



A WEBINAR SERIES ON:

CHANGING POLITICAL ECONOMY IN LARGE RIVER BASINS: ENVIRONMENT, VALUES AND SYSTEMIC PRESSURES

WEBINAR 1: SETTING THE SCENE – A CHAOTIC LANDSCAPE FOR VALUING WATER

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CONVEYED BY KING'S WATER AND INTERNATIONAL WATER MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE, COLOMBO

INTRODUCTION TO THE WEBINAR:

The global community is grappling with an era of unprecedented challenge in water management and governance. Climate change is one factor shifting systems of understanding and shaping policy responses to water security risks, but so too are the systems of values and beliefs that construct, deconstruct and reconstruct our approaches as individuals, sub-state entities, states and regional cooperation mechanisms towards valuing, governing and managing this vital resource.

With this in mind, [Kings College London](#) and [IWMI](#) convened the first in a series of webinars on *Changing political economies in large river basins: Environment, values and systemic pressures* on 28th April. Setting the scene for

the series, this first meeting aimed to ‘throw out some big ideas and big questions’, according to **Dr Naho Mirumachi (Kings College London)**, one of the co-convenors, in an introduction shared with **Dr Alan Nicol (IWMI)**.

The webinar series was dedicated to **Professor Tony Allan** a mentor, supervisor and ‘thought provoker’ of both co-convenors, who had unfortunately died shortly before the webinar. How narratives and discourses shaped the way people thought about water resources in large river basins was a direct link back to the kind of thinking Tony Allan had inspired for so many years at SOAS and Kings College.

SUMMARY OF THE PRESENTATION :

Alan Nicol, began a short introduction, **highlighting how structures had come to symbolize so much more than just water storage and power generation, but also fulfilled national state-building and ideological functions**, representing 'breaks with the past' and establishing new discourses on development. In this sense, dams for instance, could be part of national redemption strategies – e.g. from former colonial control – or other types of real and perceived control. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) fulfilled such a function, but so too did other entities built in preceding decades (e.g. the Merowe Dam in Sudan built in 2007) and the High Aswan Dam in Egypt in the 1960s at the height of Nasserism. Such structures were also part of wider discourses, including, more recently, **ideas of responses to climate change and mitigation strategies – greening economies and new directions in development**.

Naho Mirumachi described how a chaotic landscape of valuing water had within it embedded and sometimes conflicting belief systems, including issues of statehood, good governance, activism and grassroots

movements. Other 'isms' of localism, communitarianism, environmentalism, etc, represented some of the multiplicity of belief systems held between state and non-state actors ensuring that this was both a chaotic and deeply dynamic landscape.

Alan Nicol highlighted how untangling and understanding these complex belief systems and ideologies could help build a better picture of how regional cooperation could begin to work, and therefore went beyond a purely academic exercise. Moreover, cooperation entities within large river basins created their own belief systems and 'isms', including forms of regionalism and collective action.

Before turning to the discussion, Naho spoke of the notion of geographical imaginations. This entailed imaginations of rivers as embedded in beliefs, for example in rivers as economic tools of development. She also noted the importance of history and the legacies of post-colonial imperatives and past agreements. This served to highlight the importance of the historical in contemporary debates, as well as (and related to) the key linkages between aid and development narratives and river basin.

 DISCUSSION WITH PARTICIPANTS :

Inviting reflections from the 60 or so online attendees, the co-hosts kicked off with core questions, including what examples people had of competing and overlapping ideologies or world views in specific geographies, and on how a better analysis of these could strengthen future cooperation. There was also an invite to prepare input to a [menti poll](#), answering the question: What are the most important world views or ideologies shaping the political economy of river basin in your geography?

