

# Blue Paper #7: “Riverhood” and the politics of (mis)recognizing local water cultures and water rights systems

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*Understanding the world’s diverse, on-the-ground water worldviews and cultures - in the past and the present - is essential to value the conflicts and solutions that exist within water management. Rutgerd Boelens, professor of Water Governance and Social Justice at Wageningen University and professor of the Political Ecology of Water in Latin America at the University of Amsterdam, analyses the intricacies of water governance and politics. He argues for new ways to recognize and negotiate the value of local water cultures, and proposes the term “Riverhood” as a way to understand the political, technological and cultural arenas in which water rights and governance frameworks are being shaped in grassroots movements’ everyday practice, in interaction with rivers’ adjacent social and ecological communities.*

It is a classic, age-old desire and motive to engineer utopian societies through the conquest of nature, in particular through the domestication of rivers and the ordering of ‘wild water’. Sumerian, Egyptian, Roman and Incan societies have engaged with the utopian effort to transform and control humans and nature at once (Boelens 2017), through water. In the Andean countries not only Spanish colonizers, modernist engineers and water bureaucrats, but also indigenous empires and Inca rulers used similar tactics to subordinate local water cultures and collectives.

In present day water management, customary uses tend to be brushed under the carpet and water demands for mining, hydrocarbon, agro-export and hydropower often get priority. These demands entail territorial transformations, sometimes polluting or drying out downstream regions. This ‘mega-hydraulic regime’ builds on a normative discourse, but tends to involve a deep neglect of existing, diverse water cultures, overlooking territorial meanings, values, identities and rights systems on the ground. Examples of these mega-hydraulic regimes are large dam schemes, such as Franco’s ‘Hydraulic Policy’ implementation in Spain and more recently China’s Three Gorges Dam, Brazil’s Belo Monte Dam, and India’s Sardar Sarovar Dam.



Fig 1. Model of the Three Gorges Dam and the Xiling Bridge over the Yangtze River in China. The dam was finished in 2006. Sharon Nardo, CC BY 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

After decades of scientific approaches exalting the engineering of nature to maximize water control through river damming, the last two decades have witnessed various new water management paradigms. Approaches as *Integrated water resources management* (IWRM) advocate participation and multistakeholder platforms to curb the technocratic engineering tradition.

In fact, however, many of these recent approaches still delicately restrict and deny complex water realities. Governments and political-economic elites, when claiming to respect and recognize local and indigenous water cultures and heritage, commonly deploy subtle cultural politics (the way in which dominant cultural norms, attitudes and beliefs inform political decisions and relationships, see Boelens 2015 and 2017). They differentiate between two kinds of local water cultures. On the one hand, they identify 'good governance water cultures' with 'good practices' (meaning those that are compatible with dominant water knowledge and society), which should be 'recognized'. And on the other hand, they tend to critique the 'wasteful, inefficient water cultures' (which they think should be 'cured' and 'educated', preferably not by force but by 'participation'). Our universities' water engineering and governance disciplines have contributed their part. Simply said: "disciplines discipline".

Also common to find is that governments and elite bodies in many countries tend to glorify the ancient ('petrified') indigenous water traditions, religions and empires. These

do not threaten their current-day hegemony, unable to challenge their unsustainable water interventions and unfair allocation practices, but rather provide them with national pride and identity. At the same time, however, they oppress the existence of contemporary, actually 'living' water cultures of peasant and indigenous societies: because these are 'unruly', 'stubborn' and do not fit 'rational' water norms or orderly follow 'efficient' (inter)national legislation. As Latin American author Cecilia Mendez (2000) wrote: 'Incas yes, Indians no' .



Fig 2. The Indian Prime Minister Modi inaugurates the Sardar Sarovar Dam, in Gujarat on September 17, 2017. Behind him is India's Minister for Transport, Shri Nitin Gadkari. The construction for the dam begun in 1987, but the project was stalled in 1995 over concerns of displacement. Prime Minister's Office (GODL-India), GODL-India <[https://data.gov.in/sites/default/files/Gazette\\_Notification\\_OGD\\_L.pdf](https://data.gov.in/sites/default/files/Gazette_Notification_OGD_L.pdf)>, via Wikimedia Commons.

Scientific approaches (as market-environmentalism, rational choice paradigms, etc.) that prominently feed the new mainstream ('inclusive') water governance approaches (such as IWRM), equally tend to misunderstand the complexities, contingencies and power-laden interactions among humans. Naturalization, technification and universalization make that experts' norms, definitions, and values become the equalizing metric. River basins come to be seen as 'natural' water management units, and 'rational' allocation, 'functional' water rights, 'efficient' water use, and 'optimal participation' become universalized standards. In water debates, these technocratic arguments are presented as objective, neutral or even 'natural'. They have become so dominant that they are accepted as normal or inevitable, making it difficult to recognize them as biased representations of good water management.

Grassroots movements, activists and academics have criticized the multiple ways in which mega-hydraulic developments have generated environmental damage and



human suffering. Locally existing ‘living’ water cultures do not remain silent but respond. Far beyond any romanticization, now and in the past, they have combined their struggles against cultural discrimination, unequal water distribution and political exclusion; building on ecological integrity to sustain their waterscapes or ‘hydrosocial territories’.



Fig. 3. KATRIBU National holds an anti-dam protest in the Philippines. *International Rivers on Flickr*, CC BY-NC 2.0.

