

Levine, G.; Solanes, M. and Dikito-Wachtmeister, M. 2013.  
*Introduction – Voices of water professionals:*  
Shedding light on hidden dynamics in the water sector.  
Water Alternatives 6(2): 148-153



---

## ***Introduction – Voices of Water Professionals: Shedding Light on Hidden Dynamics in the Water Sector***

### **Gilbert Levine**

Professor Emeritus, Biological and Environmental Engineering Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA; [gl14@cornell.edu](mailto:gl14@cornell.edu)

### **Miguel Solanes**

Former Water Law Advisor to the United Nations and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean; Senior Researcher, Imdea Water, Madrid, Spain; [miguel.solanes@imdea.org](mailto:miguel.solanes@imdea.org)

### **Mercy Dikito-Wachtmeister**

Former Senior Network Officer and later, Senior Officer Global Initiatives GWP Secretariat; from 1 July 2013, Management Consultant – Gender and Diversity in Development, Stockholm, Sweden; [mdikitowachtmeister@gmail.com](mailto:mdikitowachtmeister@gmail.com)

---

This Special Issue of Water Alternatives titled *Voices of Water Professionals: Shedding Light on Hidden Dynamics in the Water Sector* is intended to bring to the fore many of the problems, ethical dilemmas, and frustrations that those of us involved with international development recurrently encounter, but rarely discuss and hardly even write about. This is an attempt to depart from most existing literature dealing with water and society that is written by scientists and not water practitioners, as the latter often feel constrained by time or bound by professional confidentiality while engaged in international or governmental spheres. They also often suffer from both a range of discomfort from exposing to public view problems that reflect adversely on one's professional discipline and the more serious fear of the loss of employment or other significant reprisal. Yet water professionals are central witnesses of, and participants in, the broad spectrum of the social and political processes at work in water law or policy making, in water resources planning and development, and in the management of river basins, irrigation systems and water utilities. As participants they often find themselves at the interface between commercial or political interests and collective values of resource use efficiency, social equity and environmental sustainability.

This Special Issue is therefore dedicated to tapping the often unarticulated wealth of experience with regard to the social and political processes that permeate real-life professional practice but often escapes academic scrutiny. We think this is especially important because much of the knowledge associated with this experience is lost after the retirement of key actors of the water sector. The sector is broad and large, including international aid agencies, national governments, private consulting companies and individuals, private construction companies, and non-governmental organisations. Within these, there is a wide range of perspectives represented – those of politicians, policy-makers, bankers, administrators, designers, managers and researchers. We have tried to capture as many of these perspectives as possible.

Some of the papers in this collection address factors affecting water policy formulation; others focus on problems of implementation of projects; and still others on institutional and personal corruption.

They highlight the influence that global policies, institutions and practices have on the allocation, distribution, development and protection of water resources. They note that there is a global spectrum of ideological, legal, economic and institutional influences affecting the local level, and that the distribution of costs and benefits between the local level and international actors is often neither symmetrical nor equitable.

Many of the testimonies and illustrations provided by our contributors shed light on the gap between formal or alleged practices on the one hand, and real-life governance structures on the other. The ultimate question, implicit, if not explicit, behind the Special Issue, is the governance of the water resource. The papers reflect facts related to water being both power and wealth, and the conflicts associated with development activities, since they have impacts on water allocation and distribution, and therefore on the wealth made available to different economic and social actors groups. Moreover, development activities often change the *status quo ante* without providing alternative livelihoods to those adversely affected, assigning compensations, making adequate cost-benefit analyses, and ensuring environmental adequacy and sustainability.

The wealth effect associated with water includes the many contracts and assignments resulting from development processes, and their impacts on different interest groups, political power and clientele constituencies. It is therefore a fact that in many places discussions concerning development work are anything but objective or balanced.

