Water Diplomacy, negotiated cooperation.

Proceedings of the seminar on its conceptual potential and practical application in pursuit of SDG-6

October 12, 2016

Esteemed participation and valuable input from:
Introduction

A seminar on Water Diplomacy was hosted at Wageningen University on October 12th 2016. Following the students’ initiative, a group of around 70 international participants from various backgrounds came together. They collectively engaged to advance the conceptual and practical understanding of Water Diplomacy and encouraged an uptake within Wageningen University. The outcome would simultaneously inform two MSc thesis researches.

The afternoon program was given shape by four esteemed key-note speakers. They engaged in open and interactive presentations, sharing their experiences and views.

In order of appearance:
Henk Ovink - special envoy for International Water affairs for the Kingdom of the Netherlands,
Tjitte Nauta - IWRM expert and regional manager South and East Asia for Deltares.
Joop de Schutter - former business director at UNESCO IHE, senior policy analyst for IWRM and member of the Water Diplomacy Consortium
Sonja van der Arend – Participatory governance researcher and policy fiction novelist.

The afternoon’s hosts were a selection of students at the Wageningen Sustainable Development Diplomacy (SDD) master track. This track is a unique study program that cuts across many studied disciplines yet is pursued by students who jointly aspire a career as advocators of Sustainable Development. On a regular basis, the students initiate similar events to highlight the subject of their particular fascination.

The afternoon program was sponsored by the FNP chair group at Wageningen University.
The seminar

Opening and welcome
Setting out, Thijs Stoffelen (MSc student Wageningen University) welcomed the participants with a concise introduction. He briefly touched upon what inspired him to initiate this afternoon. Inspired by witnessing the political challenges of Transboundary Water Cooperation and the dynamics of the associated negotiations. He claimed that, no matter how well a river basin plan is drafted, how well the stakeholders have been involved and even, how well willing they are. If political will is lacking, or the overruling political objectives do not correspond, the plan will have a very hard time materializing.

He used two case studies to illustrate his claims. Firstly and briefly, he mentioned the geopolitical tensions in the Ganges basin between upstream Nepal and downstream India. Whereas the geological arrangements are such that mutual gains should not be hard to obtain, the relationship is marred by political mismatches and noting substantial gets materialized. To bring it closer to home, he addressed the lack of cooperation between the riparian countries in the Rhine Basin, Germany and The Netherlands. Even though on water quality major synergetic achievements have been made, on water quantity however, cooperation and synchronization seems totally absent. Employing a contemplation from Dr. Jeroen Warner (SDC Group – WUR) he openly called into question; “the Dutch are good water managers, but are their diplomatic skills equally refined?”

Subsequently, he brought to notice that the conceptual understanding of Water Diplomacy is different to different people. Without making claims, he mirrored two definitions of Water Diplomacy, one non-specific formulation from the Dutch Clingendael Institute and one very descriptive, almost normative, from the Tufts University in the United States.

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’
“All contacts between (non-)state actors and at least one state or international governmental organization over transboundary freshwater resources such as a lake, river and aquifer basins.”
(Rood and Van Genderen 2011)

Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University
“An approach to water management that acknowledges the complexity and uncertainty of natural and societal systems, accepts the increasing interconnectivity and consequences of important decisions, and rejects the unquestioned authority of hierarchical governance structures.”
(Islam and Susskind 2013)
Mr. Henk Ovink (special envoy for International Water affairs for the Kingdom of the Netherlands)

As a special envoy on International Water Affairs and a Sherpa to the High Level Panel on Water, Mr. Ovink in his position was able to provide invaluable insights in the grave necessity for a change in how we manage water globally. He got to captivate the minds of the participants through illustrative cases, personal anecdotes and intellectual nourishments.

First of all, he linked his presentation to the preceding introduction. The political will as objective of water diplomacy, according to him there is a misinterpretation. We think there is political will, but before that even, comes political intent. For intent we need understanding, and when it comes to water, there is actually a lack of understanding. So for now, political will is too farfetched when it comes to Water Diplomacy.

He further claimed that to change everything we need everyone. That is what is lacking in diplomacy, we don’t talk to everyone. Policy makers often have the illusion to set the agenda themselves and then go talking to others, that default perspective is a main war-causer. An inclusive process is where everyone is included from the beginning.

