic factors.

While Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) has been established as the leading management paradigm for addressing these challenges in water resources management, the success and effectiveness of IWRM is highly contingent on the adaptive capacity of the system itself as well as the implementation of adaptive management practices.

Assessing the adaptive capacity of transboundary systems, one would argue that the ability of such complex systems to effectively adapt to changing conditions is constrained due to the following factors:

- aggregate and diverse water management problems,
- multitude of different actors at various governance levels, representing a wide range of stakes to be considered for IWRM,
- lack of trust among riparian countries,
- limited information regarding water status and possible management options.

A solution that addresses at least in part these water management challenges has been the formation of transboundary water management institutions, most of them river basin commissions, which in the best case create a forum for the interaction of representatives from all riparian countries at the transboundary level. Especially in the developing world, however, these river basin commissions are under-capacitated and severely dependent on support of the donor community.

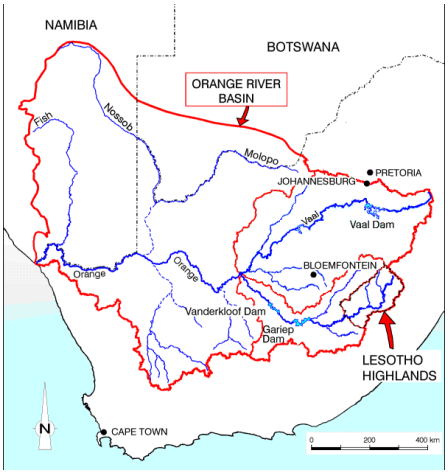
In this context, the question arises of to which extent the broad participation of non-state actors could have a positive impact on policy outcomes in terms of increased adaptive capacity and resilience of water resources management systems at the transboundary level. The paper takes a closer look at existing and emerging participative governance structures in the Orange-Senqu River Basin in Southern Africa. It shows what has been undertaken with regards to participatory approaches at the transboundary level in this basin, and assesses the activities implemented so far against the background of the available literature. The paper

poses the question of which might be promising entry points for further efforts, as well as commendable avenues to follow, with view to increasing the adaptive capacity of this important river system; it also asks where major challenges might be encountered due to limitations in the Southern African governance environment.

In this context it should be noted that the actual impact of participation on policy output and implementation effectiveness (and thus eventually outcome), i.e. the advancement of adaptive and sustainable water management, has only been investigated to a very limited extent. There is emerging evidence that participation might not lead to the desired improvement regarding effectiveness and outcome in all cases. Thus, careful attention needs to be paid to the modes and impacts of participation in a specific water management context. It appears to be instrumental to determine to what extent the call for more participation is catering to normative 'good governance' paradigm, and where, on the other hand, it is serving as an instrument to actually induce chance and contribute to enhance the adaptive capacity of water resource management systems.

The paper is based on observations and results collected during interviews with water management officials and other stakeholders in South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia in December 2006. The analysis contributes to research conducted on 'New approaches to adaptive water management under uncertainties' in the framework of the NeWater project[1]1, while aiming to link up this discourse to research conducted at the Collaborative Research Centre on 'Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood'[2] and 'New Modes of Governance'. While this connection has been established by several scholars before, this paper aims to make an original contribution by investigating the ramifications of these underlying processes on river basin management in the context of a nascent institutional structure at the international level.

Transboundary water management has always been of key importance in the Orange-Senqu basin, with individual agreements existing between Lesotho and South Africa (Lesotho Highlands Water Project) and Namibia and South Africa respectively on the use of the shared water resources. Only with the introduction of a joint water resources management commission, referred to as ORASECOM, in 2000, which also included Botswana as a partner due to its specific hydro-political importance in the basin, has public participation slowly emerged as an issue to be addressed at the international level. This development has been flanked by efforts in the riparian countries to enhance public involvement in water resources management, positive experiences with public participation in other African basins, such as the Okavango and last but not least by the international discourse on IWRM.



Orange-Senqu River Basin and riparian states

1 NeWater – New Approaches to Adaptive Water Management under Uncertainty, Integrated Project in the EU 6th framework programme, contract No.: 511179 (GOCE), Priority 6.3 Global Change and Ecosystems, Project Duration: 01.01.2005 - 31.12.2008, www.newater.info.

2 Collaborate Research Center 700: Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood, supported by the German Research Foundation DFG, www.sfb-governance.de.

For the past two years, public participation has moved up on the agenda of ORASECOM, but also among the donor community supporting the formation of institutional structures at the transboundary level. An elaborate Roadmap has been drafted in order to direct stakeholder interaction over the years to come, detailing responsibilities as well as concrete steps for implementation. The question that remains is what it takes to put this Roadmap into practice and how learning among all actors can be maintained and strengthened, also with view to fostering the adaptive capacity of the water management regime. The paper provides for a three-pronged approach in assessing the future development potential of the Roadmap for public participation as well as possible hindrances and obstacles, focusing on stakeholder networks, multi-level governance as well as management style and capacity.

Considering the emerging challenges, the key issue seems to be that of capacity at ORASECOM to successfully tackle the daunting tasks of nurturing a sound and effective transnational stakeholder network in the years to come. The path commenced with the Roadmap, which clearly supports decision-finding among all stakeholders rather than decision-making, points into a promising direction; nevertheless, many questions still remain open regarding the implementation of such an ambitious approach and the direction it will take. The fact that ORASECOM is operating with a very low capacity, and that the authorities in the four riparian countries do not as of yet have an impressive track record concerning implementation of water policy, raise doubts as to whether a result will be obtained in the near future, but also the question of which actors will take the lead and shape water resource management in the basin.

Certainly, the donors will play a role when it comes to financing the officially accepted Roadmap, but it remains to be seen how open to stakeholders these processes will be. Also, in 'everyday water management', other actors might assume a stronger role, to the degree that one could detect a blurring of the usual distinction between state and non-state actors. Whether or not an equal representation of all interests can be achieved is not only relevant due to the history of non-consultation in the region, as well as against the background of the emerging democracies; it will also provide useful information for the assessment regarding the adaptive capacity of the water management system in the Orange basin vis-à-vis global environmental change. If the engagement of stakeholders on a basin-wide scale provides the fabric for an adaptive water management approach in the future, and if thus the adaptive capacity of a river system is fostered through participation, then the implementation of this approach should receive the utmost attention by those responsible. A lot of responsibility has been assigned to ORASECOM by the riparian countries in this regard. It remains to be seen how this can be put into practice against the background of the hydro-political situation in the region, the historic challenges in water management and, most importantly, the evolving power positions of the various stakeholders. In addition to the capacity to manage all relevant interactions in water management at the multiple scales, it will be a crucial task for ORASECOM to fully grasp the norms and values of their stakeholders across the basin.

The roles have been defined; it remains to be seen whether an enhancement of the adaptive capacity of the water regime in the Orange can be achieved through stakeholder participation by tapping into the potential of the stakeholder community or whether, on the contrary, the capacity to act at the international level will be stifled by an ill-conceived approach, which is using up too much of the available resources.
However, there appears to be a lot of awareness of the issues at hand among those steering the process at the moment, providing reason enough for an optimistic outlook.

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