

Notes on World Water Week Session T6
August 18, 2009

Water Governance: Why does it matter and how can we measure it?

Many water problems are rooted in poor water governance. In these cases, implementing technical solutions or addressing only water management issues will not solve problems in the long run. Values, power, politics, and corruption are strongly entrenched in water governance and, for this reason, it is not always easy to discuss governance deficiencies openly and to introduce measures to tackle them. Considering the key role of water governance in actually solving water-related problems, there is a need to define it carefully, and measure it in a systematic and repeated way, with the objective of identifying deficits and assessing the impacts of improvement measures.

The workshop conveners opened the session by defining water governance as the process through which water-related decisions are made (“the exercise of authority”). Its attributes are the structure within which decisions are made, the actors that influence them, and the way they are made. Various speakers and commenters elaborated on this definition, highlighting particular components of water governance. The role of transparency, integrity and accountability was emphasized. Similarly, the importance of considering all levels of governance was stressed: water governance operates not only in high-level decision making, but also in actions taken at regional or local levels. Along this line, several speakers converged on the need to consider not only the decision-making process but also on-the-ground implementation and the concrete outcomes of decision making processes.

The second part of the session focused on measuring water governance. The approach of the USAID-funded MENA Regional Water Governance Benchmarking Project (ReWaB) was presented (www.rewab.net). The project aims at producing a set of indicators assessing the quality of water governance in selected countries of the Middle East and Northern Africa. The project analyzes, on one hand, the capacity to govern water resources and, on the other it considers governance performance. The first aspect is addressed through the analysis of policy documents, laws and organizational structures in each of the studied countries. The second aspect is assessed through field work that captures the perception of the quality of water governance during meetings of water experts. Project members presented preliminary results for one country (Jordan) and pointed out the challenges related to the project approach. These include: building a representative sample of experts, combining perceptions based on differing ranges of experience, ensuring comparability of judgment among countries despite the different values embedded in perceptions, and the multiple territorial levels of governance.

Comments on the project approach addressed mainly the selection of sample of experts and how changes in its composition and size may influence the results. In ReWaB, this issue is addressed by clearly defining the composition of each national sample so that the same set of roles is represented in each country and in each repetition. In addition, the number of experts

in each of the sub-groups is fixed to avoid biased weighting. The audience also stressed the need to include or link the assessment to the outcomes of governance processes (e.g. the quality of water services, ecosystem health).

Overall, the session confirmed the deep interest evoked by water governance as a means to tackle water problems in a durable way. It also confirmed the need for practitioners and decision makers to converge on an operationally-useful definition of water governance, and the value of designing indicators to measure and compare quality of water governance across countries.

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