

# Water governance



Water governance is one of the most critical areas through which to improve the sustainable development of water resources and services. How societies choose to govern their water resources and services has profound impacts on people's livelihood and the sustainability of water resources. Access to water is, for many people, a matter of daily survival, or can help to break the vicious circle of poverty.

**What is water governance?** | Water governance refers to the political, social, economic and administrative systems that influence water use and resource management. Water governance determines the equity and efficiency in water resource and services allocation and distribution. It balances water use between socio-economic activities and ecosystems. It determines who gets what water, when and how, and who has the right to water and related services and their benefits. How the decisions are made and the roles of power and politics are important issues in governance.

Governance should mainly be perceived as a neutral term. What is good for some can be bad for others. In this sense, improved governance is path dependent and needs to be linked to particular development goals in society, such as water services and sanitation for all, equitable reallocation of water between users, or any other goals such as food and energy for all, or conservation/restoration of ecosystems. Water governance relates not only to the state or government but also to civil society and the private sector, and where development takes place within different constellations of these three entities.

**The four dimensions of water governance** | There are four fundamental dimensions of water governance to consider when analysing governance dynamics:

**Social:** The equitable distribution of water resources and services among various social and economic groups, and its effects on society. Apart from being unevenly distributed in time and space, water resources and services are also unevenly distributed among various socio-economic groups in both rural and urban settlements.

**Economic:** Efficiency in water allocation and use and the role of water in overall economic growth. Effective poverty reduction and economic growth depend highly on water and other natural resources. Improving water governance will improve durability and sustainability which results in more efficient investments in water.

**Political:** Equal rights and opportunities for water stakeholders to take part in decision-making processes. Participation facilitates more informed decision making, more effective implementation and enhances conflict resolution. A more effective involvement of commonly marginalized citizens, such as indigenous people or slum dwellers in water-related decision making can greatly improve outcomes.

**Environmental:** Sustainable use of water and related ecosystem services. The sufficient flow of water of appropriate quality is critical to maintaining ecosystem functions and services that



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build upon them. Unfortunately, water quality is declining in many regions due to insufficient safeguards in the way it is used by intensive agriculture and in large urban and industrial areas.

**Challenges in water governance** | Increasing water scarcity is one of the globe's greatest challenges. As local demand for water rises above supply in many regions, the effective governance of available water resources will be key to achieving water security, fair allocation of water resources and settling on related disputes. When river flows, ecosystems and groundwater tables are altered and polluted they affect the conditions for producing water and sanitation services, and the possibilities for producing crops and other economic uses of water. This affects people living both up and downstream to the extent that they form part of the same social, economic and political system. The benefits of a more socially equitable water allocation and economically efficient water use accrue to society beyond the specific groups that share a water source. In reality however, the way water is allocated often leads to greater benefits for some groups or individuals while others lose out.

Water governance is a complex issue that involves a wide range of skills, institutions and actors. Responsibilities are often unclear, with several different government agencies having overlapping formal and informal responsibilities. The allocation of water is often determined by factors and actors outside what is usually defined as the water sector. Agriculture, trade, energy, environmental and industrialization policies greatly affect water allocation and use. That many factors are beyond the control of any one actor lies at the very heart of the governance challenge. In many places of the world, effective governance of water is undermined by poor resource management, corruption, inappropriate institutional arrangements, bureaucratic inertia, insufficient human capacity and shortages of finances for investments. In addition, efforts to develop water resources are undermined by the lack of long-term sustainability of water infrastructure. Improved governance lowers transaction costs and significantly strengthens the water infrastructure investment environment, helping to ensure investments are used correctly and efficiently. Lack of financing for actual reforms is, however, a significant obstacle. There is a need to adequately reflect the use of water and other natural resources in national income accounts and put

in place policies and institutional frameworks that can correct market failures and the economic and social under-valuation of water resources. Governments play an important role in providing incentives to facilitate this.

**Getting to good governance** | Improved water governance remains at the heart of the struggle for sustainable human development. Addressing governance through human rights-based approaches, gender and by improving integrity and transparency, is thus critical. Only a part of the deficiencies in service delivery have to do with a lack of water or infrastructure as such. The way ahead is to be found in the governance structures, including the relations of support from national authorities, involving clarity of policies and laws and facilities for capacity development. Decision-makers, civil servants and service providers need to take responsibility for their decisions and services. Well-functioning accountability mechanisms can help to clarify the commitments of actors involved in natural resource governance as well as in water and sanitation governance and lead to efficient management of fiscal resources. It should protect water resources and increase control over the actions of public and private stakeholders, while ensuring minimum quality standards.

