

Who wants to be an agent?

A framework to analyse water politics and governance

Richard Meissner*

Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), PO Box 395, Pretoria, 0001, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a framework to analyse water politics and governance. The framework has been constructed from a social constructivist perspective. This theory places attention on the role of normative aspects like ideology, values, interests and culture in politics. This means that a theory of international relations such as neorealism, neoliberalism or structuralism would be appropriate but limiting for the analysis of water politics, in terms of the range of actors, processes and issues focused on. The framework's niche lies in that it focuses attention on non-state actors. This carries the potential to widen the understanding of the role and involvement of such actors in water politics and governance. The framework has five components: description of the geographic area or issue; the actors involved in water politics and governance; the (hydropolitical) history of the issue; the actors' power to enable change; and the type of interaction between the actors. In order to illustrate the components, examples from South and Southern Africa, and specifically the Kunene, Limpopo, Okavango and Orange River basins are used.

Keywords: Water, politics, governance, agential power, river basin, authority, ideology, economy

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a framework to analyse water politics and governance in order to highlight aspects that are lesser known within the South African water discourse and to introduce and further a critical understanding of water issues. Water politics is defined as the authoritative allocation and/or use of international and national freshwater resources. Within this authoritative allocation, the relationships between states and non-state entities, such as individuals and interest groups, play an important role (Meissner, 1998a; Turton, 2002). In other words, it is not only state entities that are involved in water politics. This is also the case with governance. Governance is defined as the result of interactive socio-economic and political forms of governing that result in problem solving and opportunity creation (Rhodes, 1996; Kooiman, 2008; Meissner, 2013). Considering these non-state-centric definitions of water politics and governance, the framework is flexible, dynamic and progressive, in the sense that it is applicable to any situation where actors collaborate or oppose each other in an issue area. An issue area can range from the functioning of wastewater treatment works in a municipality to the politics and governance in part of a river basin. The framework, apart from being an organising tool, assists in the identification of factors that influence the interaction between actors, the manner in which they govern systems and the socio-political variables that influence their conduct. This could be a valuable addition that could enrich the development of scenarios in the management of water resources and water services, especially where institutions need to deal with complexities, particularly in finding a balance between society's and the environment's water needs (Claassen et al., 2013).

For the framework to be dynamic and progressive, it is necessary to not construct it with a specific or dominant theoretical paradigm in mind. This means that a theory drawn from international relations, such as neorealism, neoliberalism or structuralism, would be appropriate but limiting in terms of the range of actors, processes and issues focused on. Such theories have a predominantly exclusive focus on state actors, the organisations they create, the treaties they sign and implement as well as the political elite that lead these institutions. This seems to be the predominant theoretical foundation used to do water research at the domestic level in South Africa. With respect to advancing understanding, doing research from such a foundation is unsatisfactory; a close link exists between theory and policy/decision making and if one theoretical paradigm dominates, policy makers do not have a variety of theoretical choices to base policy decisions on (George, 1994). This means that responses to problems and the generation of opportunities could fall short of expected returns. The framework presented in this paper has been constructed from a social constructivist perspective. This theory places attention on the role of normative aspects in politics, such as ideology, values, interests and culture.

Since the framework's objectives are to analyse, explain and predict interactions around issues, its constitutive elements must encapsulate this problematique (Meissner, 2004). This is the framework's niche – it presents alternatives to decision makers in the understanding of the politics and governance of water resource management. There are of course other frameworks. Franks and Cleaver's (2007) framework focuses on non-state actors from a sociology perspective to determine the impact of water governance systems on the poor (Franks and Cleaver, 2007). Said differently, frameworks for analysis have specific purposes based on the research agenda of the researcher(s). For instance, Ostrom's (2007) framework, in part, discounts the pervasiveness of panaceas or cure-alls in decision-making. The task of Schmeier's (2012) theoretical framework is to assess the various determinants of river basin

* To whom all correspondence should be addressed.

+27 12 841 3696 /+27 71 677 6262;

e-mail: RMeissner@csir.co.za

Received 17 September 2012; accepted in revised form 2 December 2013.