

Water is multiple

Why development cooperation needs to treat water as more than a commodity

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Humanity celebrates World Water Day on 22nd of March. This year's topic is "Valuing Water". As UN-Water explains, "[t]he value of water is about much more than its price – water has enormous and complex value for our households, food, culture, [communities, collective action], health, education, economics and the integrity of our natural environment. If we overlook any of these values, we risk mismanaging this finite, irreplaceable resource". The topic of this year's World Water Day is a stark reminder that prioritising "getting the price right" hinders sustainability and water justice rather than promoting it, if doing so obscures other values of water that are not commensurate to a monetary figure.

In a context of unequal access to and control over water resources, unsustainable economic growth and rising population, climate change is increasing the pressures on water availability, especially for vulnerable groups. This has led to perceptions of water as 'the new gold' – a commodity made economically valuable by conditions of scarcity and rising demand. Investors have even started trading water in the US stock market as a future commodity under the premise that there is money to be made out of conditions of scarcity. Ample evidence suggests that conditions of water scarcity are created by water allocation, which relates to power, rather than by simply lack of rain. Trading water on the stock market only provides further incentive to perpetuate conditions of scarcity.

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Responses to water conflicts and crises have traditionally privileged top-down, technocratic governance and, since the turn of the millennium, increasingly looked to the adoption of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) as a solution. While IWRM promotes, among others, more stakeholder involvement, it also places a particular emphasis on the economic value of water. In consequence, policies concerned with implementing IWRM to tackle water governance problems often treat the economic value of water as a shorthand into which multiple values of water can be condensed, in order to make them comparable and to find a way to mediate between diverging interests. An example would be the

(wrought or anticipated) destruction of water-related ecosystems of a mining company upstream and smallholder farmers downstream. By getting the price right, as conventional wisdom would have it, the mining company can adequately compensate smallholder farmers for the damages incurred, thereby resolving the problem of opposing interests. In this logic, water valuation becomes a prerequisite to coordinate diverging interests and to resolve conflict. Water governance then becomes concerned with putting the right price on water, allocating water rights and creating the conditions for market-based water management (e.g. water privatisation, water funds, water markets).

What these responses fail to do is to recognise that a monetary figure is an inadequate lingua franca for the multiple values of water. As it neglects the social embeddedness of water, which in different societies and hydrological, geographical, ecological and political contexts imbues it with different meanings. All water is H₂O, but the water that the Mongolian herder gives to her cattle has not the same meaning as the one that a biochemist samples within the same watershed. Similarly, the water that indigenous communities have struggled for generations to control communally in the Andean Highlands has not the same meaning as the water that the flower farm further downstream pays to conserve and appropriate. This is to say that water itself is multiple, and that water governance problems often originate from diverging water values that are promoted by actors in unequal positions of power. Struggles over water control are struggles over water meanings, cultural recognition and political participation as well. Attempts to compress its multiple meanings and dimensions into a single economic value thus favours the perspective of those (generally privileged) actors who view water as a commodity while eradicating the water meanings of those who hold an opposing view. As water connects people, places and things, it is a relation, a medium as well as an element, that reconfigures our relation to others and nature. In that way, development cooperation that promotes market-based water policies with a blind eye to other water values thus risks compressing the layered meanings and relations into the flat surface of a dollar bill.

Radically integrating environmental justice into the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes can offer a concrete way for development cooperation to start building bridges and balanced alliances across differences. Only by respecting and promoting water's multiple values and the diverse societies using, coproducing and depending on water can development cooperation contribute to water justice and the equitable and sustainable management of water.