While scientists and academics discuss economic, social, and environmental pros and cons, users, politicians and contractors discuss water rights and use, votes, costs and payments (sometimes to individuals and sometimes contributions to the party in power at the time contracts are signed). Consequently, politicians and contractors may pay little attention to local conditions, social or environmental.

Financial institutions see and discuss performance in terms of projects, time frames, budgets and disbursement schedules. In this context investments in water works are much more 'profitable' than measures instilling better governance, whatever their relative impacts on government liabilities, income distribution, and overall efficiency of investment. They may also pay little attention to local issues.

These different worlds of development have few productive and transparent interfaces.

The different attitudes towards more open discussion of potentially difficult subjects/matters are influenced by a number of factors including, importantly, the positions individuals hold – in government, in the major development banks, as a development consultant, and as an academic researcher. Each position has its own probability of adverse consequences. Perhaps the most vulnerable is the government employee, followed by the consultant, the development worker in NGOs dependent on donor funding, the development bank employee, and least the academic researcher. While recognising this, the editors of this Special Issue thought it important to have as wide a representation as possible and invited participation from the full range of employment categories. We are very pleased at the response, particularly since all contributors have had many years of experience and most are still active in the development field. To provide maximum freedom for the authors to express themselves, the editors suggested the format to be based on personal reflections about the problems and issues encountered. Given both the objective of the Special Issue and the nature of the articles, they have not been subjected to the customary external reviews and are therefore published as *Viewpoints*.

The papers present a broad spectrum of issues and problems, from those encountered at higher levels of policy formulation and political decision making, both international (Washington Consensus) and national (China, Chile, Tanzania) to 'on-the-ground' problems of local power (Pakistan, Philippines); they address problems at the level of international institutions (global users of local water resources and their special protections, major development banks, foreign aid agencies, international investment agreements and international investment courts); they identify issues at the country institutional level

(India, Sri Lanka , South Africa) and at the local level (India, Venezuela). Essentially all the papers emphasise the need to explicitly learn from experience, not only from personal experience (though that is clearly important), but from a more systematic review and analysis of the outcomes of development efforts, including those in the social as well as those in the political and economic spheres. Almost all the papers identify lessons that can be learned from the experiences of the authors, with a major one that is shared, implicitly if not always explicitly: the failure to adequately consider the interaction of social, political, economic and local environments and international contexts in policy making, planning, implementation and use of water development efforts is a major cause of subsequent problems.

The Special Issue also suggests that it is relevant to consider not only experiences related to development activities, but also to comparative national and international practices concerning institutional development, water legislation, and regulation of water-related activities.

Some international projects have discussed legal regimes, with a particular emphasis on formal rights, to the detriment of the customary uses of local populations. In extreme situations legislative changes may not be beneficial to local populations: rights vested under colonial regimes are enshrined in legislation and governments are unable to pay the hefty compensations that would be required, should changes take place. Legal drafting often leaves aside the measures that could assist in redressing historical inequity. When water rights are associated with international investments, they are protected by the special rules and procedures of International Investment Agreements, whose concerns for local populations and public interests are nil (Solanes).

In some countries global public utilities were able to take over already existing massive public investments, to provide water and sanitation services with light-contract based-regulation. After successive renegotiations with flexible and understanding governments many of them failed. International investment courts are adjudicating upon the stranded conflicts, left over by these ill-advised privatisations.

The Guest Editors hope that these papers will draw attention to these important neglected issues in the water development field. Some of the areas of concern addressed by the contributors are illustrated below.

There are a number of contextual factors affecting the outcomes of water-related activities. They can be global, national, local, or even individual. While Jeremy Berkoff stresses the ignorance or neglect of local conditions when designing water projects, Jensen discusses "what happens when normative water polices are forced out of their comfort zone and into social and political realities"; and Dipak Gyawali illustrates how day-to-day political dynamics in Nepal reflect party politics as well as the influence of donors and lead to confrontations between the central government and the communities.

