BUILDING BLOCKS OF WATER GOVERNANCE IN THE AWASH BASIN, ETHIOPIA

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Even though there are many ways to approach water governance, some indeed better than others, efforts to discern some common rules and necessary building blocks of a good water governance system are undertaken. In light of this, the Water Governance Centre (WGC) published their building blocks for good water governance in 2011, and a new edition will be published in March, 2016. These five building blocks are briefly described below and are further elaborated in *'Building blocks for good water governance'* WGC (2013).

- **A powerful administrative organization of water management**, of which the basic principles are: absolute clarity on which organization is responsible for which water tasks; sufficient administrative and organizational scale; appropriate legal powers; access to sufficient financial resources; and transparency, participation and accountability.
- **A legally embedded system of water management**. This entails the incorporation of Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) principles in the legal framework, which include: aspects of participation, of stakeholders but also policy-makers at all levels; the recognition of fresh water as a vulnerable and finite resources; recognition of its economic value; and recognition that women play a central role. It also includes the decentralization and democratization of water management and the existence of special water acts.
- **A systematic planning approach of water resource management problems and activities**. These include: safety, recreation, shipping, agriculture, nature conservation, etc.
- **An adequate financing system** entails a sufficient degree self-support and of cost-recovery through collecting charges and fees on the basis of principles like polluters pays. Economic analyses of water management means spending the money efficiently.
- **The participation of stakeholders** is important to balance interests of various parties involved and create a sense of ownership. Early stakeholder involvement in the planning process improves implementation.

The case study below is a brief analysis of these building blocks in relation to the case of the Awash Basin in Ethiopia. It is not a deep analysis of the governance in the basin, but rather based on extensive experience with the basin's main agent: The Awash Basin Authority[1] (AwBA).

Awash basin

The Awash basin (figure 1) finds itself landlocked, with Djibouti and Somalia on the east separating it from the Gulf of Aden. The basin's main physiographic feature is the 1280 km Awash River, which originates in the high lands of Ginchi, not far from the capital Addis Abeba which is located at an altitude of about 2,600 meters. Most inflow to the main river occurs through the eastern tributaries during rainy season. The river meanders downstream filling a number of artificial reservoirs. It never mouths into the sea, but instead ends in Lake Abbay. It is therefore a closed basin. It is also Ethiopia's most utilized and industrialized basin with tremendous economic importance. Large state-owned sugarcane irrigation schemes, foreign investment in horticulture, textile, leather and steel and manufacturing industries are found particularly

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Figure 1
Topography of Ethiopia and some neighbouring countries. The Awash River basin is delineated in black.
Source: ArcGIS on line.

in the upstream and middle parts. Some industries are found downstream in addition to large numbers of small-holder farms. The river system is shared by five regional states (Oromiya, Afar, Amhara, Somali, and SNNP) and two administrative towns (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa). For AwBA's systematic planning and water administration the Awash basin is hydrologically divided into 6 sub-basins, namely, Awash Upstream Koka, Awash Awash, Awash Halidebi, Awash Adaitu, Awash Terminal and Eastern sub basin.

A powerful administrative organization

Ethiopia has a federal system where regional states enjoy high autonomous power and have their own constitutions in line with the federal constitution. The national government has set out sector policy lines and decided upon the establishment of River Basin Organizations (RBOs) for decentralized water resource management. In this structure, a Basin High Council (BHC) brings policies to the parliament, being the RBO's political arm, and River Basin Authorities (RBAs) being the RBO's technical arm, has the operational mandate to implement Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). The fundamental planning unit is the hydrological boundary of a basin. RBOs are thus federal institutions cutting right through the administrative borders of regional states. RBAs are neither set up nor operating in an institutional landscape that neatly give way to the powers and duties RBAs should have. Moreover, they exist in diverse socio-economic conditions and hydrological regimes with complex cultural traditions and ethnic tensions. And this trickles down all the way to the level where RBAs attempt to fulfil their responsibilities. In the Awash basin, the RBA is the Awash Basin Authority (AwBA). Before its current role as an authority, AwBA was a project administration office for a state irrigation farm in Middle Awash. Now, it has to make itself familiar with the role of coordinating activities in the basin and reconciling the many stakeholders. And, with limited capacity, execute their operational mandate in a basin three times the size of the Netherlands. The coming decennia will be a major challenge for AwBA to grow into a powerful administrative organization of water management.

A legally embedded system

National policy sets the direction for the country's water governance and points at the aim "to put water resources of Ethiopia to the highest social and economic benefit for its people".[2] This is further elaborated through so-called Proclamations, regulations and directives. Especially the latter are currently being developed. It is, however, the striking comparison with reality that shows how a good legal framework on paper has had little impact on the ground thus far. Despite good laws on paper, there is a mismatch between legislation and enforcement. This gives the reality where water users are officially breaking the law, but in lieu of punishment are given leeway to undertake the necessary actions to comply with law in the future. With not enough capacity to enforce law, it remains to be seen whether all water users will actually undertake these actions. It will be interesting to see how water users that did not anticipate well enough will behave once AwBA's enforcement capacity is up to the mark. Given the characteristic ambiguity of law, this period is also exciting for AwBA to claim the extent of their operational mandate.