Investment plans on the short term do not take climate change in their portfolio because it is too long term and does not directly concern them. Reflecting on the Paris agreement, it is weird that a world’s goals is based on a negotiation process, not on what is actually needed. Nonetheless, our goal is set for 2100. Mr Ovink shows that it takes 5 years to start changing the curve in which we are progressing. We need to employ this 5 year term to set goals that we can comprehend and see in our own lives. We can translate these back into our short term planning, in our business cases.

Dutch policy focuses on supporting developing countries in enhancing their water security and self-reliance – in particular for vulnerable groups. We are not exporting the Dutch but we match our talents with the rest of the world’s, finding connections and building coalitions to increase and enlarge perspective. When it comes to diplomacy, often the lack of understanding limits the perspective. Furthermore, we need adaptive approaches: “so that today’s innovations do not become tomorrow’s constraints”.

“You can add more knowledge to that level of the conflict, it will not broaden their perspective. But once you will broaden the scope, increase aspect of connecting the dots. Showing the water is part for food, part for energy, part for equity issues and you bring in other players to that same table. The negotiation will become a conversation. Diplomacy is about organizing a conversation, not about guiding a negotiation.”

(Henk Ovink)
Mr Ovink then briefly throws light on how he is employing his beliefs through two initiatives he is taking part of, the Delta Coalition and the High Level Panel on Water (HLPW). Delta Coalition – a collaboration between countries to exchange knowledge on a practical way. It is a type of diplomacy that does not start with a conflict, it starts with capacity building, it is a broker of transboundary cooperation.

Why the HLPW? There is a lack of understanding about the complexity of water issues, there is a lack of water being part of the conversation when it comes to the solution to climate change mitigation and social derogation. If water could be part of the conversation, Social, Economic, Cultural and Environmental, it increases the opportunity to build better solutions. To change you need action, the panel has only 2 years so it is forced to take action quick and eager to do so. The panel does three things: ignite action and bring it to an end, start action and hand it over to others or, support actions in the field of water.

Q&A

“How is Water Diplomacy taking shape, is it a developing tool as applied in foreign policy or is it becoming a business model, in support of the Dutch water sector?”

(M. Veenkamp – WUR / The Hague Institute of Global Justice)

First we have to agree on what Water Diplomacy is. There is different levels of Water Diplomacy, it can either be linked to conflict, to crisis or economically induced. All requiring a very different diplomatic approach. Nonetheless, the Dutch international water ambition is very clear: The crisis is immense, we want to deliver our part to deliver a water secure world. So the driver for engagement in the word is to arrive at water security. Subsidiary though at the same time we have our own national economic objectives. If the Netherlands can engage to increase the global understanding and intelligence, we can and should find more opportunities on a business level to set-off our intelligence and experience.

“Water Diplomacy suggests that it is interaction only between formalized parties. She proposes to address it as ‘competing claims’ moving away from the classic understanding of diplomacy and toward harmonizing interests between different parties.”

Tineke Roholl (Dutch Ministry of Foreign affairs)

“Water Diplomacy should be about building connections, rather than dropping out experts as a business model. What are your ideas on how can you start building these connections?”

Jelle Behagel (FNP Group, WUR)

The Dutch often suffer from the misconception that abroad we can do it alone. Yet, as we learned in The Netherlands, you cannot do anything alone when it comes to management of water, you need to collaborate. Our relationship and added value is specific. We don’t spend billions but bring our knowledge and expertise for a better approach on all levels. As we know it takes a million to spend a billion, and within that million we can create the most added value with our expertise in a collaborative and inclusive way.
Mr. Nauta, a Wageningen University alumni, has been contributing to cooperative water management for the past three decades. He has witnessed and experienced how international, intercultural and inter-organizational challenges very often effect pragmatic decision making, yet sometimes accelerate technological innovation.

Mr. Nauta brought the case of Singapore to the attention, a case in which securitization efforts have brought domestic progress. Over history, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have tried to find transboundary cooperation with regard to water. They however have not been able to come to a mutually satisfactory agreement, as a consequence the protracted struggle prevails. To assure that international tensions would not halt domestic progress and development, Singapore has started to securitize their water supply independently. They employ a conjunction of local catchment, imported water, NEWater (treated waste water) and desalinated water. Even though the Water Diplomacy doctrine encourages a move away from independent securitization and toward synergetic collaborations, Singapore has showcased how in very challenging situations, technical endeavors have successfully met their demands and hold promising future projections.