Other authors (Chambers, Solanes) identify constraints to knowledge and information. Such constraints include ignoring diversity (when making of one case a general rule, universalising the exception, or relying on temporary success stories) and promoting or accepting as science what is in fact a lay out intended to benefit special interest groups. The 'one-size-fits-all' examples provided by Levine do not illustrate knowledge constraints only, but also the sheer common belief that the 'project is right' and the people 'lousy'.

In connection with this, Chambers stresses that mistakes are many times legitimised, through uncritical repetition, while institutional imperatives silence knowledgeable individuals who could have made a difference.

The discussion on the Peruvian Water Act (Solanes) highlights the importance of individual standing. However, individuals are not always willing to act. There are several factual reasons for complacency and silence (Chambers). Walter Huppert reminds us of Leys' general justification for silence, when discussing rent-seeking and corruption: "the widespread feeling that the facts cannot be discovered, or if they can, they cannot be proved, or if they can be proved, the proof cannot be published" (Leys, 1965, as quoted by Huppert).

The relevance of water as a source of wealth and its relation to political power and economic interests run throughout the Special Issue. Ramaswamy R. Iyer illustrates how the discussion on large dams in India was obscured and polarised by the importance that they had in terms of bureaucratic power and construction contracts. Dipak Gyawali also refers to the subject, raising issues of excessive costs, bad estimates, output capture, and exaggerated conditionalities required by the World Bank to approve a hydroelectricity project in Nepal. Levine and Riddell underline the strategic preference that Bank staff has for larger projects, and the appeal that projects have for irrigation departments and consultants.

Phil Riddell rounds up the picture with examples of projects bent on inducing non-required water works for irrigation and drainage in tropical areas, because they were useful to the tax strategy of the firm sponsoring the project. The sponsor of the project, rather than its theoretical beneficiaries, needed it. And, therefore, as Riddle says, promote "solutions looking for problems"...

World Bank conditionalities, political and economic interests, and eventually legal capture of water resources are also at the core of the discussion of the Peruvian water law draft, that intended to reduce water to private rights and markets (Solanes), despite the fact that water characteristics limit the role of markets (Berkoff).

Likewise, the intransigency and efficacy of special interests in capturing the law-making process in order to benefit from the economic outputs of water is the essence of Mike Nelson's paper on how the electricity companies in Chile were granted water rights, without concerns for integrated water management, other users, and the environment. The balance of academic discussions and the needs for IWRM are of little impact when it comes to allocating the costs and benefits among economic actors with asymmetric political access.

Barbara Schreiner certifies the power that attitudes, vested rights, and institutional traditions have on water allocation, when discussing the reasons behind the failure to implement the 1998 National Water Act of South Africa, redistributing water to the previously neglected black majority and protecting the environment. Effective water reforms eventually are about redistributing both decision-power and the benefits of water and they still have to go a long way before having a more equitable impact on hitherto excluded populations.

While in South Africa human resources constraints are also part of the failure in implementing the Water Act (Schreiner), Ténrière-Buchot illustrates the importance of the availability of such resources and, more importantly, how management practices are embedded in cultural norms which shape the way negotiations are carried out, incentives designed and decisions taken.

A number of papers (Gyawali, Chambers, Iyer) comment on the limitations of the preference for structural, rather than a balanced combination of structural and managerial, measures. The preference for structural projects is shared by financing organisations (the larger the better), governments (patronage) and entrepreneurs (contracts). The array of interests vested in developing water works may even marginalise considerations of feasibility, sustainability and productivity (Riddell).

There are also references to different forms of intellectual and monetary corruption: doctoring project's benefits (Chambers) 'creative' cost-benefit analysis (Berkoff), uncritical acceptance of non tested systems for water allocation and marketing (Solanes), wilful ignorance (Levine) and simply illegal payments (Chambers). In a number of cases rent-seeking and corruption seem to be structural (Huppert). Levine mentions how to 'skim the rent' in water construction projects by saving in construction components: the practice is old! Roman aqueducts had to be water-proofed using a special red clay. Clay, and its application, were expensive due to material costs and the height of aqueducts. On the really high ones contractors just applied red paint. They were sure inspectors would not be willing to risk their life climbing so high. The example provided by Levine suggests that the situation has improved. It is now possible to cheat at ground level...

