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Water, place and equity. The MIT Press.

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BOOK REVIEW

Whiteley, J.M.; Ingram, H. and Perry, R.W. (Eds). 2008. Water, place and equity. Cambridge, Mass/London: The MIT Press. ISBN-10: 0-262-23271-5, 318 pages, US\$63.00

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This edited volume sets out not simply to raise awareness of the importance of equity to water resource management, but to illustrate ways of building in equity to future water policies. It is based on the premise – now widely acknowledged by international water agencies – that the water crisis we are currently witnessing is essentially one of water governance (p.2). The book looks beyond the conventional, functionalist explanation of water conflicts as being an expression of the diversity of uses water serves. This utilitarian perspective on water, the editors argue, is only one of the many different values which water holds in different places and at different times. The dominant "efficiency framework" of conventional water policy needs tempering with broader notions of equity, fairness and justice. The aim of the book is, therefore, to "rais[e] equity to its proper place as equal to efficiency among criteria to evaluate water-related actions and policies" (p.29).

The book comprises eight local/regional case studies of water management (all but one from the Americas) with substantial introductory and concluding chapters written by the editors. It is divided into two sections: Part I (*Water, Place and Equity*) exploring various equity issues in diverse contexts of water management and Part II (*Civic Engagement and Governance*) focusing more on procedural aspects of equity, although the distinction between the two sections is not always clear. The introductory chapter sets out the above rationale for writing the book and introduces its principal themes. The subsequent case studies are set up to illustrate different contexts and dimensions of equity, refining the meaning of equity for water management in the process. The cases covered include studies of asymmetrical trans-boundary relations (e.g. between the USA and Mexico and between the USA and Canada), river basin organisations (e.g. water users' councils in Northeast Brazil), national water reforms (e.g. in Mexico and in Brazil), the historical legacies of water treaties, development plans and infrastructures (e.g. the Columbia and Fraser rivers and national water policy in Spain) and the privatisation of water services (e.g. Cochabamba, Bolivia). The concluding chapter explores alternative ways to incorporate equity into future water resource management decisions. Here, the editors set out their recommendations for going beyond utilitarianism to equitable practices of water management. They call for greater inclusiveness (of participants and alternatives) and ethical eclecticism (adapted to specific contexts), a commitment to democratic processes, making ethical assumptions clear and transparent (since no ethical approach will be universally popular) and collaboration among parties who disagree in order to minimise the influence of self-interest. They point out, however, that existing inequities over water resource management are likely to be exacerbated by new inequities emerging from the impacts on water resources of climate change and of the policies designed to mitigate against, and adapt to, global warming, such as 'green' energy alternatives to fossil fuels.

The prominence of the concept of equity to the book and the convincing arguments made about its importance to water policy raise expectations about how it is defined which are not fully satisfied. A theoretically founded and empirically grounded definition of what equity means for water policy is

sadly missing throughout the book. The editors are very clear that equity is not a residual or add-on category but one which goes beyond self-interest to include concern for broader community values, the effects on the poor and disadvantaged and respect for equitable processes (p.27). The principal distinction they draw is between distributional equity and procedural equity. Distributional equity is based on the premise that "no groups, particularly the disadvantaged, should be made worse off in absolute or relative terms because of water policies" (p.16). The chapter by Wilder specifies the following analytical dimensions to distributional equity: access (physical and economic), distribution of socioeconomic impacts, extent of use and cost-sharing. Procedural equity is based on the premise that good results do not excuse unfair processes (p.21). Decision-making should be fair, open and transparent. Given the multiple meanings of water, the editors are right to stress that water equity cannot be reduced to 'one size fits all'. The chapter by Arnold – on the moral outrage at water exploitation in the San Luis valley – introduces the term 'complex equity' as a regulative ideal for goods distinguished by multiple meanings. Decisions that fail to regard complex goods as complex thus "commit a kind of injustice" (p.53). However, it would have been helpful for the editors to provide a clear working definition of equity as an orientation for the case studies as well as a distinction between equity and other related terms, such as justice and fairness, which are used more or less interchangeably throughout.

It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that the case-study chapters address the concept of equity in different ways and in varying degrees of intensity. Some use it without due reflection, as in the chapter on U.S.-Mexico border water management. In other cases, such as on water privatisation in Cochabamba, the added value of using the concept is not made explicit. Most of the empirical examples, though, do make important contributions to appreciating the multi-faceted dimensions to water equity. Wilder draws attention to the distinction between political equity (relating to the institutionalisation of local participation in water policy making) and economic equity (addressing affordability, productivity and accessibility) and goes on to demonstrate how recent water reforms in Mexico have enhanced the former but not the latter. Kamieniecki and Below make the point – familiar from the literature on environmental justice – that inequities rarely come alone. Thus spatial inequities – for instance between upstream and downstream users – are often overlaid with social, economic and ethnic inequities – for instance, for those unable to move away from polluted water courses. Like various authors, they highlight the problems of pitting equity concerns against one another, requiring institutional arrangements inclusive enough to encompass all equity issues deemed relevant by the stakeholders. Hirt demonstrates – using the case of the development of the Columbia River – how historical inequities and dissenting voices once suppressed can re-emerge to haunt river management today. Vaccaro points out that equity issues in Spain's water policies are largely attributable to the influence of the European Union. Lemos argues that stakeholder involvement – the core to procedural equity – certainly has the potential to increase the level of equitable allocation, democratisation, accountability and transparency of water management, but can also threaten equity through 'elite capture' of knowledge and decision-making. Her study of a water users' commission in Ceará, Northeast Brazil, reveals that despite more participation, non-elites remain less represented and less influential than elites.

If equity is central to most, if not all, the contributions to the book, the other term in the book's title – place – is given only cursory attention. The importance of place to water management in general and water equity issues in particular can be read into all of the stories presented, but only implicitly. There is no attempt by either the editors or the case-study authors to define what is meant by place and why it is so relevant to equity issues. Repeated references to 'communities', 'boundaries', 'local context', 'upstream/downstream users', 'urban vs. rural', 'multi-level governance' and 'sense of place' in connection with water resource management are all suggestive of this relevance, but interpretation is left to the reader.

These criticisms do not detract, however, from making this book a highly valuable resource for understanding a dimension of water management which has been continuously – some might claim,

systematically – overlooked by water managers and researchers worldwide. The thoughtful and differentiated analysis of water equity provided by this book makes a powerful case for mainstreaming equity issues in future notions of sustainable water management.