Question raised in the chat included challenges of reaching agreements in complex disputes such as the GERD, between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt. Alan responded that, referring back to **Tony Allan's analysis of virtual water as a 'silent solution', sometimes narratives (and silent narratives) could help in unpicking disputes.**

Alistair Rieu-Clarke (Northumbria University), from an international law standpoint, noted the levels of misunderstanding – some of which might even be deliberate – between systems, including claims and counter-claims about what international law should or shouldn't be able to do. Alan noted the importance of 'sanctioned discourse' and law as playing 'part of the game' (of politics) in basins. Naho also mentioned ways in which there is 'selectiveness' in the way world views are used and judged as 'legitimate' and how some are (more) justifiable over others – e.g. economics prioritising certain (market) values or ways in which international law may. An input from Charity Osei-Amponsah (IWMI) in Ghana focused on historical perspectives and how traditional authorities had managed the five basins in Ghana up till about a quarter

be used as a way to justify particular world views for example on equitable and reasonable use.

Another participants spoke of contestations over inter-basin water transfers in Spain, and how **ideologies and their agendas are represented via competing scales of both non-state, state and "within-the-state" actors and communities**, from the EU down to national, regional, municipal governments, and communities. He noted that the dynamism of ideologies and beliefs over time, and pointed to the importance of the concept of 'hydronationalisms'.

In relation to the Teesta Treaty in the Global South, the state-sub state relationship was highlighted and the complexity this presented for the governance of agreements, and how this can establish complex political economies and a matrix of coexisting conflict and cooperation (at different levels). A participant from Kenya asked why water was such a 'wicked problem'? Why so few cooperation agreements in spite of commitments? He saw water competition as an increasing zero-sum game, with states seeing who could 'create infrastructure' quicker than their neighbours. He noted that the difficulties had become akin to states 'ceding territory'. Unpacking the reality was necessary, as discourses could appear collaborative, but run counter to reality on the ground.

century ago. Having taken on this role, government who seeks to use it for electoral gain, but has therefore created a particular challenge – how to enforce its own regulations

whilst seeking to keep electorates onside. **How could non-state/chiefdoms and state approaches be combined to align state interests on economic benefits and development agendas with the practical utilization and management challenges of rivers by non-state actors?**

Another participant noted how ideologies could fragment at lower levels, e.g. the fragmentation of worldviews within governments, and across different levels of government (including from local level to national level). Large scale water infrastructure projects and the development of river basins could be the result of contingent arrangements between multiple stakeholders, in that sense perhaps we should **think of a hybrid 'mix of ideologies' driving and justifying dams**, for instance. This was a point which resonated more widely with the audience, including the notion of ideological complexity and 'presence' within river basins, serving to underline how **ideologies are not necessarily 'hegemonic'**, but may be part of a constant series of contestations and mutations.

Returning to the GERD, one participant noted the room for compromise being restricted between a view on 'historic rights' downstream and a (sovereign) 'right to use waters' upstream. These views were reflected in the 'securitized' and 'sovereignty-centred' arguments made on both sides. Again, spotlighting the link between policy positions, systems of belief and national development arguments. Even within countries, as noted in the case of Nepal under federalism, it was noted by one participant – reflecting the point made earlier about India in relation to the Teesta

Treaty – **that economic and technical perspectives at a federal level could dominate, whilst lower, provincial levels, with more interest in multiple social inclusion, equity and gender aspects of water, might struggle to understand the wider dimensions of resource management.** This resonated with an earlier point made at the beginning of the meeting about localisms as a key element in world views on cooperation.

Where does this lead us to next? The challenge of oversimplification was noted as was the concern about becoming too abstract and theoretical. Perhaps this was all part of trying to understand the chaotic system of water values 'out there' as represented in the result of the mentimeter poll (below).

What are the most important world views or ideologies shaping the political economy of river basins in your geography?



Naho Mirumachi and Alan Nicol closed the meeting at just over an hour and invited participants to attend the next discussion on

the 26th May, which would focus on the Mekong Basin: “Power Interplay (Re)shaping the Politics of Value in Mekong Hydropower”.