Furthermore, decentralization and participation play important roles in water reform. Many countries are moving away from conventional forms of water governance, usually dominated by a top-down approach, towards bottom-up approaches that combine the experience and knowledge of various local groups and people. The establishment of well-defined and coherent roles and responsibilities can lead to a number of social, economic and environmental benefits. These include improved access to water by groups that have previously been denied the formal or informal water right, and efficiency of existing water supply allocations. It can also be a basis for improving hydrological data to support more effective resource management and increase willingness to invest – in both rural and urban contexts

The Sustainable Development Goals provide legitimacy for guiding development efforts and implementation strategies at international, national and local levels. The UNDP Water Governance Facility at SIWI (WGF) particularly embraces the goal to ensure availability and sustainable management of water

and sanitation for all. It recognizes the importance of participation, and capacity development for integrated management and ecosystem protection, water quality and quantity management as well as universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene. Effective governance based on the rule of law is the conduits for sustainable development.

**Our response** | WGF manages programmes that help governments and support agencies to jointly define priorities by facilitating the coordination of roles and support capacities.

- **The GoAL WaSH programme** (Governance, Advocacy and Leadership in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) is a UNDP programme established in 2008. The overall goal is to support effective, equitable and sustainable service delivery. This is done through the support of governance reform, sector leadership and capacity development.
- **The Shared Waters Partnership** (SWP) addresses trans-boundary water governance by promoting cooperative approaches to advance peace and security, environmental protection and to open new opportunities for riparian states to sustainably develop their water resources. The programme seeks to build trust and prevent conflict through multi-stakeholder platforms, diplomacy and capacity development.
- **Accountability for Sustainability** is a partnership with UNICEF that focuses on how to improve accountability in delivery of water supply and sanitation services. It operates by providing UNICEF and UNDP WaSH staff worldwide with the tools and practical guidance they need to support improved governance and thereby help shape programmes to deliver increased sustainability.

- **The Water Integrity Programme** aims at improving transparency, accountability and participation in water resource management and service delivery. The programme targets water sector institutions, aiming to harness a culture of integrity and empower institutions to manage and improve their performance to be worthy of public trust.
- **Knowledge management** is an important part of WGF's activities. The WGF Report Series analyses experiences and puts useful water governance knowledge and insight into a format that is accessible for water sector practitioners and professionals.

### Suggested readings

- Tropp, H. 'Water Governance Challenges', in World Water Assessment Programme, 2006, The United Nations World Water Development Report 2: Water, a shared responsibility, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO), Paris.
- SIWI, WIN & UNDP. (2013). User's Guide on Assessing Water Governance. Available at [www.watergovernance.org/resources/users-guide-on-assessing-water-governance/](http://www.watergovernance.org/resources/users-guide-on-assessing-water-governance/)
- UNDP Water Governance Facility at SIWI. (2015). Water governance in perspective – Water Governance Facility 10 years 2005-2015. Available at [www.watergovernance.org/resources/water-governance-in-perspective/](http://www.watergovernance.org/resources/water-governance-in-perspective/)
- UNDP & UNICEF. (2015). Accountability in WASH: Explaining the Concept. Available at [www.watergovernance.org/resources/accountability-in-wash-a-reference-guide-for-programming](http://www.watergovernance.org/resources/accountability-in-wash-a-reference-guide-for-programming)



Photo: Pilar Avello

In El Salvador the GoAL WaSH programme has strengthened capacities of local actors to ensure protection of water resources in the Torola River Basin.

## The UNDP Water Governance Facility at SIWI (WGF)

The UNDP Water Governance Facility at SIWI (WGF) is a collaboration between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI). The WGF provides strategic water governance support to low- and middle-income countries to advance socially equitable, environmentally sustainable and economically efficient management of water resources and water and sanitation

services. The ultimate aim is to improve lives and livelihoods and reduce poverty, inequalities and exclusion. The WGF forms part of the UNDP Water and Ocean Governance Programme (WOGP) and receives financial support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

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