

# COMPARATIVE WATER STUDIES



Workshop at SOAS, London, UK, 24-25 October 2011



## REPORT



On 24 and 25 October 2011 a group of 20 scholars came together for two days to discuss the state and prospects of comparative water studies. More than ten others showed interest but were unable to come for various reasons. The participants' academic career phase ranged from starting PhD researchers to retired senior professors, the participants came from very diverse academic backgrounds, and had mostly met very few of the other participants. This means an unusual group of people came together – in the most positive sense of that word. The number and diversity of participation, and the deliberations at the workshop have solidified the beginnings of a network of researchers interested in comparative water research, with an interest to take the discussions at the workshop further into more focused exchanges and new research initiatives. This report of the workshop concentrates on the 'further steps' that may be taken to strengthen comparative water studies as a collaborative and critical endeavour.<sup>1</sup>

The 'further steps' for strengthening comparative water studies were summarised and briefly discussed at the end of the two-day workshop, and developed somewhat more in subsequent exchanges. The main components are the following.

- 1) Fill the ICCWaDS webpages ([www.iccwads.org](http://www.iccwads.org)) with content, as a platform for exchange, for visibility of the initiative, and to broaden participation in it.
- 2) Publish a revised version of the draft working paper 'Theorising structured diversity' on the ICCWaDS website. The site can be used for publication of working papers by all interested. Additional resource bases (cf. Compass) to be considered, f.i. in the form of DropBoxes.
- 3) Compile a three-paper special issue collection for (fast) publication in an open-access journal like *Water Alternatives*: A shortened version of 'Theorising structured diversity', paper by Wendy Olsen/Vincent Ortet, paper by Jim Wescoat.
- 4) Organise subsequent workshop meetings, which will have specific focus: either themes or aspects of comparative method, or both, for presentation/discussion/exchange and project proposal development.
  - The next, second, CWS workshop will be held in Bonn, Germany, on Friday 20 January 2012 and possibly Saturday 21 January 2012. Daphne Gondhalekar (ZEF) and Annabelle Houdret (DIE/GDI from 1/12) will coordinate the organisation.
  - The third CWS workshop will be held in Wageningen, NL in May or June (Flip Wester/Arjen Zegwaard will set a date).
  - If occasions arise, convened sessions/panels can be organised in conferences. A first opportunity may be a conference in Oxford, 17-18 April 2012 on water security.
  - Reading groups or other regular interaction can be considered 'on location', particularly for and by PhD researchers.

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<sup>1</sup> Flip Wester, Jim Wescoat, Marja Hirvi, Susanna Mitra, Katharina Welle are thanked for their written editorial and substantive feedback on the draft report (and several others are thanked for confirming they found it OK). Feedback provided regarding the draft working paper will be acknowledged in the final version of the paper.

- 5) Facilitate (new) collaborative comparative research initiatives, either as contact and exchange networks or as project initiatives for external funding, or any other variety of collaboration. Several of such potential initiatives have been identified and are sketched in more detail below.

## **ON COMPARATIVE METHOD IN WATER STUDIES**

The workshop confirmed a conclusion of the draft working paper of Gondhalekar/Mollinga that comparative method is not strongly developed and weakly debated in the main body of policy-related water studies that has emerged since the 1970s. However, given the gradually expanding disciplinary scope of water studies, comparative approaches are flowing into the field through 'parent disciplines' like comparative politics and comparative policy analysis. The use of comparative approaches in the water and health field needs to be looked at – it has not been addressed in the draft working paper, which is an omission.

There is a clear need for more detailed study and debate, and training, on the (elaboration of the) specifics of comparative method in critical water studies, and more general methodological issues like 'casing'.

