

Philippines: Commons, a Model for Managing Natural Resources

Water Commons, Water Citizenship and Water Security

Monday 26 October 2020, by [DARGANTES Buenaventura](#), [MANAHAN Mary Ann](#), [MOSS Daniel](#), [SURESH V.](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2020).

Future Generations at the Table: Governing and Managing

Our Water Commons

In Cebu City, the Philippines, public sector workers like Zosimo Salcedo at the Metro Cebu Water District (MCWD) opposed Asian Development Bank financing that would purportedly increase the burgeoning city's water supply. The financing sounded like a water workers dream - more infrastructure funds spells more jobs. So why was Zosimo Salcedo opposing the funds? Contrary to common perceptions that workers are only concerned with preserving jobs and receiving higher pay, the union acted as stewards of the water commons. You might call them water citizens. They understood their responsibility as "carers" of water, from catchment to storage to distribution. They didn't measure their effectiveness simply in numbers of households connected to the grid but in conservation, watershed protection and raising questions about what increased debt would mean for the water system's long-term financial and resource sustainability. They asked the hard question as to whether, in fact, the new infrastructure meant to extract more water would, in the long run, actually ensure continuous and increased water supply. Rather than tap new surface and groundwater sources, they concluded that it made more economic and ecological sense to conserve water through cheaper system repair and watershed protection.

What is extraordinary about this change in mindset is the emergence of a new consciousness that workers have an important role to play in tending, caring and nurturing water, even though their own daily work involved a minimalist technical role with water distribution alone. In effect, Salcedo and his colleagues in the MCWD workers union symbolized a fundamental restructuring of the relationship between the water workers, the water utility, the community and water itself.

In this new consciousness and practice, which we call water citizenship, they sought to secure water for all, for all times.

The Challenge of Safeguarding Water

You can think of our entire planetary natural resource base as one giant global commons or alternatively, as a series of inter-connected, localized commonses. Either expression presents formidable governance, management and sovereignty challenges. The term "commons" turns current water planning topsy-turvy. A water commons means that water is available for all people and ecosystems, and that the resource be passed on undiminished and intact for future generations' enjoyment. You don't have to look far to see that current water planning often fails to uphold those principles.

Garret Hardin, in the “Tragedy of the Commons”, was pessimistic about the commons. He argued that shared ownership of a common resource is likely to lead to unequal use, pilfering and degradation. There is certainly much evidence, including in the Lempa River case examined here, that an unmanaged commons can be disastrous. Hardin’s work is often cited to justify the break-up of the commons into private parts.

The 2010 Nobel Prizewinner for Economics, Elinor Ostrom, has a more optimistic view. She waded into communities’ commonses and did not find tragedy. She did find resource conflicts – they are inevitable – but also sufficient intelligence and altruism to manage skirmishes and develop binding rules for equitable sharing. As in the case of the semi-arid region of Minas Gerais, Brazil described in this collection, these rules can be far-sighted enough to ensure that nature itself receives her fair share of the water commons. Ostrom discovers resource users exercising choice – to pursue an unequal and unsustainable resource management regime or attempt something more cooperative.

Ostrom articulated principles and practices that can guide good governance of the water commons – for example, defining the universe of users, mapping the physical boundaries of the common resource, ensuring governance rights to all stakeholders, designing low-cost conflict resolution and sanctioning mechanisms and nesting/ linking management rules and institutions from the local to the international, from upstream to downstream. These principles and practices aren’t water engineering feats – they’re largely intuitive institutional arrangements and all too often ignored.

A New IWRM 2.0 to Tackle the Deepening Water Crisis

Twenty years ago, at the Rio Summit in 1992, commons-based water governance and management took steps both backwards and forward. The millennia-old philosophical ethic that water belongs to all and is to be safeguarded for future generations, was called into question by Dublin Principles adopted in the first Earth Summit in Rio Declaration (1992): “Water is a public good and has a social and economic value in all its competing uses”.

Public and private institutions seized on the opportunity to place water in a market framework and as a society we seemed to lose sight of the water commons. There’s no question that pricing is essential to operate a water system but it must be fair. That means that higher volume, wealthier users pay more per unit and the poorest households receive a free or subsidized lifeline. But that has not generally been the guiding principle. Instead, policy makers and private operators seem to have become enamoured with full cost recovery from all users, even when it means denying basic rights to water. The prospect of turning a profit from water also began to seem possible to entrepreneurial operators – both politicians and CEOs.

A wave of institutional and economic restructuring engulfed much of the world. Starting in Latin America, from Bolivia to Argentina, Colombia to Chile, public water institutions were dismantled and replaced with private players who in some cases managed entire systems and in other cases were sub-contracted for construction or tariff collection. The First World Water War in Cochabamba, Bolivia (2001) was the most dramatic outburst symbolizing the anger of the poorest sections excluded from water services because they were unable to pay.

