Redefining the rules of water: contestation and the production of scale in water governance in Myanmar/Burma

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WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT WATER?
Water in Myanmar/Burma

H$_2$O
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Source: Karen News (left); International Rivers (right)
Hydrosocial approach

“[…] water is not merely a material substance that is subject to human manipulation, but a 'hybrid nature' in which water’s materiality and its social relations constitute and express each other […] Redefining water as co-produced enables us to think about not only the social processes that shape water, but also the ways in which water also shapes social relations […]"
Hydrosocial approach

“[…] water is not merely a material substance that is subject to human manipulation, but a 'hybrid nature' in which water’s materiality and its social relations constitute and express each other […] Redefining water as co-produced enables us to think about not only the social processes that shape water, but also the ways in which water also shapes social relations […]. Thus, […] the flows, forms, practices and discourses that characterise water […], reflect the material and social processes through which instances of water become formed. This requires attention to a range of 'moments', such as physical flows, patterns of access, technologies, institutions, practices, legislative reforms, governance frameworks, and discourses around water, which are mediated by social and political processes and collectively constitute the waterscape of a given context.” (Budds and Hinojosa 2012)
Which networks of actors play a role in water governance of Myanmar/Burma?
The National Water Policy Regime

– heterogenous interests evolving around plural waters
– no clear rules, norms, laws on how water will be decided upon

Policies & Laws

• National Water Policy (approved 2015)
• National Water Framework Directive
• Zero-Draft Water Law (on-going) in drafting process – not publicly available

• Several water-related regulations
Water: a centralized, hegemonic narrative

- NWRC & AG aimed to be powerful apex body on a national level
- IWRM as central paradigm with the RB as a central unit

“IWRM purports to “integrate” cultural, ecological and economic aspects of water with its purely hydrological dimensions, and calls for the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in decision-making. The popularity of IWRM attests to a broad historical shift in the way water is understood. However, it is precisely this idea of integrating the hydrologic and the social – as if they were a priori separate and unconnected – that we seek to reposition, though the concept of the hydrosocial cycle.” (Linton and Budds 2013)
Water: a ‘modern’ narrative

• ‘modern’ water (Linton, 2010)
  ➔ technocratic approach

• Basic needs

• Green growth: water as economic good
“[I]f the country is going to federalization and [...] if there is a region and region conflict of interest, there will be the national level coming in and decide. And also, if it is a national-level concern, like the national/ international, transboundary river, then the national government is concerned […]. So [the National Water Law] will be the master of all the laws related to water and also the sanitation, contamination, and everything is to be integrated […]. According to our Constitution, the right is under the [Union] state of handling water. But at the same end, the law should protect the right of every consumer - if it is in the household level as a human right, but at the same time the commercial one who like to use water must pay for something, you know, and also for the pollution, polluters-pay principle is also integrated.”

(personal communication 2017)
The ‘right‘ level of decision-making I

“The objective of the National Water Policy is to take cognizance of the existing situation, to propose a framework for creation of a system of laws and institutions and for a plan of action with a unified national perspective”
(National Water Resources Committee (NWRC), The Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2015, emphasis added)

centralized, expert-led water policy-making is shaping a hegemonic, unified Myanmar narrative mainly based on a ‘modern’ Water understanding
The Salween Peace Park – a grassroots alternative?

“The Salween Peace Park is a grassroots, people-centered alternative to the previous Myanmar government and foreign companies’ plans for destructive development in the Salween River basin. Instead of massive dams on the Salween River, we see small hydropower and decentralized solar Power [...]. Instead of megaprojects that threaten conflict and perhaps the resumption of war, we seek a lasting peace and a thriving ecosystem where people live in harmony with the nature around them.” (KNU & KESAN 2016, emphasis added)
Predominant narrative for the SPP

- Bottom-up, community-led water governance
- "Water is life" → political, emotional approach

- KNU Land & Forest policy + planned water policy; SPP Charter
  → self-determination;

“The ethnic nationalities are the ultimate owners of all lands, forests, water, water enterprises and natural resources” (KNU, 2015:5)
The ‘right‘ level of decision-making II

“No, [the National Water Law would not have any influence] because the Salween Peace Park as we say is a demonstration to self-determination. It is not about the Union Government saying you have to do this and that, it's independent. As this is exactly what we are calling for: the right to self-determination. So, that is the things that we are trying to demonstrate.”

(personal communication, 2017)

→ a narrative of community-led, bottom-up decision-making within a federalism of self-determination
The Politics of Scale

“[S]cale is what needs to be understood as something that is produced; a process that is always deeply heterogeneous, conflictual, and contested. Scale becomes the arena and moment, both discursively and materially, where sociospatial power relations are contested and compromises are negotiated and regulated. Scale, therefore, is both the result and the outcome of social struggle for power and control.” (Swyngedouw 1997, emphasis added)
The Production of Scale – a battleground of water governance

“The production of scale, rather than scale itself, is thus often the appropriate research focus (Smith 2000:725), although this not to deny that socially produced scales still have tremendous material effects and often great persistence. If scale is produced or constructed, then the questions immediately arise: who produces scale, how, and for what purposes?” (McCarthy 2005, emphasis added)

• future rule of decision-making and actors involved in it
• power-relations within the network of actors & actants
“[...] who produces scale, how, and for what purposes?”

• Different networks of actors (i.a. NWRC & AG; SPP network; etc.)
  • With different visions & paradigms around governance aiming at different scales at which decisions are to be made at

• Only two among many intersecting networks contesting scales of water gov.
  \(\rightarrow\) enmeshed with a variety of intersecting networks of actors at various scalar articulations
“[…] who produces scale, how, and for what purposes?”

• Legal strategies: policy drafting under differently recognized institutional arrangements based on historically-built power structures and ‘scales’

• Discursively: pluralist waters

• Connection to wider networks

• released documentation on envisioned scales (i.e. rather techno-scientific reports vs. politicizing press releases)
“[...] who produces scale, how, and for what purposes?”

• Peaceful, democratic, federalism-based governance structures

• Visions how the ‘change for the better’ is to look like differ amongst (and at times within) networks

• Which visions will prevail?
→ underlying power-relations
Moving beyond Water: Degree of federalization

“We are considering for governance and management of water resources in [a] federal system, but to form this system […] depend[s mainly] on the political change and the changes of the governance system. Without having federal states and regions, it is impossible to have federal system for Myanmar’s water [governance].” (personal communication NWRC6, 2017)

“The new Myanmar government has promised to lead the country toward a devolved, federal democracy. The Karen are not waiting idly for this: the Salween Peace Park is federal democracy in action. It is indigenous self-determination and community protection of natural and cultural heritage in action.” (KNU and KESAN, 2016:3)
Moving towards water: some concluding thoughts

Acknowledging water’s plural ontologies…

… means acknowledging plural networks of actors with diverging visions and material manifestations on how water ought to be ‘governed’ at diverse and at time overlapping scalar articulations.

…leads to fundamentally different analytics and communications (e.g. technical vs. emotional), which in turn shape different politics and policy – producing different scales.
Thank you for your kind attention.

Questions, Comments?
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Sources