## **POTENTIAL COLLABORATIVE AND COMPARATIVE RESEARCH INITIATIVES**

Based on the papers, notes and proposals presented, the following themes were identified at the workshop. Titles are provisional, and sometimes too cumbersome. Intention is that in the two months leading up to the Bonn workshop some of the themes/topics below will acquire some more profile and concreteness, by different people taking the lead in/facilitating their elaboration. The agenda is, obviously, fully open, and other and additional alignments are most welcome.<sup>2</sup>

### **1) State and power; rationalisation and legitimacy: Comparative cultural political economy of water governance structure and practice**

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the prominence of 'comparative politics' in comparative method development, several contributions to the workshop addressed the broad theme of 'the nature of the state'. Examples were Nadine Reis' first draft of a project proposal on water bureaucracies and the morality of their formal structure, Scott Moore's paper on federalism and water resources management, and Eelke Kraak's PhD work on dam building making rivers governable in Central Asia and Ethiopia. These papers and proposals have a theoretical interest in conceptualising 'the state' in terms of different state forms or state characteristics. As such this theme is very close to the

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<sup>2</sup> Katharina Welle remarks that topics 1-3 appear to relate more to theoretical/conceptual issues, while 6 and 7 relate to specific water related topics, with 4 and 5 being a mixture of the two. *Response*: the objective of the organisers at this stage was not to create a coherent umbrella programme of some sort. However, going by Burawoy's 'division of sociological labour' matrix, it might actually be interesting to have comparative work in all the four 'boxes', on the argument that the 'antagonistic interdependency', as Burawoy labels the relationship among his four different types of research, can enrich all four and correct their 'pathologies'. It is thus, indeed, worth thinking more about the logic of the 'portfolio' of CWS that is pursued.

substantive research interest expressed in the draft working paper by Gondhalekar and Mollinga, on how globalisation of water resources management varies across different state forms and scales.<sup>3</sup>

*Further steps:* Nadine Reis is developing her proposal for external (postdoc) funding. With some PhDs ongoing (as present in workshop and otherwise) it should be relatively easy to organise a focused further exchange on this topic, perhaps in the context of the development of a broader research programme initiative. Peter Mollinga will continue to work on developing the globalisation-localisation research focus as outlined in the draft working paper, as a project for external (postdoc and PhD) funding.

## **2) Policy Odysseys: A comparative political economy of water policy translation/transfer/travel**

‘Policy analysis’ is another terrain in which a number of papers and proposals operate, overlapping with the focus under theme 1). The proposals/papers under this heading are focused specifically on understanding the dynamics of policy processes (and the relevance and impact of such dynamics). Examples are the IDS project on the appropriation of global IWRM ideas in southern/eastern Africa presented by Jeremy Allouche, Virginia Hooper’s PhD work on water distribution in closed basins, Susanna Mitra’s concept note on water policy transfer dynamics, and Amrita Lamba’s PhD work on water/natural resources governance in India and Brazil.<sup>4</sup>

*Further steps:* Method(s) for comparative policy analysis, broadly understood, seems to be an area where additional input and discussion would be valuable and appreciated. The central theme under this heading may be how processes of policy translation, transfer or travel. The IDS project may start before long. Susanna Mitra, who was unable to attend, is working on a project proposal for external (postdoc) funding on the political economy of policy transfer. PhD work is ongoing – quite a bit of additional work is ongoing on this topic, though maybe little of it in comparative mode. Given the popularity of this theme, it should be relatively easy to organise a focused further exchange on this topic, perhaps in the context of the development of a broader research programme initiative.

## **3) Science at work: A comparative political economy of water knowledge<sup>5</sup>**

A third cluster of papers/proposals has a prime interest in ‘knowledge’, as policy discourse, but also as instrumental knowledge in development practice, like monitoring, or by comparing cases learn how to design water resources interventions better better (e.g., by linking research design with environmental design and policy design). Examples are The Netherlands/Bangladesh comparison of flood resilience approaches presented by Flip Wester (a just started project), the closely policy-related study of IRS Erkner presented by Jan Monsees on developing a method to enhance

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<sup>3</sup> Marja Hirvi suggest to include an additional theme under ‘state and power’, namely that of ‘state capacities’ (based on work of Skocpol and Steinmo)

<sup>4</sup> Marja Hirvi suggests proposes a two-fold focus for this theme: exploring the process which leads to adoption of a particular policy from among many alternatives; 2) exploring how a ‘universal’ policy becomes embedded in the local context (making use of Kjaer and Pedersen’s concept of translation).

