

# Re-thinking paradigms in the water sector

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As the President of the International Water Resources Association (IWRA), I very much welcome the opportunity to share my views with readers of the *World Atlas on Hydropower & Dams*. This publication has already carved out a very special niche in these increasingly important areas, because of its focus on reliable facts and authoritative analyses.

The IWRA is one of the oldest professional associations in the area of water. Established in 1972, and currently with members from more than 110 countries, it is the only water association that has consistently taken a multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholders and holistic view of water management from its very inception.

Right from the very beginning, an overriding philosophy of IWRA has been that efficient water management requires a multi-sectoral approach. Water affects a variety of other sectors like food, energy, land use, environment, industrial development, transportation and tourism, and is, in turn, affected by them. Long-term efficient water management is thus only possible within an overall inter-sectoral framework, and with the involvement of multi-stakeholders during its planning and management stages. Within this overall context, IWRA has consistently provided a global forum for bridging disciplines, sectors, stakeholders and geographies by sharing knowledge and experience, and by developing functional networks among public and private sectors, national and international organisations, universities, research institutions and NGOs who are interested in improving water management practices and processes all over the world.

During the decades of existence of the Association, the focus of the discussions in the water field has changed, discourses on specific issues have ebbed and flowed, and paradigms have evolved. Many of the earlier widely used paradigms like integrated water resources management, integrated river basin management and sustainable development are giving way to a new one: water governance.

Water governance is perceived, in its broadest sense, as comprising all social, political economic and administrative organizations and

institutions, as well as their relationships with water resources development and management. It considers political, economic and social processes and institutions by which governments, the private sector and the civil society make decisions about how best to use, develop and manage water resources. It refers to the range of political, social, economic, and administrative systems that are in place to develop and manage water resources and the delivery of water services at different levels of society. It comprises the mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which all involved stakeholders, including citizens and interest groups, articulate their priorities, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences. It emphasizes the causality of water-related problems by pointing out not only the natural limitations of the water supply or lack of financing and appropriate technologies, but rather from profound failures in water governance, such as the ways in which individuals and societies have assigned value to, made decisions about, and managed the water resources available to them.

Water governance and water management are considered interdependent issues in the sense that effective governance systems are meant to enable practical management tools to be applied properly as the situations require. Partnerships between the public and private sectors, participation of stakeholders, and use of economic or regulatory instruments will not be effective unless there are administrative systems in place and appropriate and functional institutions, as well as commitments of the governments, private sector groups and civil society organisations to forge an overall consensus.

However, the reality is that even though reform of water institutions and policies is taking place in many countries, its progress has been rather slow and limited. In most countries of the developing world, water institutions do not function properly and many of them display fragmented institutional arrangements and overlapping and/or conflicting decision-making structures. Political interferences in the functioning of the institutions are often extensive and

corruption in many countries is endemic. With the involvement of multiple actors in the arena of water resources planning, development and management, and the introduction of ethical issues such as responsibility, accountability, transparency, equity and fairness, the challenges associated with governance of water resources have become exceedingly complex.

Therefore, despite the importance of the concept of water governance, it is likely to remain illusive until and unless countries and sectors solve some of their long-standing and rampant societal and economic problems, not only in the water sector but in other sectors as well. It remains to be seen how the countries, their governments and their societies, can make the best of the opportunity of having multi-stakeholder participation and consideration of ethical issues to achieve much needed reforms in the water sector, or if the paradigm of water governance will remain with an increasing gap between the theory and the reality, as has been the case with many other paradigms.

As an association pursuing the efficient planning, management and development of water resources at present, and looking towards the future, IWRA encourages the analysis of the paradigms used in the water sector. Paradigms should not be adopted only because they are part of the current international thinking, they should first be tested in the realm of reality and questioned and challenged against the needs and expectations of the countries and their populations. Otherwise, paradigms will continue to be what they have been until now: of limited use for the improvement of water resources management.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite the readers of the *World Atlas on Hydropower & Dams* to join IWRA, a growing association that has made a determined attempt to promote efficient water management as a fundamental development challenge, with the cooperation and collaboration from within and outside the water sector as well as from the multiple interested parties.

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