Planning is key to the success of Singapore and the reason why it is way ahead of the other regional countries in terms of developing their potential. Mr. Nauta quoted, “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail”. Singapore felt the pressure of things not working out with Malaysia and Indonesia and consequently took their own required actions.

Bringing it back to the role which Deltares and the Dutch water sector have played. Mr. Nauta claimed that it is an exchange of knowledge and skill both ways, we have learned a lot from the experiences abroad and the practices of these countries. Which in turn we apply domestically and internationally, supplementing the collective global capacity.
Q&A

“Independency comes with new dependencies, dependencies on technologies and funds, how are these taken in account?” (Saskia Werners - WSG Group, WUR)

Singapore has the strong believe that it can totally and almost solely rely upon its technological advancement. When new issues would emerge, innovative technology will emerge subsequently. Nonetheless, it obviously remains a question whether that will hold on the long term.

“Even though it is safe, people seem not to want to drink recycled water, how can this be constructively be addressed?” (Lisa van Wageningen MSc – WUR)

Mr. Nauta acknowledged that this is a situation that Singapore is struggling with, at present much of the water is being treated and then eventually pumped back into the reservoirs. The government addresses this issue through promotion though it is very complicated to alter a psychological belief.

“Water is one thing but how about energy or food? Are there other issues through which could jeopardize Singapore’s independency? And potentially connecting issues?” Marco van Burik (MSc student, WUR)

The concern is predominantly water, but there are other issues as well. Mr. Nauta remarks that another challenge is to obtain fill material needed for land reclamations and by doing so enlarging the water catchment. Besides that, perhaps energy might become another concern in the near future.

**Joop de Schutter - member of the Water Diplomacy Consortium, former business director at Unesco IHE and senior policy analyst for IWRM.**

Mr de Schutter sets out with introducing the main IWRM principles which have guided him throughout his career. He spotlights the book ‘Water Resources System Planning and Management, an introduction to Methods, Models and Applications’ from Professor Elco van Beek and Daniel Loucks, and his own publication in cooperation with Professor Victor Dukhovny ‘Water in Central Asia: Past, Present, Future’.

He proceeds with his view on how you have to understand a system before you can start talking about it. The necessary basis for negotiation processes should be solid, reliable data. That brings him, to the Water Diplomacy Consortium’s (WDC) definition of Water Diplomacy: “all measures that can be undertaken to prevent or peacefully resolve conflicts related to water availability, allocation or use between and within states and major stakeholders in the river basins and all this based on sound systems knowledge and analysis.”

“You will need to stand on two legs, understanding the system and have the capacity to support the negotiation process.” (Joop de Schutter)
Mr. de Schutter shared his experience while working in Iraq for Unesco-IHE. One of the most first and striking requests from the Iraqi ministry at the time was “Can you please teach our people to explain the Turks what they are doing to our water resources?” Indicating, there is a high level of ignorance across borders. Mr. de Schutter states that the development of common perspectives (common frameworks) on transboundary water challenges is very much a condition without which not much will happen. Globally, there is a great lack of this capacity and it is essential condition to arrive anywhere at all.

Over the past decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has gone through a process of continuous talking, from one agreement to another. Mr. de Schutter concludes with stating, that if you would ask anybody involved as a broker of cooperation in Central Asia what has been the result of transboundary efforts, they would say we kept them from fighting by keeping them talking. Implying that sometimes, in certain cases, the best available is preventing more violent conflict.

Q&A

“The definition of Water Diplomacy of the WDC states that cooperation is always based on “sounds system knowledge and analysis” but isn’t it very often actually based on political realities which are distant from these physical, hydrological realities?”

(Dr. Jeroen Warner (SDC Group – WUR)

Mr. Schutter acknowledges this, yet for a sound negotiation, still you need to know what you talk about, it is a starting point. Asked where the potential lies for cooperation in Central Asia, he replies that the negotiators should keep the conversations going. But having the actual presidents of these countries sit together and discuss the issues has not been achieved so far.

“In certain cases, the best achievable is preventing more violent conflict by keeping the dialogue going.”

