



POLICY BRIEF

Overcoming Obstacles for Reflexive Research Practices in Water Governance: Perspectives from Early Stage Researchers

*A Policy Brief for Policy Makers and Practitioners, Communities and Activists, and
the Academic Community*

On World Water Day in 2018, the United Nations proclaimed the beginning of the International Decade for Action on 'Water for Sustainable Development'. The aim was to fast-track water action since, as it stands, the world is on track to missing several goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Several impediments are slowing down equitable, just, and sustainable governance of complex water problems. To first position ourselves, we are a group of 15 Early Stage Researchers, covering 15 research projects on water governance, embedded in the NEWAVE Network. In conversation with each other and our wider network, we have identified several impediments that are hindering progress towards equitable, just, and sustainable governance of complex water problems. One of the biggest issues we highlight in this brief is the **limited reflexivity in both academic and policy arenas on *who* is doing water governance, *how* it is being done, and for *what purpose*. Disciplinary silos, combined with distrust, vested interests, and unequal power dynamics between different groups, has resulted in a limited reflection amongst water governance actors on:**

1. Dominant approaches and paradigms in water governance (i.e. neo-liberal perspectives, integrated water resource management, ideas around efficiency and control) go largely unquestioned, whereas the transformative potential of critical thinking (i.e. feminist, political ecology, post-colonial theories) is subdued under these paradigms as a marginal narrative;
2. The power dynamics between actors, as certain stakeholders continue to be underrepresented, unable to access decision-making processes (even those deemed 'open and accessible'), and are ultimately (un/intentionally) re-portrayed as recipients of 'solutions' and policies designed by 'experts' and based on technical expert-knowledge;
3. The limits to accessibility on water data and how this affects decision-making processes, particularly as disclosure and transparency on data and its collection methods are crucial for actionable water governance.

Below, we share **seven actions** for actors working on water challenges to incorporate reflection on these topics. Doing so can help **create spaces for transparent, just, and accountable forms of water governance** to emerge.

Address the limitations of academic institutions within which case studies in 'remote laboratories' are upheld as more 'objective' than action-research and co-creation approaches. These limitations are particularly problematic when academics from the 'Global North' conduct research in the 'Global South' as it replicates a colonial and extractive approach to research and knowledge accumulation - about which many critical researchers are sounding alarm bells. How can researchers build ethical and sustained partnerships (with institutional support) with local actors/institutions?

Intertwined with the previous point, it is important to acknowledge and question biases of what research is considered useful, neutral, or legitimate. In the water field, more 'objective' and positivist modes of research are often considered to have higher eligibility for grants, permits, requests for information, and access to participants. This pushes researchers to perpetuate existing paradigms and prioritize certain ways of knowing and doing which are often entangled with colonial ideas that dominate and sideline other views. In some sectors (i.e. development organizations), there might also be implicit or explicit pressure to emphasize 'successful' interventions, rather than admitting challenges.





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Critically engage with information collection practices. Collected water data is often based on limited parameters and intended to meet specific purposes. Such data collection practices can be questionable, poorly monitored, or manipulated. Because water governance is inherently political, actors may be censored on what they share or only agree to work with researchers who they think will be beneficial for them, and any research outside of this is viewed with suspicion and resistance. There is a perceived acute need for more support to address concerns of vulnerabilities, repression, and unintended consequences when carrying out sensitive research. Moreover, data are frequently not made available to stakeholders, the broader public, or research communities. An immense amount of knowledge is kept within the walls of financial, governmental, and private institutions, where access is highly contingent upon having the 'right' contacts. How do dominant paradigms determine what data is collected and for what purpose? How does institutional inertia condition what data is shared and with whom? What role does technology play to enhance or hinder transparency?

Acknowledge the connections of water and land. Most research on water governance treats water as H₂O or, in recent systems approaches, as a component of the water-energy-food nexus. The connection between the socio-ecological and political links of land and water often remain under-researched, which de-politicizes historical-material processes and invisibilizes/ justifies practices such as land grabbing. Re-politicizing water and land entanglements can shed light on a blind spot of water governance research.

Critically reflect on the limitations of institutions. Water challenges are becoming increasingly complex with the impacts of climate change placing stress on existing institutions. Existing legal frameworks– from access rights to environmental migration policies– must be re-imagined and re-crafted to meet the challenges of today. As researchers on water governance, how can we shed light on such limitations of institutions? How can we better visualize locally-situated experiments that are challenging/ overcoming barriers of legal frameworks and institutions?

Complexify and challenge binaries in water governance research. Common binaries include formal-informal; control-chaos; technical-political; public-private or the public-commons; science-policy; and science-activism, among others. More fluid research that challenges these binaries and boundaries is needed. For instance, informality often remains negatively depicted or invisibilized, but how might it help overcome service gaps and limitations in legal rights that leave behind certain groups? How could de-privatisation and re-municipalisation of water services enable the emergence of water commons and commoning practices, beyond a state-citizen binary? How can researchers take a critical stance on water governance processes while at the same time contributing to transformative processes and water justice struggles?

Reflect on how metrics are designed and leveraged to promote certain policies or paradigms. It is critical to research how written policy materializes on the ground, and the discrepancies between policy and reality at different scales. Metrics, used to measure the impact/ outcomes of developmental interventions, infrastructure projects, policy or legislation, are not neutral but inherently political and driven by particular paradigms. For example, climate change processes and resulting uncertainties raise questions on which metrics used in physical sciences (i.e., modeling, the meaning of averages, long-term hydrological series) and how those metrics are chosen. Similarly, 'success' of interventions needs to be challenged on a normative level. Can we measure what it means for water governance approaches to be more 'just' and 'equitable' and if so, how? How can we simultaneously embrace plurality and resist the pressures to generalize or scale up?