At the same Rio summit, a body of water management practices known as Integrated Water Resources Management or IWRM was born. It is based on some of the Rio declaration’s best stuff – shining expressions of co-existence with nature and matching human aspiration to ecological reality. But IWRM has suffered in implementation and conception; development banks and governments have more often treated water as an economic good than a commons. Citizen participation has been cursory, not nearly as authentic and robust as it should. On the cusp of a global re-commitment to environmental sustainability, we’d be foolish not to step back and reflect: What have we learned

during these two decades to improve the way we govern and manage our water resources?

IWRM may not be to blame, but the water crisis' human and ecological toll is bad and accelerating, egged on by climate change and governance failures. Unfulfilled Millennium Development Goals haunt us. Excellent reporting has recently uncovered woeful mismanagement of our banks and economies, but we need to cast the same spotlight on the mismanagement of water, which threatens our very existence. At the same time, we need to hear stories that narrate the occasional piece of good news, the successful efforts at overcoming the water crisis. The cases we present here inject some of that overlooked good news.

Let's call it IWRM 2.0, a new ethic that embraces water commons, water citizenship, and water security. Our societies have learned the hard way – through under-performing water systems and degraded watersheds – that if an authentic sense of water citizenship doesn't guide water governance and management practice – they are likely to fail. The role of the MCWD employees' union – mentioned above – in making informed recommendations about infrastructure investments for the common good shows just how helpful overlooked constituencies can be in democratizing water system governance. State-community collaborations that embrace community leadership in a meaningful way, as in the Colombian community water system case presented here, illustrate how important this cooperation is for the state to be able to guarantee the right to water, as now mandated by the UN.

IWRM 2.0 stresses basic hydrological and socio-political realities of inter-connected ecosystems. Urban water systems like Baybay and San Salvador's rest upon a healthy, rural landscape for their long-term sustainability. We imperil the urban consumer and undervalue rural farming families when we separate the two. We note with dismay that so much water system design, by intent or omission, reinforces a false dichotomy between urban and rural systems. This collection challenges a generalized urban water system bias, intentionally choosing rural systems as our departure point, while exploring their connection to urban systems.

The case of New York's protection of its rural water supply shows how critical it is to tie together upstream and downstream management, even when it means wading into the complexities of territorial sovereignty and folding long-term, ongoing watershed protection costs into water tariffs and financing. Designing for upstream-downstream coordination acknowledges our interdependence and need to establish mechanisms that can smoothen often conflict-ridden relationships along a watershed and between watersheds.

The alternative to facing these conflicts early on in water planning and taking the necessary political risks to resolve them is the much-predicted water wars that are glibly predicted and must be avoided at all costs. IWRM 2.0 would likewise ask us to plan for all water resources in a comprehensive package – at the intersection of potable water, sanitation, irrigation. IWRM 2.0 embraces the very nature of water – that its multiple uses derive from the same source.

Embracing water citizenship and water security

All of the cases discussed in this collection share a basic insight: people tend to steward a resource with greater care when they feel they benefit from it and have taken part in deciding for whom and how the resource is used. We call this act of participatory stewardship, "commoning". A commons without "commoning" stands a good chance of falling apart.

The Mary River Catchment Committee in Australia plays an active governance role, albeit with no statutory authority. Not only are they active watchdogs, stopping a damaging and unnecessary dam after one billion public dollars were spent, but they monitor water quality, work with farmers on

sustainable land and water use and clean up the river basin as well.

In Parambur, India, a Tamil Nadu village characterized by long-standing class and social inequalities embedded in the caste system, villagers ensure that everyone enjoy water use rights and bear stewardship responsibilities, regardless of class/caste position. For about 40 years, Parambur small farmers have successfully balanced equitable and sustainable use without sacrificing economic viability.

Too often, management of natural resources focuses on technical facets of resource protection, regulation and allocation, with little attention, if any, to the ongoing participation of resource users in stewarding the resource. It's not that these technical aspects are unimportant – quite the opposite – it's that technical details, including budgeting, shouldn't be left to technocrats and engineers working in isolation, without the benefit of active community involvement and debate.

A basic tenet of Maude Barlow's principles for managing the water commons is that conservation comes before any other intervention. Repairing a leaky pipe before exploiting a new water supply makes good sense. But the truth is that infrastructure pork barrels dominate the watershed management landscape. Financing and pricing decisions look different in the Philippines, Australia and New York, when a technological plan is not based on a lucrative contract for an engineering firm or fulfilling conditions of an infrastructure loan. Supplying drinking water, sanitation, irrigation and hydroelectricity certainly require feats of engineering, but technological decisions – subject to public scrutiny – guided by a "conservation-first" approach, shift the paradigm from "return on investment" to sustainability as a return.

