

Five Challenges for Water Governance

This article, *Five Challenges for Water Governance*, was written by Jerome D. Priscoli, and was an inaugural speech at a 2005 International Symposium on Ecosystem Governance in South Africa. The article was part of a compendium of other articles from the book: *Governance as a Dialogue: Government-Society-Science in Transition* (2007). The five challenges according to Priscoli are: 1) defining water governance, 2) ensuring that water has a primary role in civic culture, 3) how to reconnect water and development, 4) initiating a new dialog about water between rich and poor nations, and 5) the need to clarify rhetoric about water governance. He concluded the article by offering several recommendations to global water managers.

My Evaluation:

Generally, this article was quite informative and has broadened my appreciation of the challenge around defining water management and it also validated the enormous complexity and contextualisation around water governance, however we define it. The article was easy to understand and transitioned well between his points. He made it clear, that society needs to reform its relationship with water and how improved water management can be driver for that change. His outlining of the links between water management and the social-political realm and the need to economic development was also strong. I liked that he referred to the importance for the concept of 'sustainable development' and then also acknowledged of how the phrase can be an oxymoron. I also appreciated his reference to IWRM and adaptive management approaches and their importance. He stressed that, we also need to change the way we view and use water infrastructure, going forward. I liked how he wrote about the need of good water governance and development, to help gain economic prosperity and also to eradicate poverty. And yet, he was humble enough to mention that even we in the first world, don't always do things right and best to not follow our advice. And clearly, there is a tremendous need for better communications between all water managers. Some minor criticisms of the Priscoli article, would be his bias or promotion of the 'hard path' of engineering structures as the solution to our global water problems. There was also no mention for the need of innovation or the current innovation out there being used in the water sector. Further, there was no reference to climate change and it's impacts as huge global challenges to water governance. His concluding recommendations were somewhat vague, however, considering the article was a speech transcript in a book, I can understand this limitation.

Breakdown of the Article:

Priscoli begins by asking what is water governance? Which of course is not so easy to answer, however the socio-political system was strongly linked to water governance. Any fundamental water reform will involve social and political change and environmental

considerations need to be considered. The premise that water management is central to our civic culture is long standing with many historical examples. Water reform advancement is really “macro-economic & political reform” and has flourished in the developed world thanks to open markets, participation and less corruption. He mentions many other global water management regimes from the past, all referring to that water is power and political.

Reconnecting water and development will be controversial, but it is necessary to avoid future conflicts because such development will capture the immense potential water, needed for community- building, mitigating conflict and diplomacy. The requirement to focus on sustainable development and adaptive management strategies are key, but also challenging. He, says this approach is the “meeting ground” for all stakeholders. Priscoli asked, how do we help those in poverty, when access to water is an ethical consideration that is linked to geography. Too many people live in regions with water scarcity, however, infrastructure is badly needed along with water governance in these areas, an example of using a balance between hard and soft path involvement. Such means could be ways for these vulnerable countries to break out of poverty, have some economic gains and reduce potential further impacts of future disasters.

Water infrastructure is crucial for ensuring water storage, flood defenses, agriculture, electricity generation, political shock absorption and also for maintaining aquatic health. And, it was here that IWRM approaches and improved institutions can be beneficial to the entire water management process.

A new dialogue between rich and poor is required, and one that is not driven by the rich, as in the past, the rich regions tended to preach unrealistic recommendations to poor regions. Any new water governance conversation must recognize these dynamics as each have very different needs and outlooks on water use. An example was how the rich countries use water responsibly, there is a trend for preservation of water, and to minimize impact, whereas, the poor need water for economic growth, source supply, agriculture, which are life and death issues for them. He wrote, of how the values of the rich are based on assumptions stemming from their own experience, which are so different from those they are advising, the poor. The rich nations are focused on less water infrastructure and more management, while poor countries just want more infrastructure.

The final challenge in the article was on clarifying the rhetoric surrounding the world water debate. Priscoli states, that the utilitarian approach (wise use) is the key to water governance, yet there are many facets of water governance that require clarification thanks to numerous vague definitions and perceptions. The concept of sustainable development being a good example of this vagueness. Many water terms have different meanings and context depending on location and types of governance and these can disguise political agendas. He stated, that decentralization of water management is an important objective, but it needs to be clarified as to who has decision making abilities at local and regional level rather than the central government. There is a shift to more risk-based decision making and use of the precautionary principle, and with that there are further consideration of the ethics of making decisions and

not making decisions. And obviously, transparency and accountability of financial subsidization and cost recovery is required in the new water management paradigm.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Priscoli summarizes with several recommendations: A new ethical view on water – an ideological and ethical agreement on water is needed. Also, an engineering structural approach with environmental priorities can work while also co-designing with ecology and environmental services. Better communication is needed – The need to reformat water messages and its conflicting perceptions that we in the developed world know everything. The need to look for new ways of funding like more privatisation as a solution. The need to differentiate between water management and water services and the need create the political will to act to make change. Recognise the role of new water structures and infrastructure in water governance. The need to go beyond viewing water only as a human right or just an ecological good as water management can be the means for economic and social development, that can reduce poverty. Water governance should involve water organizations more directly in interventions both in the review and design stages. The need to create better relationships between technical experts and the public decision makers. Developed countries and regions need to better understand their own history and context of water management before trying to influence poor nations. The need to understand water as humanity’s learning-ground for building communities and forming society. And rightly stated, that water people will not solve the water crisis, we need an integrated approach. The need to appreciate that water decisions are also ethical decisions and they mirror our ethics around notions that: Water as a common good, water brings human dignity, water as a facilitator for well being, rights and responsibilities to access water, water and social justice, and the wealth generation roles of water.

Chinese philosopher, Lao Tze, noted 20,000 years ago that water was political and transformational. River + Dyke = Political order

Source:

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