New threats to transboundary waters require a new conceptual approach

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2013 World Water Week: Cooperation and Hydro-Diplomacy – Successful Approaches to Optimise Transboundary Water Management. Source: Flickr User worldwaterweek

Approximately 40% of the global population live in transboundary water basins and growing threats such as climate change emphasise the urgent need for coordinated management of transboundary water bodies. The reality of global change calls for innovative "hydro-diplomacy" aimed at strengthening international collaboration for climate change adaptation under the framework of regional security and win-win politics.

Since the end of the Cold War, classical "regional cooperation" has been the most mentioned approach to resolve transboundary water conflicts between riparian states, yet this approach faces new challenges, such as the devastating impacts of prolonged drought as well as ongoing instability and conflicts, thus requiring a new paradigm to water cooperation.

The classical nature of international relations needs to change from a zero-sum game based on resource appropriation to a platform of mutually beneficial and supportive interrelations. This change needs more than intention, and requires a new paradigm. It requires us to identify the most effective mechanisms for governments to engage in regional collaboration that would be effective in managing a shared watercourse.

There is a paradox in that although the vital importance of transboundary water management is continuously emphasised, there has been little advancement in the development of

applicable and effective frameworks for realistic international water cooperation in the past decades. This article presents a new paradigm for more realistic international water cooperation and collaboration.

Why do we need new international hydro-diplomacy?

Although there are many reasons justifying the need for a new conceptual approach to hydro-diplomacy, the most basic reason has to do with climate change and hydrological variability. The variability and uncertainty that climate change entails for many basins is a new threat for transboundary water management and in certain regions, climatic changes will result in an excess of water during particular periods of the year and a deficit during others[2]. As a result of such changes, Pohl et al. suggest that if climate change were to result in conflict, it would most probably be over water[1].

Unfortunately, few transboundary agreements (for instance the Orontes River agreement between Lebanon and Syria) have been designed to account for climate change and variability as they are often restricted to a rigid definition of water allocation expressed in terms of volumes of water, not in percentages of flow which would allow for greater flexibility. Thus greater climatic variations will result in an increased pressure on, in many instances, already weak water sharing agreements[3].

It is also unfortunate that water management in many transboundary basins is highly politicised which has a considerable impact on conflict prevention, regional stability, and international governance.

A new conceptual approach

In light of these challenges, the conventional term *"hydro-politics"* should now encompass consideration of a variety of scales; new actors; increased consideration of the water, energy

and food nexus; new geopolitics; and new technology.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word 'cooperation' as "working or acting together to the same end for a common purpose or benefit"[4]. Unfortunately, this process does not always take into account a "*shared vision*" to reach an ultimate goal. Real collaboration requires mutual dependent relationship and trust.

Therefore, thinking over transboundary water "cooperation" has to shift away from a focus on sharing absolute water quantities towards capacity building in transboundary water management and benefit sharing collaboration in different sectors. If collaboration is essential to sustainable transboundary water management, co-riparian states firstly have to find out a mutually beneficial way that can help build this collaboration.

Hama, a city on the banks of the Orontes River in central Syria. Source: Flickr User Alessandra Kocman

Conceptualising conflict and cooperation in a linear fashion is not a solution oriented approach. There is a need for a new conceptual approach. It may be productive to focus the analyses on new security threats such as energy, environment and climate change as common issues that require collaboration between basin states rather than taking discrete instances related to transboundary water interactions.

As Therese Sjömander Magnusson suggests,[5] *"we need greater understanding of how various regional forms of cooperation work outside of the water sector. We need a way of*

cooperation that strengthens regional integration affecting water management between countries".

New hydro-diplomacy: Spill-over effects and sharing costs and benefits

A new threat like the impacts of climate change on water resources should bring a new focus to the framing of hydro conflicts.

In these instances where basin relationships are unstable, adaptation to climate change impacts may be built on technical collaboration to facilitate stability. Such collaboration can and should simultaneously be used to foster regional integration by supporting the "*spill-over effect*" of cooperative practices into other sectors, such that water management may become the nucleus of more formal integration via legal rules and shared institutions[7].

New hydro diplomacy should also take into account sharing *"cost and benefit"* approach instead of sharing water under the effects of climate change.

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