

Accessing water in Africa :
emerging paradigms between risks, resiliences and new solidarities

International Conference
Paris, 4-5-6 July 2016

Organisation :

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Défense

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Nearly 40 years after the United Nations Conference on Water in Mar del Plata in 1977, and 20 years after the International Conference on Water and Environment in Dublin in 1992, the “global water management model” has been thoroughly debated. Its three pillars (the Integrated Water Resources Management-IWRM, public-private partnerships and the commodification of water resources) have all shown their limits when applied to African countries where the hydrosocial configurations are very different from those of the northern countries in which they were conceived.

The widely discussed assessment of the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals in Africa suggests that a global “alternative” model does not yet exist that might meet the challenges of the management of water on the continent. Yet recent research explores the emergence of new paradigms of water management, sometimes based on old or emerging forms of solidarity, which seem more suited to local hydro-social configurations.

The objective of this conference is to study these new forms of “water policies” and to consider the extent to which they might provide alternative solutions to current problems around water distribution and access.

These questions are most often studied in a sectoral manner; for example, research focuses on linkages with agriculture or climate change, on specific applications in urban or rural areas, or aspects such as the environment or infrastructure. Instead we have chosen to adopt transversal approaches, focusing on four themes that cut across both theoretical issues and specific African realities.

Theme 1

Conflict and cooperation over water

The introduction of new techniques to cope with increasing water demand and the emergence of new actors has profoundly challenged the existing arrangements of water management, which have to be reframed. As they reflect the key divisions, rankings, statuses of society, new forms of conflicts have emerged.

The purpose of this first theme is to study the various forms of “embeddedness” of water within the social fabric and how it can become a source of conflict, solidarity and cooperation. Such questions can be understood at all scales, considering major international water basins or “water gifts” among neighbors.

Keywords: embeddedness, hydropolitics, hydrosocial cycles

Theme 2

Rescaling water policies

After the Dublin Conference (1992), many African countries adopted water basin management, which was presented as the ideal spatial framework for addressing water-related issues. This choice is not "neutral" politically and corresponds to a specific development logic.

Research has shown that in many cases, water basin management is difficult to implement and inadequate. The question therefore becomes: how is it possible to organise water management in Africa on other territorial scales, or following other logics?

In the specific context of fragile states, this theme fits into the current debate on the choice between watershed and problemshed management and on the spatial framework of public policies or, in other words, "scalar policies".

Keywords: IWRM, watershed/problemshed, scalar policies.

Theme 3

Coping with Risks and Uncertainties

Droughts and floods in Africa are of course related to natural hydrological patterns influenced by high climate variability, whether in the Mediterranean regions, southern Africa or the Sahel. But the consequences of climatic events are exacerbated by political risks and uncertainties.

In the long term, uncertainty around climate change should be also taken into account within water management. The coalescence of risks and uncertainties produces "complex emergencies", in which the food-energy-climate nexus is a central issue in the African context.

To cope with climate variability, highly sophisticated water management models have been designed. But their relevance is limited without any action on the vulnerability and resilience of local populations. One of the major questions of this theme is the reconciliation between the two approaches which are generally studied separately: action on variability, through technical means such as large dams and water transfers on the one hand and on the other hand action on vulnerability and resilience through social policies.

Keywords: complex emergencies, socio-ecological systems, climate change, food-water-energy nexus, resilience.

Theme 4

Justice and injustice in water access

Access to water is one of the major challenges on the African continent, yet it is often considered solely through the narrow lenses of water and sanitation statistics or water prices. The question of justice (and injustice) in water access is however much more complex. For instance, it also encompasses issues of water sharing in agricultural areas, and access to land and water. In rural areas, the issues of land and water are intimately linked, whether in traditional irrigated areas or in the case of land grabbing, which is often accompanied by water resource grabbing.

In this perspective, we would like to examine the questions: “what justice for what waters? And what justice for which actors?”

Keywords: environmental justice; water and sanitation access, land grabbing and water, the right to water