Planning

On planning, two major challenges can be found: 1) planning in scope: i.e. increasing systematic planning with water management tasks which have thus far not

Figure 2
A large irrigation scheme near Metahara diverts a huge chunk of the river flow to irrigate thousands of hectares of sugarcane.

been part of AwBA's range of activities; 2) planning in time horizon: i.e. drafting strategic river basin plans and over periods of 5-10 years. Real incorporation of a systematic planning approach at AwBA would require expansion of human capacity since AwBA is understaffed in relation to their mandate area. Systematic planning, though necessary and useful in the long run, does not yield benefits on the short term for most of the staff involved in regulation, information management and river training. Indeed, allocating time on devising a systematic planning approach is not rewarding for employees at this moment. Efforts on systematic planning, for example, are undercut by unforeseen drought, even though such efforts should help anticipate on drought events. However, AwBA is on the right path and in a step-by-step manner planning receives a bigger emphasis.

Adequate financing

Considering the power structures in a government system like Ethiopia, this might be the hardest building block to implement. Whereas in the Western world we put so much trust in our institutions—election results that are accepted almost without questioning, the assumed independency of the judicial system, etc.—the developing world is still struggling with tacit institutional arrangements and power and stature attributed to the individual. Position dictates rules more than rules shape position. This can manifest itself in the reluctance to accept transfers of power and budget. How this affects the finance system of water governance is demonstrated by the following example. There is a huge decentralization effort to ensure water management at 'the lowest appropriate level'; when policy makers fail to negotiate the proper budget transfers, and only tasks and responsibilities are decentralized, such an effort may be counter-productive. Successful decentralization must include some degree of financial autonomy. Sustaining this financial autonomy often depends upon the establishment of some form of water pricing or tariffs, having the users obeying such payments, and having the proceeds remain within or return to the basin. Thus, decentralizing management to the basin level, developing and maintaining the institutional arrangements for basin-level management, and implementing any form of financial autonomy implies that some financial resources at the basin level will have to be committed to the decentralization effort.[3] With the strong influence of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED), who collects revenues directly, AwBA operates without real autonomous budgets. That is not to say that financial resources are not available. Rather, when budget is needed, a proposal needs to be drafted and forwarded to MoFED to justify the allocation of funds.

Stakeholder participation

Recognizing the importance of stakeholder participation, the national Ethiopian government wants to give citizens a voice in water governance issues.[4] Thus AwBA is tasked with ensuring the use of water resources in a participatory manner.[5] On many fronts, there is stakeholder participation. In October 2014, for example, AwBA organized a public forum to address the recent flood and many audience members spoke up. And there are more examples of stakeholder meetings and public platforms where water issues are discussed. But such participation is mostly construed as information provision, and to a lesser extent consultation. Active involvement, such as participation in permit application procedures, is not yet present.

Figure 3
Uncontrolled wastewater discharge at the Dukum Eastern Industrial zone. Industries use groundwater and farmers subsequently use the wastewater to irrigate crops.

Neither are stakeholders actively involved in the planning process. This makes it very hard to balance the interest of the stakeholders. But is seems that practices to involve stakeholders structurally are underway.

Looking ahead

By implementing the building blocks of good water governance, AwBA slowly morphs from a technical unit—habitually executing their operational activities—into a coordinating governance unit safeguarding the sustainable development of the entire basin. A successful and proper progression is all but guaranteed and one of the toughest parts in this long-term effort is contrasting this reality with the goals in mind. Simply pointing at the need for these building blocks is not enough. Adequate financing for water management services or empowering RBOs is recognised as important, yet will only receive the high and essential political support when issues they relate to become highly salient. To a lesser extent, we see this in The Netherlands too. However, in Ethiopia, institutions are much more reactionary, and implementing the building blocks for good water governance becomes side-tracked by short-term interests. Hence it is best to operate on two levels. One, incremental steps that need to be taken, structurally and consciously, should become part of the modus operandi. And second, leaping forward by recognising opportunities for real institutional change at critical junctures. All in all, implementing good water governance is an art of the possible, contingent on context; not a coordinated effort to achieve institutional change. This harbours one big danger: successes made so far can be dialled back.

1 The Awash Basin Authority has a partnership with the Dutch Water Authorities. The author is a staff member of the Dutch Water Authorities and seconded to the Awash Basin Authority. This article expresses his opinion and not necessarily the opinion of the Awash Basin Authority itself. See also: Hemel, R. & Loijenga, H. (2013) Set up of a Water Governance Program in the Awash River Basin, Central Ethiopia. Assessment of Water Governance Capacity in the Awash river basin, Water Governance Centre.
2 Ethiopian Water Resources Management Proclamation, Addis Ababa, 9 March, 2000
3 A more elaborate discussion on financial autonomy as a condition for decentralization can be found in: Blomquist, Dinar, Kemper (2005). Comparison of institutional arrangements for river basin management in eight basins. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3636.
4 Fekahmed Negash, Executive Director Nile Basin Initiative, personal communication
5 River Basin Councils and Authorities Proclamation, Addis Ababa, 23 July, 2007.