

EDITORIAL

IWRM revisited: from concept to implementation

Concepts are the constituents of thoughts. Consequently, they are crucial to such psychological processes as categorization, inference, memory, learning, and decision-making. This much is relatively uncontroversial. But the nature of concepts – the kind of things concepts are – and the constraints that govern a theory of concepts have been the subject of much debate. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that disputes about concepts often reflect deeply opposing approaches to the study of the mind, to language, and even to philosophy itself.

—Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concepts/>

In the development field, we have long recognized that there are clear gaps between the current understanding of concepts and paradigms and the one that is necessary to address evolving economic, social and environmental planning and management issues as well as their political, institutional, legal, regulatory and participatory considerations. Some of the best-known paradigms, namely ‘sustainable development’, ‘integrated water resources management’ and ‘governance’, have permeated the development discourse without necessarily having a visible impact on natural resources management, including water resources.

In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen (1999) presents an insightful account of development as a momentous process of engagement with freedom’s possibilities in which freedoms of different kinds strengthen one another. Public policy to foster human capabilities results from the promotion and interlinkages of these freedoms. Sen argues that individuals live and operate in a world of institutions, where opportunities and prospects are crucially determined by the existing institutions and their functioning. Institutions should thus not be considered as mechanical development devices since their establishment, operation and use depend on values, priorities and participation mechanisms. Instead, they could be conceived as constructions that work to promote societal goals and reflect the characteristics of the society to which services are offered. What is needed is to nurture a plurality of institutions that respond to the present and future needs and aspirations of societies.

In the daily world, however, we face constraints which confront theory with reality, where the importance of a more comprehensive view of key issues related to development has still not been fully appreciated, including plurality of institutions, partnerships and even ideologies. In fact, governments face numerous obstacles in incorporating concepts like ‘integrated management’ and ‘sustainable development’ into public policies, translating them into plans and programmes and then successfully implementing them.

In an increasingly globalized world, policy makers have realized that development should go beyond economic growth to encompass social goals and environmental protection. Ultimately, the objective is to improve the quality of life of the populations. Therefore, a major challenge and aim set for current policy making is to reconcile economic, social and environmental goals in various areas of development, including

water resources, so that the overall benefits to the society are maximized, and costs minimized. Since environmental problems cannot be solved by technical or economic means alone, interrelated factors like social activities, perceptions and aspirations must be considered as well.

Many old unresolved issues plague the water sector and impact development: inefficient water institutions, many of them with overlapping or conflicting decision-making structures; outdated or unresponsive legal and regulatory frameworks; increasing and unregulated withdrawals for cities, industry, agriculture and energy; a prevailing focus on water supply rather than on demand management; and water prices and tariff structures that do not consider socially desirable outcomes – to mention just some of them. Conventional wisdom, as it relates to the management of water resources, needs to be challenged and reconsidered so that it is able to address current and future development constraints and opportunities.

An important limitation has been poor information, communication and coordination (not to mention integration) among sectors, partners and actors on goals and objectives. Ideally, in order to take any decision within the public sector for policy development and implementation, and then with the private and non-governmental sectors, some kind of coordination, at least sharing of information, is necessary among institutions, actors and sectors. But it is seldom achieved. This is due to some extent to the increasing number and type of political and social actors involved in and contributing to the development field, who have not always been willing to work towards common development goals. That is, not only has the lack of strong institutions and legal and regulatory frameworks come up short in responding to the changing needs of society, but also the ideological differences among the myriad of actors and partners and self-interests have fostered fragmentation.

The global development landscape is undergoing radical changes and is becoming increasingly more complex. Policies should thus be formulated as part of an overall development agenda whilst striving to link human needs, their fulfilment and their overall impacts on the environment. They should also be dynamic and periodically redefined according to changing trends, requirements, and availability of data and information. Given this panorama, it is pertinent to analyze the role of concepts and paradigms in the different sectors and their importance in terms of development.

In the water sector, one of the most widely known concepts is that of integrated water resources management (IWRM), first promoted by Dr Gilbert White in the 1940s under the term ‘comprehensive water resources management’. The Global Water Partnership later developed its programme based on the Dublin and IWRM principles. During the past two decades, most donors and international organizations have intensively promoted IWRM as a way of solving water-related problems all around the world. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent for its implementation. Nonetheless, IWRM practices have been very difficult to achieve anywhere in the world, especially in macro- and meso-scale water policies, programmes and projects.

Given that the concept has become part of policies and also laws in numerous countries, and based on lessons learned from previous decades, an imperative arises to objectively analyze its appropriateness in the twenty-first century. It is equally relevant to identify the main implementation gaps so that the conception and implementation of IWRM-related policies has more consequent development impacts. Therefore, with the objective of fostering scholarly exchange, encouraging intellectual debate and promoting the advancement of knowledge on the topic, the September special issue of the *International Journal of Water Resources Development* focuses on the understanding of IWRM as a concept, as a goal per se and as a strategy towards development goals.

The issue contains 17 excellent researched and documented papers that reflect the diversity of thought, ideas and experiences related to IWRM. They draw from an extensive, inclusive and geographically representative range of theoretical propositions and practical examples. These include the implementation status of the IWRM concept at local, basin, regional and national levels; its appropriateness for the twenty-first century; main implementation gaps from the institutional, legal, policy, governance, management and technical viewpoints; the likelihood that IWRM's entrenchment in laws, regulations and policies has led to smoother implementation and the reasons why that has been the case; reflexions on whether the attention given to IWRM is pushing other alternatives to the policy periphery; and the new conceptual constructions that can be put forward for discussion in the international arena. For the development and water communities it is imperative to debate and reach towards more illustrative conclusions regarding whether the promotion of the IWRM concept and its actual implementation status have been beneficial for development and how the notion could evolve to achieve this end.

Therefore, in-depth objective and constructive discussions, arguments, proposals and ideas based on the authors' experiences are put forward for analysis by all interested parties. The papers are valuable sources of information, ideas and controversy that should open up additional and more extensive and needed dialogue avenues on this overall theme.

In *Ecological Economics*, Soderbaum (2000) argues very eloquently in favour of the co-existence of a plurality of paradigms. For IWRM, its evolution and impacts, it would be very difficult not to agree with such an image: one of plurality and diversity, where a wider pool of partners and argument are considered well beyond the conventional wisdom of its promoters.

As such, I invite the academic, research, policy and water development communities, the authors of the papers published in this special issue, and the reviewers who have greatly added to the high standards of this journal, to continue debating and challenging prevailing wisdom well beyond the fields of development and water resources. Even if controversial, such epistemological, academic and intellectual exercise can only yield positive results as it will ultimately help to promote the advancement of knowledge.

References

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Soderbaum, P. (2000). *Ecological economics: A political economics approach to environment and development*. London: Earthscan.

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