

Regional Environmental Governance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Theoretical Issues,  
Comparative Designs (REGov)

River basins as new environmental regions? The depolitization of  
water management

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**Abstract**

The debate on water management is presently dominated by concepts of Water Governance, Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and River Basin Management. These concepts make apparent, that management approaches are based on a basin or a catchment area. This geographical unit is presented as the most relevant one for the delimitation of what and who should be integrated in the management institutions or governance structure. This paper questions the river basin as a “naturally” given geographical unit for water management and positions this attempt to naturalize the delimitation of water governance regions in a global trend of depolitizing water management.

This contribution is based on a set of reflections presented at the REGov Workshop. These reflections were offered as part of a panel discussion around the topic “Environmental regions in multilevel governance.” Additional presentations provided in the context of this panel discussion include those of Ron Witt, United Nations Environment Programme, and Liliana B. Andonova, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, and Stacy D. VanDeveer, University of New Hampshire (this volume). Webcasts of all presentations are available at <http://www.reg-observatory.org/outputs.html>.

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Keywords: Water governance; Integrated water resources management; Interbasin water transfers; Depolitization; Postpolitical water management.

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**1. Introduction: water management at what scale?**

Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) and Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) are the new approaches in water management policies since the Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development formulated in 1992. This programmatic statement, which will be used as the main reference in the domain of water policy design, defines the river basin as the fundamental geographical management unit. The first Dublin Principle states that “[...] effective management links land and water uses across the whole of a catchment area or groundwater aquifer” (Global Water Partnership, 2010). Designed for the preparation of the conference for the

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International Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, these principles were taken over and enshrined in art. 18.5 of the Agenda 21. They establish a strong link between the need of integration of all stakeholders and the scale of a catchment area as the management region. Subsequently, IWRM forms the centre piece of water management approaches and international as well as national water policies. It is advocated by the Global Water Partnership founded in 1996 by the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and is regularly reiterated during the World Water Forums, especially during the second World Water Forum in the year 2000 in Den Haag and the International Freshwater Conference in Bonn in 2001. The concept of IWRM and the river basin as its geographical base are established as the prominent approach to reconcile the different interests of water users in order to solve water supply problems and finally to reduce the number of people without access to drinking water. Despite the will to integrate all stakeholders in order to achieve these laudable goals, the question arises whether the river basin is the relevant scale for the integration of all actors for the management of the water resources. Further one might ask, why the river basin is dominating as the territorial unit for water management approaches? What is the meaning of such domination in regard with our way to define and handle environmental problems, and what can this domination of the river basin reveal especially in regard with nature - society relationships?

## **2. Integrated Water Resource Management and the basin fetishism**

The choice of the river basin as the unit for Integrated Water Resource Management has been taken over by various international institutions. The EU is particularly active in advocating the river basin as the relevant scale for water management as the EU Water Framework Directive (2000) and the EU Water Initiative show. The Water Framework Directive prescribes the creation of river basin districts and river basin management plans until 2009 and all member states of the EU established or finished to establish subsequently basin organizations for all their river basins. Formulated for developing countries and presented in Johannesburg in 2002 at the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Water Forum, the EU Water Initiative emphasized the importance of the river basin, importance reiterated since then in numerous reports and strategy papers. On a higher level, the Global Water Partnership is as well promoting the river basin: “Water flows according to natural characteristics and does not respect administrative boundaries – therefore the question arises: should water be managed and management structures defined according to existing administrative boundaries or according to natural boundaries, usually taken to be river basins? From a pure water resource point of view there might be much logic in adopting a river basin approach, or at least considering the river basin as the logical planning unit (Global Water Partnership, 2000, p. 47).” The rhetorical question tries to impose the choice of the water divide as boundary because it is naturally given, and therefore relevant disregarding that the choice of this delimitation is neither natural nor evident. The high complexity of present water management practices and the connectivity of river basins through water transfers show that catchment areas are not the scale of water management in large parts of the world.

## **3. Water management practices: diverting, plumbing and pumping**

The promotion of the river basin as the management and planning unit disregards water transfers observable in many regions. Techniques of water diversion exist since the development of irrigation agriculture. The construction of dams allows the transfer of water resources at tremendous quantities since the beginning of the 20th century. The entire hydrological map of the western part of the USA was modified in order to satisfy the urban and agricultural water demand of the American West (Worster, 1985). In Europe, it is Spain, which experienced the biggest intervention in the hydrological cycle. Since the end of the 19th century a technonatural waterscape was build upon more than nine hundred dams (Swyngedouw, 1999, p. 450). But even less dry regions are dependent from water transfers from other river basins, like Stuttgart and its agglomeration with 4 Million inhabitants being supplied for its drinking water from the Lake Constance (Zweckverband Bodensee-Wasserversorgung, 2010). Examples of interbasin transfers at a large scale in emerging countries are the Lesotho Highlands Water Project in South Africa, the Indira Gandhi Canal in India and the South-North Water Transfer Project in China to name only the most paradigmatic – and contested – ones. These respective plumbing systems through the connection of rivers basins, the diversion and even pumping of water from one basin to another are common practices today which stay in contrast with the promotion and domination of the river basin as the management unit. The question is how to understand

this discrepancy between the political claim and the actual management practices. Why institutions retain the “natural” boundary despite the managerial reality?

#### 4. Water governance and depoliticized environments

A first indication of the reasons for the persistence of the claims and narratives is a quotation of the German Federal Ministry of the Environment according to which “river basin management also overcomes political borders” (BMU, 2007). The reference to the river basin tries to impose the «naturally given» region as a scientifically justified area based on a rationality of natural science. This is an attempt to carry away water management from existing political and administrative structures and their inherent power relations and hierarchies in order to establish “water governance,” the new concept promoted by programmes and institutions like the Global Water Partnership, UNDP and the EU. This shift from the existing water management approach towards river basin management and water governance can be put in a wider context of governance promotion. Following several authors the concept of governance replaces increasingly approaches of government by trying to reduce political aspects from decision-making processes. “Governance entails an explicit reference to “mechanisms” or “organized” and “coordinated activities” appropriate to the solution of some specific problems. Unlike government, governance refers to specific “policies” rather than general “politics” because it does not entail a binding decision-making structure. Its recipients are not “the people” as a collective political subject, but “the populations” that can be affected by global issues such as the environment, migration or the use of natural resources (Urbinati, 2003, p. 80, cited in Swyngedouw, 2010). This depoliticization of management has been characterized as a postpolitical consensual policy arrangement by reducing the political to the ‘policing’ or ‘policymaking’ and to a managerial and consensual governing (Swyngedouw, 2009, p. 605). From this perspective water governance with the concept of IWRM on basis of river basins are to be understood as a progressive replacement of the polity by expert environmental administrators.

#### 5. Conclusion: river basin districts as postpolitical environmental regions?

The choice of the river basin as the planning unit is to be questioned in the light of the increasing water transfers between catchment areas. To privilege one particular scale in order to grasp an increasing level of basin connectivity and management complexity seems not only naïve and erroneous but also misleading in terms of the finding of solutions to problems of access to water. These problems are neither technical nor hydrological but are of political nature. The river basin fetishism, the domination of the IWRM and governance concepts can be taken as a symptom of the depoliticization of water management. It has to be understood as an effort to create new environmental regions voided of political interests, political representations and overall of politics.

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