To conclude, is it possible to extract a list of points or questions that might inform further discussion of, and reflection on, the politics of professional water resources practice? After all, this collection started from the assumption that acknowledgement of, and more explicit debate on, this form of everyday politics might be helpful. In the vivid accounts of this collection there is quite a bit that is hilarious, and the cynically minded would not find much difficulty finding grounds for the confirmation of their cynicism. More important is, however, that many things reported are outright worrying, disturbing, and sometimes scandalous. If the papers – collectively – are a reasonable approximation of 'how things really work', then there is indeed an issue to be addressed and understood: why does this understanding of 'how things really work' not get reflected more and better in official water resources discourse, deliberation and decision-making? The papers allow the identification of at least five themes within this broader issue.

1. Much emphasised in the collection is the lack of 'fit' or 'contextualisation' of water policies and development projects: they seem to be often designed with high degrees of mismatch as regards their targeted context of application. This may be due to strong ideological drivers for pushing particular policies, to politico-bureaucratic preference for standardised approaches, to pursuing unspoken objectives, and to several other reasons.
2. Many papers in the collection directly or indirectly discuss the 'politics of knowledge': the way different agents in the development enterprise treat 'facts' and 'analysis', ranging from outright manipulation, to uncertainty facilitating bias and selectiveness, to 'diplomatic science', to arrogance, to simply ignorance and, at a more general level, the characteristics of the knowledge system that informs 'Promethean attitudes to nature', associated with highly polarised forms of water politics in many parts of the world, with 'dams' being the signature example.
3. A third recurring theme is the stubborn defensiveness of hydrocracies with regard to internalising new concerns and societal priorities in water resources management – environmental concerns as these were articulated from the 1980s being a prime example. The systemic corruption in the water sector is one element of its explanation, a topic, however about which there has been till very recently a 'deafening silence'.
4. Fourth, international aid agencies and development banks seem to have similar problems in learning from past experience. Many of the flaws, distortions, and manipulations associated with the typical 'project cycle' are well identified but these seem to continue unabated, with the logic of supply-driven projects (money has to be disbursed) frequently nurturing corruption and poor efficiency of aid money.
5. The fifth theme that surfaces frequently, through a number of 'confessions' and self-criticisms, as well as through more elaborate forms of reflection, is what integrity can and should mean for a water professional. How can the difficulties implied in the first four points be navigated effectively by someone professionally active in the sector? Can conditions be created in which 'speaking truth to power' becomes less threatening and more 'professional', that is, acknowledged and respected? Following the call of Robert Chambers for 'more whistle-blowers', can further space be created for well-known yet unspoken inconvenient truths to be exposed and debated?

Some of these five themes are addressed in the academic literature on water and society, in the pages of this journal and elsewhere. Critical (environmental) policy analysis has a lot to say about the logics of policy formulation and implementation; political ecology is one of several perspectives problematising the role of (scientific) knowledge in development; there is a recently growing literature on corruption in the water sector and development practice more generally; there is a burgeoning literature doing 'aidnography'. It is perhaps the fifth theme that has received least attention in academic research.

We call on practitioners and academics alike to further contribute to the discussion that this Special Issue has sought to stimulate.

---

THIS ARTICLE IS DISTRIBUTED UNDER THE TERMS OF THE CREATIVE COMMONS *ATTRIBUTION-NONCOMMERCIAL-SHAREALIKE* LICENSE WHICH PERMITS ANY NON COMMERCIAL USE, DISTRIBUTION, AND REPRODUCTION IN ANY MEDIUM, PROVIDED THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR(S) AND SOURCE ARE CREDITED. SEE [HTTP://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY-NC-SA/3.0/LEGALCODE](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/legalcode)

---