

Koenig, M. 2011. Book review of Scheumann et al. (Eds), 2008. Water politics and development cooperation. Springer. Water Alternatives 4(2): 248-251



BOOK REVIEW

Scheumann, W.; Neubert, S. and Kipping, M. (Eds). 2008. Water politics and development cooperation. Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer. ISBN: 978-3-540-76706-0, 416 pages, €149.95.

(URL: www.springer.com/environment/pollution+and+remediation/book/978-3-540-76706-0)

Maria Koenig

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Transboundary Water Management in Central Asia Programme, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; maria.koenig@giz.de

INTRODUCTION

The key challenge in the water sector is not a lack of water, knowledge, financial resources or technology. (...) It is the political sphere that determines whether or not water problems are solved (...) (p. xxi)

Unequal access to water, unsustainable use of water resources, the water-related impacts of climate change – these are all issues that most human beings encounter to a greater or lesser extent, and addressing these keeps academics and professionals alike occupied day by day. Much research has been undertaken and significant progress made towards providing innovative technological solutions, securing financial means, or increasing people's capacities. Seemingly less straightforward, but despite (or because of) that nevertheless important is the political dimension of water management. Corruption, vested interests and political power plays can disrupt progress and eventually limit the impact of any type of development cooperation in the water sector. On the other hand, evolving global norms can feed into the political practice of nation states, thus rendering financial and technical assistance more effective.

In this context the book *Water politics and development cooperation – Local power plays and global governance* presents selected issues and research on the politics of water management. The book with 416 pages was published in 2008. The publication results from the Fifth Dialogues on Water that were held at the Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik/German Development Institute (DIE) in Bonn in 2005 under the auspices of the editors of the present publication. The Dialogues on Water formed a seminar series between 1995 and 2009 where participants from the DIE and other research institutes – the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and practitioners from implementing agencies such as the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH – shared their practical experiences with, and research findings on, water policy issues and challenges. The underlying aim was to inspire more practice-oriented research questions as well as more research-based development practice.

Stressing the "importance of the political sphere for understanding and solving water sector problems" (p. xxi) and its complexity, the dialogues on water as well as the resulting publication provide a platform for multi-disciplinary discussions and exchanges. Focusing on the political processes of policy formulation and the strategic behaviour of involved actors, the book publicly continues the dialogues' mission to trigger an "even greater number of more elaborate and conceptually innovative contributions that consider 'the political' as the key source of challenges and solutions in the water

sector (p. xxx)". In the long run, this process shall particularly benefit field practitioners by putting them into a better position to address water-related development challenges.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENTS

This edited volume is grouped into five parts, each exploring a theme or sector in the politics of water. The book comprises 16 articles mostly based on case studies grouped into five parts that are – with slight deviations – in turn, based on the structure of the underlying Dialogues. An article entitled *Water policy – Water politics* by Peter P. Mollinga serves as a conceptual introduction. Mollinga advances water politics as a research field through formally conceptualising it and mapping out relevant issue networks and problemsheds, where actors, relations and practices determine course and outcomes of water control contestation. Recognising the political dimension of water resources management, he believes, could overcome the dominant social engineering approaches to institutional transformation and give way to a normative paradigm shift towards an "inclusive, polycentric system of water governance and management having a focus on sustainable human development addressing the complex mix of economic growth, welfare, equity, sustainability and democracy concerns" (p. 25).

Part I of the book focuses on *global norms and national policies*. The first two articles consider the impact of the World Commission on Dams (WCD) recommendations. Michael Fink and Anne Cramer take stock of what has been achieved (at the time of writing in 2006) in *Towards implementation of the World Commission on Dams recommendations*. They assess their impact on policy formulation and identify critical factors for their practical applicability. Waltina Scheumann then analyses *How global norms for large dams reach decision-makers*, identifying paths and means through which the global WCD norms can take effect in the practice of nation states, despite, or because of, being the outcome of a non-state centred approach. After the focus on the WCD recommendations, two articles highlight additional aspects of global governance and water policies. Imme Scholz looks at *Global environmental governance and its influence on national water policies* and shows that, under certain conditions, water-relevant public policies can be influenced by global environmental governance processes despite the absence of a global water convention. Concluding the first chapter, Maria Schnurr in *Global water governance: Managing complexity on a global scale* outlines the path towards a global water governance architecture and highlights the role of science in overcoming expected challenges in such a complex transformation process.

The second part *Critical debates revisited* undertakes a reassessment of the practical implications of virtual water trade, water as a human right and Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). In *Strategic virtual water trade – A critical analysis of the debate* Susanne Neubert, in collaboration with Lena Horlemann outlines under what framework conditions it is beneficial to enter into virtual water trade and how the approach needs to be considered in the wider context of sustainable water resources management at different levels. Danuta Sacher and Michael Windfuhr review *The debate on 'Water as a human right' and its implications for development assistance* by analysing the discourse and drawing on experience with a rights-based approach in (German) development policy and national politics. The presented findings and conclusions are of particular interest seeing that the human right to water was formally acknowledged by the UN General Assembly in 2010 (two years after the publication of the book). *Rethinking IWRM under cultural considerations* by Manfred Matz draws on the contrasting examples of French and German water management practices and development cooperation approaches in order to argue in favour of a more culturally sensitive and less dogmatised interpretation of IWRM. His contribution seems particularly relevant in light of the challenges to the widely recognised need for improved donor coordination.

