OPINION
18
JULY 2014

How Discourses about Water Impact Communities

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In this opinion piece, we argue that the dominance of the sectoral/engineering discourse develops a storyline on the demand-supply gap as justification for more investments in expanding infrastructure. The dominance of this particular more traditional perspective of sanitary engineering, with its particular understanding of 'sustainability' misses out on a comprehensive context favourable to climate change challenges in urban contexts taking examples in Peruvian, Brazilian and Indian urban contexts.

When considering water as a commodity, water as a human right, water as a social-ecological good (and non-renewable resource) and water as a sector (and a renewable resource which management depends on technological choices and infrastructure), the 'water as a commodity' and 'water as a sector' most often are deployed in tandem.

This results in a focus on the productive use of water. Throughout our research in Chance2Sustain we found this strongest in Delhi, where water explicitly is considered a renewable resource whose management is considered from an economic perspective and based on pragmatic and technological considerations.

Also in three other case study cities (Lima, Arequipa, Guarulhos), the dominant discourse considers water as a commodity or raw material for productive uses. But in all case study cities we also identified counter discourses gaining prominence. To a certain extent the globally driven discourse 'water as a human right' was voiced. Strongest in South Africa, where it is enshrined in the Constitution, but also in Delhi where it has become a political theme since the last elections, or by movements as 'people without water' (Lima). In a similar vein the 'water as a social-ecological good' is gaining strength, mainly brought forward by environmental movements. In Latin America this perspective is being expanded to the right to water for all living beings and ecosystems.

The ideal of providing water to all (water as a human right) can also be supported by the sectoral approach, because it requires the extension of the infrastructural and distribution network to meet the demand. The case of Durban is special because it is the only city that offers free water to the unserved population by household connection, even though this free water basic is limited to 9 kl per household per month. Here the balancing act to provide 'water as a human right' but to protect water as a social ecological good has already resulted in approaches that seek to reduce water consumption, recycle and reuse water. Similar trends to combine increased coverage with ecological concerns–though less strong – were found in Lima. It is important however to note that they were driven by very different actor-network configurations, with different loci of power in water governance.

The fact that water is mainly considered a commodity, a vital product with a market value, makes its management centralised in power groups operating through companies the central government, as in the case of SEDAPAL in Lima, or monopolistic public private enterprises as the case of Sao Paulo. In Lima and Arequipa a very clear dominance of the private sector in the powerful coalition is noted; in Lima it is forged through private public partnerships (with the private sector in the initiating role), while in Arequipa the mining company is found to be dominating both a formal and an informal multi-actor network. In Guarulhos and Delhi/Dwarka central decisions on water management still remain in public institutions, though the 'public private' water company in Guarulhos is a powerful actor as bulksupplier at the state level and provider to the vast majority of municipalities in the state of São Paulo. It is clear

however that whereas Brazil and South Africa have certain monitoring mechanisms in place to countervail powerful interest, these mechanisms are less strong in India and almost absent in Peru.

The dominance of the sectoral/engineering discourse develops a storyline on the demand-supply gap as justification for more investments in expanding infrastructure. The dominance of this discourse also legitimises sectoral, engineering knowledge (technical and codified) over other forms of knowledge. The dominance of this particular more traditional perspective of sanitary engineering, with its particular understanding of 'sustainability' misses out on a comprehensive context favourable to climate change challenges, which was evident in the perception that government actors expressed about the risks of climate scenarios, although academia and civil society recognise it.

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ISSN 2308-0965

Chance2Sustain examines how governments and citizens in cities with differing patterns of economic growth and socio-spatial inequality make use of participatory (or integrated) spatial knowledge management to direct urban governance towards more sustainable development.

Consortium partners: European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI, Germany), Governance for Inclusive Development (GID) at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR-UvA, Netherlands), Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS, France), Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento (CEBRAP, Brazil), Cities for Life Forum (FORO, Peru), Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR, Norway), School of Planning and Architecture (SPA, India), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN, South Africa)

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