Reclaiming public water and beyond

Water privatization has been until fairly recently the darling of development banks and neo-liberal governments. Authentic concern about public mismanagement has dovetailed with corporate opportunism, government corruption and state fiscal crises to create the perfect alibi for public authorities to sell off their utilities. The trend is now slowed due to the many failures of private systems in providing quality water to all at affordable prices. It may become harder still for private operators, as nations grapple with how to implement the new UN requirement guaranteeing rights to water and sanitation. The private sector can play a supportive, not the lead role in safeguarding these rights.

A broad citizens' water justice movement in the decade since the Cochabamba water war has led these successful initiatives to defend water commons, reclaim public water and pass the UN right to water and sanitation. In some cases, these efforts have resulted in remunicipalization and other forms of local management. In the cases presented here such as in the locally-controlled Colombian rural water systems, there has been synergy between anti-privatization campaigns and local stewardship, demonstrating an activist approach to water citizenship.

Unraveling false dilemmas: Upstream-downstream, rural-urban, and irrigation, sanitation, industrial and potable uses

Each case here slices through political and institutional divisions that so frequently make a mess of our water systems. Why do we make managing the water commons more difficult than it has to be – assigning water quality and sanitation to a Health Ministry, drinking water to an urban utility, irrigation to the Ministry of Agriculture and no one responsible for watershed health?

Naturally, each country has their own political and historical reasons for setting up this mish-mash of water governance and management authorities. In some cases, it's seemingly well-intentioned

efforts at decentralization that are to blame for this balkanization. But, as they say, that's water under the bridge. Wresting control from institutional fiefdoms, reorganizing and harmonizing institutional responsibilities and creating water laws takes years. Ministerial re-organization and new legislation are essential political processes, but what these cases show are innovative efforts in the short term to encourage coordination among often competing or non-communicative agencies. We find watershed committees, workers and bureaucrats, and collaborative municipalities committed to full watershed management, breaking down once dominant, but counter-productive divisions.

Bold experimentation and humble learning

Can we admit to our errors in facing the water crisis and summon the bravery to hold to account those who profit from it? We would have to have our heads stuck pretty deeply in the sand not to have learned something from the protests of thirsty communities and ecosystems withering under the mismanagement of our water commons.

A haunting and pervasive image of rural water is an African village's broken hand pump. This snapshot is a disturbing reminder not only of unresolved thirst and water-borne disease, but the failure of a charity model to triumph over the water crisis. Donations that don't embed village pumps in the political landscape, from the local to the national, may very well end up broken and signal to NGO's that coordination with local governments and other public agencies is essential.

Taken together, the case studies in this compilation illuminate a path out of water insecurity, towards a social justice ethic rather than a charity approach; upstream-downstream, multi-use coordination; fair pricing and financing; far-sighted leadership of public sector workers and watershed committees; inter- and intra-community conflict resolution; and, perhaps most overarching, the pressing need to embrace informed and engaged water citizenship. The Rio principles that informed IWRM didn't use the term water citizenship but hinted at it through their insistence on a participatory approach to water planning.

Since the Rio summit, participation has been the magic word to reform, restructure or initiate water programs. Invariably, water program proposals, public and private, drip with participation language. If you believe participation is key to solving our water crisis and that current systems are authentically participatory, you may well wonder if participation truly accomplishes anything. Does it?

These cases speak to the power of participation, but not as presently conceived and practiced. Participation as a strategic tool to consult stakeholders is certainly important but these cases illustrate that water citizenship and stewardship is less a participatory mechanism and more of a participatory ethic – inasmuch as authentic democracy is less an occasional visit to a polling station and more of an active engagement. Democratic governance can – and must – get its citizens' fingernails dirty in the details of how the system will be financed, how the resource will be priced, and how the watershed will be protected for present and future generations, among other burning issues.

Existential questions are among these issues: How do we live within resource limits? How do we make sure that the poorest among us don't go thirsty? How do we square our economic appetites with watershed protection? How do we resolve water conflicts before they boil over? These big questions lie at the heart of charting a "just transition" from the unsustainable practices that have brought us climate change and massive inequality to a restored co-existence with nature and each other. That transition is not only about fiddling with resource management practices, but a major overhaul – re-imagining water governance. We have not been well-served by devaluing or excluding

the insights and participation of workers, women, peasant farmers and fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, the urban poor and others who in reality are key to water governance as both users and stewards.

We offer these cases to dash pessimism that we can't successfully govern and manage our water commons, that privatization of water is the only way forward and that humans can't figure out how to ensure ecosystems their fair share of water. It's true that many of these cases leave unanswered questions. But even in solutions "under construction", the creativity of water citizens is on display.

Buenaventura Dargantes

Mary Ann Manahan

Daniel Moss

V. Suresh

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

All the case studies referred to in this text are available online:

<http://www.ourwatercommons.org/water-commons-citizenship-security>

Ritimo

<https://www.ritimo.org/Water-Commons-Water-Citizenship-and-Water-Security-8607>