(Joop de Schutter)
Mrs. van der Arend skillfully manages to awaken the minds of the participants, evidently strained after a long afternoon of intense deliberation. At the 11th hour of the afternoon, she shares most valuable insights and a contrasting perspective on the discussed topic.

She is no expert on Water Diplomacy, nor is she a practitioner. Yet, she holds instrumental insights in the practice and research on participatory governance. In this case we treat water diplomacy as an example of participatory governance. As a lot of participatory policy projects fail, there is widespread disappointment and cynicism. Nonetheless, the belief in participation flourishes and many different methods proliferate around the world. She claims that the focus on the formal aspects of participation makes researchers blind to what is really going on in participatory projects or settings. She coins this the ‘cargo cult of participation’.

“The myth of academic research, is the myth of a cycle between theory and practice. The myth holds that researchers use theory to evaluate cases of participation, and use that knowledge to enhance methods. That managers use these methods in practice to design participation projects, which are then studied again.... participants themselves are nowhere in this cycle. Which is paradoxical and unfair. But most importantly, it feeds the myth.”

(Sonja van der Arend)

She then questions if water diplomacy research follows this cargo cult. With some well-known pictures and definitions, she shows that the central keywords on water diplomacy are negotiation and management. Knowledge on negotiation is relevant for all stakeholders, while knowledge about managing negotiation will typically speak to managers only.

The latter type of research risks becoming a cargo cult, when it denies the role of participating citizens and stakeholders, power, and power inequalities in water diplomacy. Empowerment of participants is not the result of management, but can grow when they act politically and experience engagement, change, identity, etc. Still, formal aspects matter: bad management is a shortcut to failure in governance. In research, design & management should be understood as political acts, which consequentially cannot control their outcomes.
Discussion

Mathijs Veenkamp (The Hague Institute for Global Justice) questions the conceptual development of Water Diplomacy, is it too broad not being really anything but being everything? Should it be more like a theme of work rather than a concretized concept? Mrs. van der Arend wonders if you can really control the meaning of the word. If it would develop in a catch-all-phrase, nobody would be able to stop that really. But yes, its relevance and specific purpose as a concept lie in its focus on negotiation in international settings. Thus, it professes a mature way of looking at policy making, conflict resolution and conflict mediation. That is the power of the concept, if it does not become a ‘catch-all-phrase’.

Jelle Behagel (FNP Group - WUR) claims that it is the obligation as an academic to question concepts and theories. And based on Mrs van der Arend her presentation, he does this. He never really understood the concept of Water Diplomacy. It’s about human security, it’s about the entrepreneurial state, it’s about development, development assistance, to him Water Diplomacy evokes a very elitists and statists practice. If we follow the reasoning laid out by Mrs. van der Arend, than an elitists or even academic way of thinking is not going to change anything in the world. Should we get rid of the whole idea of Water Diplomacy?

Mr. Ovink remarks it is not elitist in itself but grouping all practices together turns talking about it into an elitist practice. That also emerges from the difference between the Tufts and Clingendael definitions. Before you know it we can talk about it for decades and the world would still be at war….. It is more about the intent than the meaning. If you want to solve crisis together in a collaborative and inclusive way and you call that diplomacy, it is fine. But if you use the discussion on what diplomacy is to not solve the issues, than it becomes an elitist game.

Mrs van der Arend continues that the Tufts Water Diplomacy Framework is predominantly informing managers rather than negotiators. The basic problem with management is its self representation of a neutral thing coming in from the outside, like you are orchestrating a miniature version of the world, fiddling from above with all the puppets below. You need to acknowledge that the managers in their strategic role are as bias and as every other negotiator, just with a special responsibility maybe. The distinction is hard to make if a person is there to manage the negotiation, to finish in time, to let everybody speak, or is he there to bring the objectives in closer reach.

Mr. Ovink sheds light on his own frustrations, what he often sees among politicians, activists, policy makers, entrepreneurs, anyone, manager or not, it is a process driven approach and not a getting-something-done approach. That is the failing part, because if progress instead of results becomes the driver, guided by Mc Kinsey charts, prescribing that green is better than orange and orange is better than red.

If progress rather than results becomes your driver, you will spend your life in green without ever accomplishing anything!
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