<sup>5</sup> Katharina Welle suggests ‘political economy of knowledge production around water’ (wondering what exactly ‘water knowledge’ is). She also wonders whether it is really about ‘science at work’ or more about the connection between science and policy.

institutional analysis capacity in IWRM research projects, Katharina Welle's PhD research on performance-based monitoring approaches in WASH projects in Ethiopia, Rob Hope's detailed field research on basic water access aiming to develop comparative insight for policy formation, and Fuad Ali's fundamental inquiry into development discourse under the label of 'developmentia'.

*Further steps:* This topic area may require some thinking for framing further exchange and discussion. Developing methods for mapping and representing the flows of comparative water inquiry on the ICCWaDS webpages, and related research projects, could help advance this topic.

#### **4) State, community and rights in Asian mountain and hill irrigation**

At the workshop this theme consisted basically of one project proposal presentation: by Joe Hill of the E3 'Irrigation, inequality and social mobilisation' component of the BMBF funded Crossroads Asia project led by ZEF. The regional focus is Central Asia and the north-western part of South Asia. A note was also contributed on this topic by Diana Suhardiman, who was unable to attend the workshop. The regional focus of this proposal/concept note is East Asia. After the workshop David Molden (director ICIMOD, Kathmandu, Nepal) has been sounded for interest in research on mountain/hill irrigation with a state-community-rights focus. A first positive response was received. The obvious focus for comparative analysis would seem to be the different mechanisms and processes through which state-community-rights connections are/have been changing, in the context of major political changes in the region as well as processes of development and globalisation.

*Further steps:* Inventory ongoing research in this topic area, with regional focus Asia. Pursue possible interest of ICIMOD in collaboration and project development. Suggested lead: Joe Hill and Diana Suhardiman.

In addition to these four themes identified at the workshop, there are three other themes on which inputs have been provided and interest shown in the preparation and follow-up of the workshop.

#### **5) Water resources and regime change in the MENA region**

This theme has been discussed between Annabelle Houdret and Peter Mollinga for some time. A concept note on this is in preparation (aiming at externally funded postdoc and PhD research) and can possibly be discussed in the Bonn workshop in January 2012. The basic idea is to look at what the socio-political transformations that have been happening in the MENA region in the past year impact water resources management, and vice versa, how water resources management has been a component of regime (in)stability. There are PhD students working on water resources in the MENA region at SOAS (Musa McKee, on Egypt; Karim Eid-Sabbagh on Lebanon; possibly new PhDs on South Sudan and Egypt from 10/12). There is a broader context of the political economy of food and agriculture in the MENA region, as well as the securitisation of water.

*Further steps:* Inventory ongoing research in this topic area. Preparation concept note. Proposed lead: Annabelle Houdret and (for the moment) Peter Mollinga.

#### **6) Dams and development in Asia and Africa**

Another possible cut through some of the papers/proposals at the workshop and ongoing comparative water research, is to focus on 'dams and development'. This could involve a comparative analysis of dams as state 'technologies of rule', the new surge of dam building, for hydropower most prominently, the role of countries like PR China in global dam building, the regional politics of dam building, the use of the ECD guidelines and other dam building regulation frameworks, etc.

*Further steps:* *Waltina Scheumann (DIE/GDI) and Oliver Hensengerth (Southampton University) are taking the lead to convene a session on this in the Bonn workshop In January 2012.*

## **7) Water, livelihoods and poverty in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa**

This potential initiative springs from post-workshop exchange between Wendy Olsen and Peter Mollinga. The basic idea is to design a comparative research project on local-level water resources management, looking at its livelihoods/poverty/exclusion dimensions, aiming, in a preliminary formulation, to move the analytical frontier on the complex connections of water and poverty, existing research on which presents several challenges/unsatisfactory aspects.

*Further steps:* *Proposed lead for development of this initiative: Wendy Olsen and Rob Hope.*

### **Appendices to this report**

- 1) Workshop Programme
- 2) Facepage participants
- 3) PowerPoint Introduction

The material presented discussed at the workshop will be made available at the internal part of the ICCWaDS website and/or a DropBox facility for those registered for the site.