The third part *Politics of water supply and sanitation* is devoted to the most prominent sub-sector in the water debate and features three articles on private-sector participation, sector-reform, and governance for water and sanitation services. Thomas Kluge and Ulrich Scheele discuss the challenges and opportunities for increased *Private sector participation in water supply and sanitation* and their

role in the advancement of decentralised systems as a step towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Equally concerned about what it takes to achieve the MDGs, Franz-Josef Batz in *Sector reforms for sustainable financing of water and wastewater services* highlights the increased funding requirements from different sources and argues that beyond reforming the water sector as such financial markets and public administration as well need to undergo significant changes. Providing insights from a specific development context, Matthias Krause in *The political economy of water and sanitation services in Colombia* demonstrates how political and administrative governance affect the quality and outreach of service provision.

Part IV *Power plays in Irrigation Reforms* contains two articles that discuss political aspects of irrigation sector reform. *Political power play in Bulgaria's irrigation sector reform* from Insa Theesfeld spells out how rent seeking political actors influenced the design and implementation of the reform. Elke Herrfahrtd-Pfaehle's contribution *two steps forward, one step back: Institutional change in Kyrgyz water governance* draws attention to the role of both formal and informal institutions and organisations at different levels in institutional change processes of irrigation reform.

Entitled *Development Cooperation* the fifth part takes a closer look at different agents and forms of development cooperation. *The World Bank's water sector policy reforms* by Volkmar Hartje follows the World Bank's internal developments and external factors that influenced the translation of the IWRM concept into policies that would finally guide operations. Martin Kipping highlights the global as well as donor-specific *Challenges for German Development Cooperation in the water sector* and how a merger of German implementing agencies (technical and financial assistance) – as it was discussed at the time of writing – could have proven beneficial in this regard. Stefan Lindemann in *Addressing the need for water service delivery in fragile states* presents a particular case of German development cooperation and identifies success factors and lessons learnt for rendering water sector reform support in fragile contexts. Finally, *EU Water Initiative – A (non-)innovative form of development cooperation* by Lena Partzsch discusses to what extent the EU Water Initiative can be considered innovative in terms of stakeholder involvement.

CRITIQUE

The enormous effort of organising a multi-disciplinary exchange on the politics of water and the consequent claim to not force a unified conceptual framework or normative stance on participants deserves recognition. However, transferring this approach to an edited volume and the resulting high diversity of topics and concepts limit the usefulness of the book for most academics and development cooperation practitioners. The book displays not only a diversity of aspects and backgrounds of water politics but also a diversity of research approaches, a diversity of respective time periods and – unfortunately – varying academic standards. The resulting character of a collection of separate articles has limited added benefit over the conference proceedings or an edited academic review. A more reader-oriented edited volume would display a better integration of the conceptual introduction and the book's chapters and individual contributions and more elaborate introductory remarks extending beyond a sequence of abstracts at the beginning as well as a concluding chapter. The weak common conceptual basis leads to diverging uses of key concepts and terms, such as politics vs. policy, making it even more difficult to relate the individual contributions to the larger context that is already diverse in itself. Moreover, as regards formal editing, a more diligent spell and grammar check – which could indeed be expected from a (Springer) book costing €150 – would have saved the book from losing additional credit.

Despite the overall critique of the volume, it is still worth highlighting several articles that are of particular value – owing to their innovative, thought-provoking or timeless nature. Manfred Matz's *Rethinking IWRM under cultural considerations*, for example, is a valuable read for understanding the effects of competition among donor organisations who follow different policy agendas; implications that can also be transferred to other areas of development cooperation and raise important questions

for donor coordination efforts. Also the two papers in chapter IV on *Power plays in irrigation reforms* in Bulgaria and Kyrgyzstan by Insa Theesfeld and Elke Herrfahrdt-Pfaehle, respectively, present insightful contributions. Theesfeld outlines the process of, and influences on, changes in the Bulgarian water sector, while Herrfahrdt-Pfaehle conducts an interesting analysis of changes in the Kyrgyz water sector under the new institutional economics framework – both yielding methodological and subject area insights that can be transferred to different contexts. Another example of a revealing contribution is Matthias Krause's *The political economy of water and sanitation services in Colombia*, going beyond the largely (too) ideological debate around private and public ownership in the water sector to look at aspects of political and administrative governance. His lessons learnt provide helpful implications for practice and, at the same time, actively encourage further research.

While the book can serve as a starter on the various aspects of water politics and development cooperation for individuals entering this subject area, it remains after all doubtful that the book will be useful as a whole for many more experienced readers in the fields of academic as well as practical development cooperation. Most articles address distinct and limited target groups. Thus, the reader should carefully balance his interest in the specific topic and the decision to buy a volume as diverse as *Water politics and development cooperation – Local power plays and global governance*. With respect to the editor's motivation, two adverse conclusions arise. While the book succeeds in selectively providing examples of practice-related research, the variety of development issues, political aspects and research approaches makes it difficult to derive significant benefit for practical development cooperation. However, it is to be hoped that the book may indeed inspire more research on this broad but nevertheless important subject area.

REFERENCE

German Development Institute. 2011. Dialogues on water.
www.die-gdi.de/CMS-Homepage/openwebcms3_e.nsf/%28ynDK_contentByKey%29/MSIN-7UZGG8?Open&nav=expand:Events;active:Events\MSIN-7UZGG8 (accessed 8 February 2011)