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Hydro-Hegemony: Beyond the Basin?

Concept Brief prepared for HH7 by Rebecca Farnum and the LWRG, 2014

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Zeitoun and Warner define “hydro-hegemony” as “hegemony at the river basin level, achieved through water resource control strategies such as resource capture, integration and containment”¹. The Analytical Framework of Hydro-Hegemony seeks to inform “who gets how much of the water, how and why” in transboundary water conflicts by addressing and understanding multiple forms of power and intensities and modes of conflict².

In mixing Gramscian and international relations concepts, developments in and ideas of hydro-hegemony have been (somewhat intentionally) basin-centric and state-actor-oriented thus far. The first six International Workshops on Hydro-Hegemony, too, have primarily included attention to state actions in river basins. But various researchers and practitioners have begun questioning whether the concept might be useful in other contexts³ and critiquing the original Framework’s Westphalian, state-centric approach⁴. Here, briefly, are a few suggestions for other settings in which “hydro-hegemony” might be a useful tool for analysis:

Sub-National Water Conflicts. Hydro-hegemony might be used to examine distribution of and access to water for indigenous communities, gender and racial/ethnic, or religious minorities, and refugee populations. While many of the world’s major river basins cross geopolitical borders, conflict and contention over their water resources do not – at all – occur solely between state actors. Though the power analyses originally adapted for the Analytical Framework of Hydro-Hegemony are focused on states, issues of power and privilege also dictate communities’ access to river basin resources beyond and within states.

Virtual Water. “Virtual water” refers to the water required to produce commodities (e.g., the water evapotranspired during agricultural production). Through “virtual water trade”, countries might trade “water” by importing and exporting goods requiring water for production rather than actual water. Since Tony Allan first suggested the concept, debates have arisen about whether virtual water trade improves or harms food and water security and is beneficial to all parties. Food trade and other virtual water transactions are subject to the political and power concerns found in any other interaction; the motivations behind and lingering effects of various virtual water trading relationships must therefore be considered.

Hydro-Hegemonic Concepts. Beyond the multiple physical settings in which water exists, water scholarship and policy may be subject to the same power biases as the water resources themselves. Dominant discourses may limit our understandings of water or the ways we are even able to consider the problem. Such “hydro-hegemonic concepts” include:

- the classic hydro cycle’s almost sole focus on biophysical processes, which neglects the ways that humans “move” water globally through politics and economics and ignoring water’s cultural and religious significance;
- the fourth Dublin Principle assertion of water as an economic good and its influence on policy decisions and government practices;
- Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) as a policy frame; and
- the default to surface ‘blue’ water over ‘green’ and other kinds of water, preferencing research on visible forms of water over aquifers, soil moistures, and clouds.

In each of these contexts, an Expanded Analytical Framework of Hydro-Hegemony could be used as a way to better understand the evolving processes of conflict, cooperation, cooption, and distribution – with the goal of better informing counter-hegemonic action.

¹ 2006: 435

² Ibid, 436

³ Sojamo, Keulertz, Warner, and Allan (2012), Greco (2013), Farnum (2013),

⁴ Duarte Lopes (2012); Selby; Warner and Zawahri (2012)