P86 / Policy ‘Workarounds’ and Innovations for Climate-Impacted Water Governance

Topic : Multilevel Governance and Local Policy

Chair : Debora VanNijnatten (Wilfrid Laurier University)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Climate impacts are evident in shared water basins across the world, and magnifying these challenges is the shared nature of water resources. For over a decade, there has been an emerging consensus that the world’s water challenges related to climate change actually emerge out of governance deficiencies (UN 2008; OECD 2015). Water is governed through a patchwork of regional agreements, sector-specific initiatives, and loosely coordinated international bodies alongside extensive domestic legal and policy architectures (Pahl-Wostl 2015, 2021; Gupta et.al. 2013, Bilalova et.al. 2025). Scholars and practitioners highlight growing governance and policy gaps that are compounded by climate change (Gupta et.al. 2013; Pichis-Garcia and Cueva-Rodrigues 2026), i.e., water quality governance and water allocation provisions do not allow for flexibility to respond to changing precipitation and streamflow patterns or to resource overuse; water quality and quantity governance regimes are not well integrated; surface waters are governed separately from groundwater; and top-down political considerations stifle watershed-based and locally-driven solutions (VanNijnatten and Johns 2020).

Unfortunately, the prospects for new/updated treaties, agreements or institutions to manage these problems are low, given current economic, geopolitical and domestic partisan dynamics. However, there is evidence that new policy approaches, processes, and instruments to address water challenges are emerging at all scales, and particularly at local and community levels (Shunglu et al., 2022). Public officials, water users, conservationists, Indigenous communities, scientists and other interests in shared water basins are finding new ways to collaborate through inventive policy approaches, policy processes and program delivery that transcend traditional borders (e.g., Newig et.al. 2016). They are, in essence, figuring out how to 'work around' existing governance architectures to provide shorter-term solutions and/or to innovate in ways that have the potential to fully transform old policies and governance approaches. Yet, while both policy workarounds and innovations represent goal-driven adaptations to overcome constraints, policy innovations have greater potential to alter organizations and outputs, change who is setting goals and making decisions, change decision processes, and transform our systems for managing water for the longer-term in an era of accelerating climate change (Sorensen 2017, Knagaard et.al. 2025).

This panel will explore what workarounds or novel governance arrangements and policy approaches in terms of new authorities, structures, processes, knowledge, and tools are evident or emerging in water governance to build climate resilience. We are particularly interested in dialogue across papers that considers: **how and under what conditions can new policy arrangements provide sufficient basis for solutions to our water governance weaknesses in an era of accelerating climate impacts?**

CALL FOR PAPERS

Climate change is creating adaptation challenges in water systems and transboundary regions across the globe, and there is a broad consensus that the world’s water challenges related to climate change are primarily governance deficiencies. Existing water governance architectures are simply not climate-ready. However, there is evidence that new policy approaches, processes, and instruments to address water challenges are emerging at all scales, and particularly at local and community levels (Shunglu et al., 2022). This panel will explore the nature of these innovations or ‘workarounds’ being developed at various scales, especially those grounded in community-based knowledge and engagement, in different basin contexts and under conditions of deep uncertainty in complex water governance systems. While both policy workarounds and innovations may represent goal-driven adaptations to overcome constraints, it is important to understand whether documented policy changes have the potential to alter organizations and outputs, change who is setting goals and making decisions, change decision processes, and transform our systems for managing water for the longer-term in an era of accelerating climate change (Sorensen 2017, Knagaard et.al. 2025).

We are interested in papers which explore new policy approaches, processes, and instruments that are emerging to address climate-impacted water governance challenges being observed in specific shared water basins. Ideally, panel contributions will also consider whether these adaptations represent short-term “workarounds”, understood from information systems scholarship as ways to “bypass a recognized problem or limitation (obstacle) in a system or policy” on a temporary basis (Schultz 2022); or governance and policy “innovations”, representing a more fundamental, structural change to the rules, processes, or institutions through which environmental and water governance takes place (Stenburg 2011, Popp 2019, Jacob et.al. 2020). In the current, challenging political and economic context, the panel thus intends to discuss, across different water basins, how and under what conditions any new policy arrangements that are documented by presenters can provide sufficient basis for longer-lasting solutions to our water governance and policy weaknesses in an era of accelerating climate impacts.