To build a water facility is to establish rights and mutual relationships among families, the collective, the infrastructure, and nature. These relationships become the fundamental basis for collective action in water management tasks. In many places, it drives the formation of local water culture and identity, water rights defence, and the relationships among local user collectives, river-ecologies, and previous or ancestral interactions with water and nature – since human-river ‘investments’ can also be inherited and in many places are ritualized. User-developed water works (Veldwisch et al. 2019) such as community-led irrigation systems, shared wetlands control, and inter-community stream diversions, therefore follow a process of coproduction among humans, technology and nature, creating and consolidating mutually established ‘water rights’.

The Water Resources Management group at Wageningen University, together with CEDLA-University of Amsterdam, the Water Justice alliance, and many partners in the global North and South, build on this. We have started a cross-continental program to study and support the large variety of, what we call, ‘New Water Justice Movements.’ NWJMs are rooted, transdisciplinary, practice-based, multi-actor and multi-scalar coalitions. They deploy a variety of institutional and political strategies, new languages of valuation, vernacular water rights frameworks and pro-active ‘commoning practices’,

to claim environmental justice, restore or defend ‘living rivers’, and enhance nature-entwined water governance and ‘pluriversal water cultures’. Alternative practices range from, among others, dam-removal, ecological flows, interlacing of small weirs, river-livelihoods, nature-inclusive hydraulics, to recognizing Nature’s Rights.

To conceptualize the program, I revived a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century forgotten word: ‘*riverhood*’ – “the state of being a river” (Oxford Dictionary 2019). The program focusses on the arena of co-production among humans and non-humans of riverhoods, and on the role of NWJMs: first, how they challenge the prevailing water governance paradigms. Second, it addresses how they provide grounded solutions to current water crises, and innovative perspectives to ‘*reviving the river*’: as a *socionatural being* and as an *entwined ecological, cultural and political subject*.

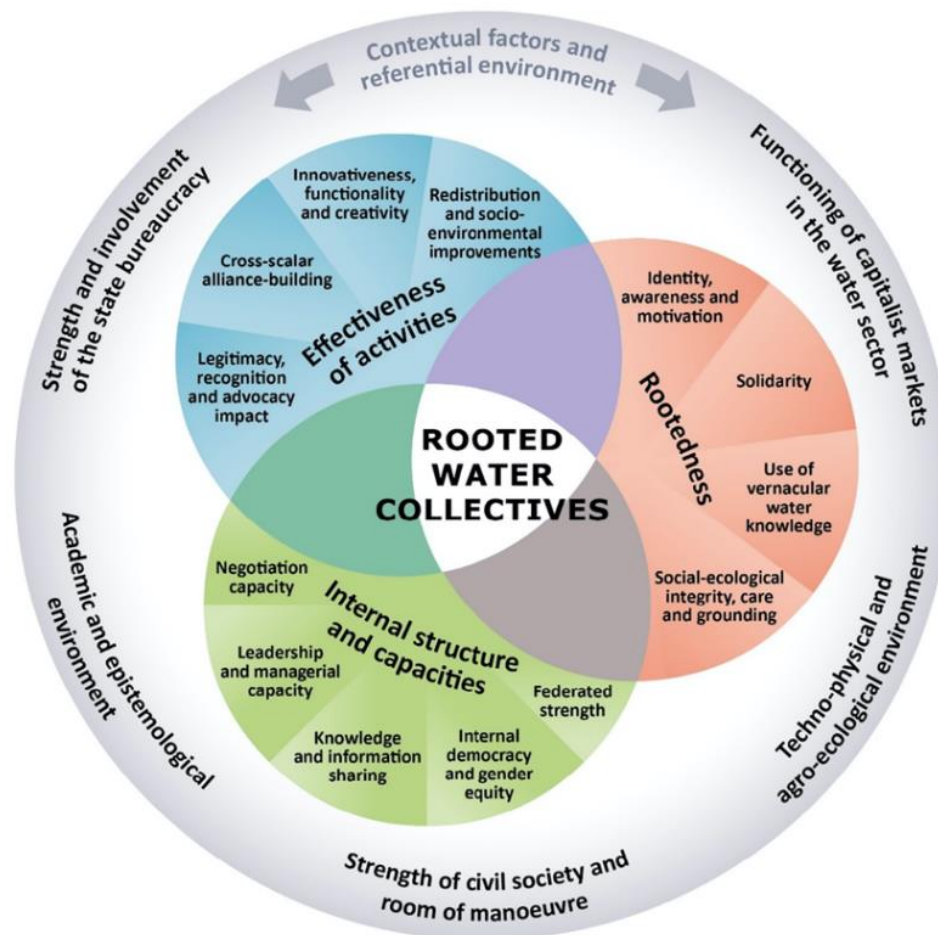


Fig 4. The three dimensions of rooted water collectives (Vos et al., 2020).

Fundamental in understanding these movements is to understand how communities form networks with nature and mutually produce their environment. Social actors inscribe their life worlds in particular environments following ideologies, epistemologies and power structures, generating environmental knowledge systems, so developing territory and Riverhood. The objective is not to ‘glorify the local’ or ‘the indigenous’,

because these may include their own class, ethnic and gender inequalities and injustices. Rather, it contests modernist water legislations and policies that tend to transform local water rights frameworks and water cultures *even before* local arrangements are *known*.

Water flows through landscapes and cities, connecting places and spaces to each other, enabling environments for living and production. Water animates cultures and entwines ecology and society in particular ways. The movement of water co-creates social, material and symbolic linkages, lived spaces and boundaries. Water, in itself, produces hydrosocial territories, and riverhood.

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