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BOOK REVIEW

Swatuk, L.A. and Wirkus, L. (Eds). 2009. Transboundary water governance in southern Africa: Examining underexplored dimensions. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft. ISBN 978-3-8329-4140-6, 221 pages, €34.

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Transboundary rivers in the Global South present some of the most formidable challenges to sustainable resource management in the world today. In regions such as southern Africa, where water insecurity is a significant contributor to high poverty rates, there are serious consequences for lives and livelihoods when the "hydro-social contract" between government and society (see Turton et al., 2007) is weak, ineffective, or neglectful of the most marginalised segments of the population. The contributors to this volume propose better governance, which is not simply sustainable management of water resources. Rather, it is inclusive of participation, transparency, multi-scalar in approach, equity, and accountability, among other characteristics. Governance is as much about process as about outcome. A central concern of the book is how to achieve good governance at the basin scale given the complications created by a river crossing multiple boundaries.

In the introductory chapter, Swatuk and Wirkus point out that there is, in both practical and academic approaches to transboundary water management, an "almost instantaneous, unquestioned and perhaps unconscious acceptance of the state as the primary organisational node for water resources management" (p.18). This is a concern in southern Africa because state boundaries are inherited largely from colonial powers (and at odds with most lived realities), because the region is characterised by weak states, and because other boundaries – racial, class and gender-based, discursive – are generated, reinforced, or hidden by the state-centric approach. Good governance, therefore, requires decentring the state in order to create opportunities for the emergence of a "newly conceived and differently-bounded spatial domain" (p.206) around which to manage water. While it is not clear what this new spatial domain will look like, most of the authors suggest that it will require paying more serious attention to the ecological parameters of the river basin, coupled with decentralised stakeholder participation.

The extent to which contributors address the compelling questions raised in the introduction is somewhat uneven throughout the book. The chapter by Cullis and van Koppen on applying the Gini coefficient to inequity of water use in the Olifants river water management area is original and thought-provoking, and their work reveals the existence of important boundaries to water access. If they had applied their research to an interstate river, and analyzed the extent to which interstate cooperation reinforced, addressed, or masked boundaries of access, the piece would have shed more light on the questions posed by the book's editors. Similarly, the chapter by Amakali and Swatuk on local-level participation in river basin management in Namibia is an interesting comparison of the effects of new laws on participation and water management in two different basins, but it is not clear how the results contribute to greater understanding of the challenges of governance when interstate cooperation is prioritised over the resolution of inequities and problems at other scales. These chapters do not

necessarily represent a weakness, but they do limit the broad conclusions that can be drawn from the research as a whole. As with most edited collections of case studies, it is likely that the researchers began with a diverse set of research questions, but some of these relate less well to the concepts emphasised by the editors.

Other chapters deal more directly with the tension between state and local actors, and between interstate and other boundaries. The case study of the Okavango by Swatuk and Kgomotso is particularly interesting in this regard. They examine the tension between the needs of local users of the lower Okavango river basin and government decision-makers, finding that equitable and sustainable governance is impeded by failure to address multiple boundaries not captured by the state scale. Tapela's research on the Pungwe river, shared by Mozambique and Zimbabwe, reveals the challenges of including local stakeholders in transboundary cooperation. The case study draws attention to the multiple ways in which inequitable power relations complicate the process. Similarly, the chapter on the Songwe river, which forms the border between Malawi and Tanzania, raises fascinating questions about the competing environmental perceptions of locals and government officials, and how they affect management priorities. These case studies allow for cross-case study comparison of obstacles and opportunities for good governance.

For anyone interested in transboundary water governance in southern Africa or elsewhere, this is an informative and worthwhile book. The writing is clear and accessible, with a nice balance of the theoretical and empirical. The regional focus works well, and one comes away with a solid understanding of how southern Africa's distinct socio-political landscape, history, and natural environment complicate and constrain transboundary governance. And, despite the problems highlighted by the research, many of the case studies reveal innovative and progressive efforts by communities to play more central roles in managing their water resources. The research suggests that transboundary water resources governance, while always imperfect, is evolving and strengthening in important ways in the river basins of southern Africa.

REFERENCE

Turton, A. R.; Hattingh, H.J.; Maree, G.A.; Roux, D.J.; Claassen, M. and Strydom, W.F. (Eds). 2007. *Governance as a dialogue: Government-society-science in transition*. Pretoria and Berlin: CSIR and Springer.