

SPRAAKWATER

VALUES OF WATER

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Water is essential for human life. However, due to its scarcity, the management of water is a topic of great concern. Inadequate management may lead to famines, food insecurity, ecological destruction, and resource-based conflicts, and eventually to human suffering and the loss of millions of human lives. Whereas some official organizations speak of a water crisis, others argue that there is sufficient water but that the water sector needs to be reformed to avoid a water crisis in the future. Whether or not one uses the term “water crisis,” the numbers are not encouraging. In 2010, more than one out of six people (0.7 billion people) lacked access to safe drinking water, and more than two out of six (2.6 billion people) lacked adequate sanitation. Almost 2 million people die every year from water borne diseases, most notably diarrhea. There are no official numbers on resource-based conflicts, but fact is that there are over 260 river basins shared by two or more countries, which may provide a source of (regional) instability or conflicts when strong institutions and agreements are missing. In the light of climate change, the impact of the global water crisis is expected to increase in the coming decades.

Traditionally, water management has been seen as primarily a technical issue, belonging to the field of engineers and hydrologists. However, it is increasingly recognized that an adequate management of water requires that the institutional constraints and juridical context be taken into account. Both in academia and policy circles, the attention has therefore shifted from water management towards

water governance, requiring the combined and coordinated effort of both technical (engineers, hydrologists) and non-technical experts (lawyers, economists, political and social scientists). With the shift from water management to water governance, the principle of equitable utilization has emerged in the literature as an important principle for allocation. However, notwithstanding recurrent pleas to include issues of “equity” and “social justice” in the governance of water, a systematic reflection on the different values pertaining to water is lacking.

Round Table

In order to fill this gap, the department Technology, Policy and Management of Delft University of Technology has started a range of activities aimed at building an expert community on the topic “the values of water” in order to contribute to the development of an integrated account of water governance. The first activity was the organization of a round table on March 13, 2012, for which an international group of water experts was invited. The list of participants included representatives of European, American and Asian institutions, with disciplinary backgrounds, ranging from hydrology and engineering to law, policy sciences, and philosophy.

The aim of the round table was to identify some possible research topics and explore opportunities for joint research activities. After a first introductory round, some preliminary research themes were identified, which included distributive questions related to responsibilities, risks, and scarce resources, the role of knowledge and information in

decision making, but also institutional questions like the public-private divide in water governance, liability and transparency, enforcement and compliance to water law, implementation of international law and the human right to water (and more recently: the human right to safety).

Result: two topics on the values of water

It was agreed that both in-depth case studies and more comparative studies are needed to advance knowledge of the subject. Two topics were picked up for further exploration at this stage: standard setting in flood risk management and mapping public values controversies in water management.

Concerning the first topic, flood risk management in general – and the implementation of the European Flood Risk Directive in particular – was found to raise some urgent questions related to fairness. Differentiation in risk standards, for example, leads to unequal safety levels in different areas. This raises the question under what conditions these unequal safety levels are acceptable. Although this standard setting will partly be an economic trade-off, money cannot provide the final answer, it was generally agreed. Another point requiring reflection concerned the transition from regional to more centralized decision making on flood risks. This requires attention for the legitimacy of these decisions. Under what conditions is centralized decision making democratic, what kind of public participation is required? These and other questions should be answered if we want to include ethics in the management of flood risks.

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Concerning the second topic, “Mapping value controversies in water management,” the aim is to explore values concerned to water as a public good. In water management, some values are represented by stakeholders, but some values do not have a representative or council. Yet, these values are essential to current and future water management.

We have agreed to develop an exploratory joint research, in which we make a rigorous international comparison of the institutionalization of values in water management. Five questions are central to this research. The first is to identify which values are expressed in a certain case. Secondly, we want to analyze who supports or opposes specific values. The next step is to study which decisions are made to operationalize the public values: which mechanisms are used to protect, safeguard or realize public values? These mechanisms may vary from laws, checks and balances, contracts, training or technology. Fourthly, we will focus on the conflicts and trade-offs between different values in water management: How is this tradeoff being made? By whom or by what? The last question is how the values and the way they are institutionalized and prioritized contributes to the further development of the value.

In both projects, the contestation of water as public good is central. In our view, water governance is certainly an engineering challenge but it is far more than just that. It is about institutionalization and the question which values, roles and responsibilities are reflected in a particular design. It is about allocation and distribution of water and water-related risks. Water is also about security and civil protection. Ultimately, in water

governance human dignity is at stake. By giving ethics a more prominent place in water governance – both in terms of access and risks and in terms of the diversity of values attached to water – we hope to contribute to a more sustainable relationship with water.

With the round table on March 13, a first start has been made. Follow-up activities are being scheduled for the fall of 2012 and 2013. We hope to report on the output of the research in this and other journals on water (governance). People interested in joining the community can contact the authors or visit the website at <http://www.ethicsandtechnology.eu/subsite/water>.