



OECD Principles on Water Governance: From policy to practice

KEY POLICY MESSAGES

- Good governance mitigates water crises.
- Translating policy into practice is a long-term commitment.
- Effective implementation requires an effective meso-institutional layer.
- Stakeholder 'ownership' through social learning and transparency is essential for policy legitimacy.

■ The near flood of the Seine, Paris, France, 2018
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WATER CRISES ARE NOT INEVITABLE

More than 40 per cent of the world's population will live in water-stressed river basins by 2050. The OECD estimates water demand will rise 55 per cent by 2050. Intensified tension and conflict seem unavoidable unless risk management replaces crisis management.

Water crises – too much, too little, too polluted – affect food security, poverty, economic development and social stability. Yet these more often result from poor governance than natural events.

Water is highly sensitive to, and dependent on, multilevel governance. Water connects across sectors, places and people, as well as geographic and temporal scales. As such, sound water management is not only about “what” to do, but “how”, “why” and by “whom”.

A substantial gap exists in many countries between what is stated in law and policy, and what happens on the ground. The OECD Principles on Water Governance, introduced by Akhmouch et al., provide a framework to guide policy development and implementation. They also enable gaps between policy and practice to be identified, assessed and addressed.

A special issue in Water International takes one step in that direction by evaluating practical issues when the Principles are applied in different contexts and countries.

THE MISSING LINK

Menard et al. note that water reforms involve two well-recognised layers of governance: the macro-institutional level determining policy and law, and the micro-institutional layer adapting general rules to specific local situations.



The ‘meso-institutional’ layer in between, where policy and law is interpreted to ensure consistent, inclusive implementation, is often missing. Policy and laws are often distorted and corrupted in this void, with perverse and unintended outcomes. Four factors contribute to this gap:

1. Unfit-for-purpose politics and policies

- Overambitious reforms that are not truly demanded, not reflective of stakeholder values, and beyond national capabilities.
- Lack of political commitment and changing priorities.
- Policy capture by economic or political elites.

2. Lost in translation

- External agencies focused on the policy development phase leaving governments with approved policies that are poorly understood and lack broad support.
- ‘Meso-institutions’ (local governments, regulatory agencies) assigned responsibility without the resources and training required to give policies local legitimacy.
- Insufficient capacity to monitor and enforce reforms, and inadequate channels for stakeholders to signal requests or express dissatisfaction.

3. Behaviour and culture

- No mechanisms to monitor rights, coordinate interests and eventually arbitrate between divergent, even conflicting, interests among water stakeholders.

■ Dysfunctional meso-institutions in Indonesia, where the Forestry Department declared this area off-limits to cultivation and moved the original farmers, but the surrounding townships gave people certificates to go back in and resume farming, 2007. © James E. Nickum.

“Continuous learning is important for progress; real learning comes from doing.” (Wehn et al.)

“Dynamic tensions among water players result in social learning.” (Colon et al.)

- Lack of resources to support 'representative' organizations, leading to low participation by water users and poor quality of some people claiming to be their representatives.
- Opportunistic behaviour ending in corruption and bureaucratic inertia.

4. Capability

- Complex administrative and political structures inhibiting water governance reforms.
- Lack of accountability and poor top-down discipline in the public sector.
- Poorly-coordinated external support driving services while the state lacks basic capacities to steer the water sector.
- A weak democratic culture, including debate, consultation and participation.

TAKE A BREATH AND TAKE THE PEOPLE WITH YOU

While 'meso-institutions' are necessary, Wehn et al. show that broad public support is also essential. Stakeholder involvement must go beyond mere participation to include social learning.

Effective stakeholder engagement in water governance takes time for necessary changes in behaviour and actions to evolve. Social learning requires consideration of the ethics, process, participants, roles and expected outcomes.

Asymmetries of power and information can sabotage social learning. All stakeholders must have access to the same information. Trust, ownership and continuity are the basis for achieving desired outcomes.

The analysis by Colon et al. of the pace of water policy evolution and consensus building in France, for example, suggests that dynamic tensions among water players have resulted in social learning. This interaction has played an important role driving policy changes and shaping the current French water policy framework in a way that is consistent with the OECD Principles.

STEP UP INTENT INTO ACTION

The OECD Principles on Water Governance provide a useful matrix to identify challenges as well as solutions. They are a means to manage risks in a sustainable, integrated and inclusive way. They are not an end in themselves.



■ Water Governance Initiative meeting in Berlin in June 2019
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ALIGNMENT IS THE EASY BIT

National water policies from Australia, Brazil, New Zealand and South Africa, the European Union's Water Framework Directive and the Lisbon Charter on water and sanitation were assessed against the standards captured in the OECD Principles.

Neto et al. identified which standards were already well-featured and which deserved more attention to improve water governance. The selected frameworks were assessed against four criteria: alignment, implementation, on-the-ground results, and policy impacts.

The frameworks had differing objectives. For example, the EU Water Framework Directive focused on water quality and ecological integrity, whereas South African water policy sought to rebalance access in the post-Apartheid period. Nonetheless, all had adopted OECD Principles.

However, all frameworks scored higher on their alignment with the OECD Principles than their delivery of on-ground results and policy impacts. This underlines the challenge of translating principle into practice.

The study identified four areas for improvement: policy coherence; financing; managing trade-offs; and, ensuring integrity and transparency among all decision makers and stakeholders.



■ Dust storms in drought in Boort, Victoria, Australia, 2020.
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Continuous learning is important to progress policy. Real learning comes from doing, when policy makers and stakeholders attempt to apply the Principles in real-world situations. A one-size-fits-all approach is doomed to fail if it is not adapted to reflect diverse circumstances within and across countries.

Improved water governance is linked to institutional mechanisms enabling stakeholders to be informed and provide feedback. Building such institutions is a crucial element to effective reform, facilitating policy implementation and reducing the economic and political transaction costs.

GOOD GOVERNANCE DRIVES GOOD PRACTICE

The OECD Principles on Water Governance, adopted in 2015, provide a guiding framework to government and stakeholders based on 12 essential elements to manage the complexity inherent in the water sector.

The 12 Principles were developed around three complementary dimensions: Effectiveness; Efficiency; and, Trust and Engagement.

For more information on the OECD Water Governance Initiative and Principles, go to www.oecd.org/cfe/regional-policy/water-governance-initiative



■ OECD Principles on Water Governance.