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Putting politics into IWRM

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The political naivety of IWRM has been denounced by Biswas (2004) because of discrepancy between the concept of integrated management and actual political institutions and property rights. The Global Water Partnership toolbox on IWRM (2003) also states that when social actors try to put IWRM into practice, "they are faced with the apparently insurmountable difficulty of bringing together a very intricate socio-economic reality, the legacy of the past and its ingrained practices and beliefs, and the apparently non-reconcilable conflicting demands". Yet the vagueness of the means by which holistic management might be achieved does not remove all utility from the IWRM concept nor should it be used as an excuse to regress into out-dated technocratic governance. IWRM continues to inspire many adherents amongst international agencies and, like the equally elusive concept of "sustainability", it has inspirational value an ideal goal or direction for improvement of water governance.

Recognition of the interdependence of nature and society and the importance of participatory approaches requires that IWRM incorporates tools of political analysis, as well as hydrological science and engineering. Political analysis can illuminate various possibilities of governance and bargaining. Recent literature is reviewed to demonstrate new approaches towards meeting the challenge of marrying top-down conceptual frameworks with bottom-up public participation, which has potential for optimising strategy and performance by providing checks and balances, revealing errors and sharing responsibility. A reinvention of IWRM as an open arena of negotiation and dialogue, where scientific information interacts with local knowledge and creatively mediates conflicting demands (Lankford and Hepworth, 2006) may offer a way forward

to meet the current challenge of regulations such as the Water Framework Directive.

In turn, IWRM demands a “new hydrology” which gives increased attention to processes; to scale effects; to investigations of temporal, even chaotic, change caused by climatic fluctuations and human interference, and to improvement in the demonstrability of hydrological results so that they can be recognised as legitimate and used in negotiation.

Biswas A K (2004) Integrated Water Resources Management: A Reassessment.

Water International 29 (2): 248–256

Global water Partnership (2003) IWRM ToolBox. GWP Secretariat: Stockholm

Lankford B A, Hepworth N (2006) The Cathedral and the Bazaar: Centralised versus Decentralised River Basin Management. Workshop 4: “Benefits and Responsibilities of Decentralised and Centralised Approaches for Management of Water and Wastewater”. World Water Week 2006. Stockholm International Water Institute.