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CONCLUSIONS



## Evolving connections, discourses and identities in rural–urban water struggles

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### Introduction

In this special issue, we set out to analyze the dynamics, discourses, identities and material conditions that evolve with increasing urbanization and associated transformations of rural–urban (dis)connections. Considering the growing importance of cities, water is a particularly useful lens through which to understand the ways in which rural–urban territories and flows – consisting of interlaced material, social and symbolic components – are dynamically and continuously reconfigured. Focusing on water connections and disconnections that link rural and urban spaces necessarily involves attention to struggles over water use and control as well as over decision making, identities, discourses and associated politics of recognition. As many of our case studies highlight, new inequities and injustices are a key element of these changing social and material flows, connections and networks. In particular, the articles in this issue have explored the ways urbanization and rural–urban transformations reconfigure territories and power relations, with varying consequences for different water users, and the changing scales and pathways of water flows through these interlinked systems, as well as the broader hydrosocial dynamics at play.

Our introduction (Hommes, Boelens, Harris, & Veldwisch, 2019) outlined several points of departure for the case analyses in this issue. First, we described how urbanization needs to be understood as a process of constant making and remaking of multi-scalar territorial networks and interactions that extend beyond traditional city boundaries. As such, these processes reconfigure rural–urban hydrosocial territories and interlinkages physically, politically, technologically, economically and culturally. Second, the fact that urbanization is not a territorially discrete and self-contained phenomenon draws attention to the understanding that the sometimes neatly presented rural–urban dichotomy is misleading, as administratively or arbitrarily set boundaries are constantly transcended by movements of water, people, goods and ideas. Third, the connections and dynamics resulting from urbanization and cities' quest for

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secure supplies of energy, food, water and other resources produces divergent effects for different water users. This makes it important to inquire how exactly, by whom and in what ways inequalities in water access and control, representation and inclusion, and cultural-political recognition among rural and urban subjects are produced, reconfigured and materialized in new territorial reconfigurations and relationships. By bringing these contributions together in a single special issue, we are able to see multiple pathways of these changes, but also key shared elements between them. In all the cases, there is a complex retracing and reconfiguration of rural–urban geographies. In each case, focus on water flows, technologies and justice considerations provides a revealing and fruitful lens to think about the consequences and significance of these reconfigurations – for diverse locales, populations and ecologies.

The contributions to this issue provide numerous examples of how water embodies, transcends, and rematerializes important rural / peri-urban / urban connections (and sometimes disconnections). Traditional transfers of water through sturdy material structures from rural to urban areas are one example; payment for ecosystem services (PES), currently hyped as a win-win solution for both rural and urban populations, is another (see e.g. the Peruvian case analysis by Bleeker & Vos, 2019). Likewise, virtual water contained in food crops, and hydropower produced for growing urban populations, link people and territories along the rural–urban continuum through water. What all these old and new approaches have in common is that they rely on a myriad of techniques: they are produced by, and embedded in, specific institutional and legal arrangements, actor alliances, discourses, interests and technologies. With this multitude of actors and techniques that aim to secure water for urban areas and that thereby automatically reconfigure rural–urban hydrosocial territories, clashes between interests, projects or ideas are common and can lead to contestations and struggles, both fierce and subtle, but also some cases, to acceptance, compromise and adjustment.

Below, we elaborate on how the contributions of this issue exemplify and enrich our understanding of the above aspects of a political ecology of rural–urban water struggles. The contributions are diverse geographically as well as thematically and conceptually. Here we draw together the insights that they allow us to gain concerning new trends and issues. Finally, we explore a future research agenda that sets the base for working towards democratic rural / peri-urban / urban relations, where water users engage with each other on just terms.

### **Evolving rural–urban connections and technologies**

As outlined, water supply projects connect far-away rural territories with the city, impacting rural environments, livelihoods, political positioning and identities (Hommes et al., 2019, this issue). Similarly, powerful agro-export companies delivering to urban populations around the globe divert water to the detriment of nearby towns (see the case in this issue from Peru: Damonte & Boelens, 2019; see also Hommes, Boelens, Duarte-Abadía, Hidalgo, & Hoogesteger, 2018; Veldwisch, Franco, & Mehta, 2018). These findings emphasize that water supply infrastructure is an example of creating both boundaries and connections in which water flows link places, people and practices and thus shape hydro-social territories – a dynamic reconfiguration that is often deeply conflictive (Boelens, Hoogesteger, Swyngedouw, Vos, & Wester, 2016).

The articles in this issue demonstrate that claims about urban water needs and the indispensability of supply projects (or flood protection, in some cases) often have both naturalizing and universalizing components (Roth, Zwarteveen, Joy, & Kulkarni, 2018; cf. Bakker, 2010; Lynch, 2013; Mehta, 2006). First, naturalizing, in cases where lack of access to drinking water in cities is portrayed as a problem arising because of environmental conditions such as drought – carefully avoiding questions about the socio-political aspects that have caused some people to lack access while others have all they need (in this issue, see Damonte & Boelens, 2019; Goldman & Narayan, 2019; cf. Harris, Goldin, & Sneddon, 2013). Another example is the political decision to inundate rural areas to protect cities from flood risks that are presented as a natural problem or as a result of climate change (in this issue, see Hidalgo-Bastidas & Boelens, 2019; cf. Porter & Demeritt, 2012; Warner, 2010). Second, universalizing, when lack of access to drinking water and sanitation are portrayed as a universal problem of today's urban world, rather than socially and politically produced (in this issue, Torio, Harris, & Angeles, 2019; cf. Aguilera-Klink, Pérez-Moriana, & Sánchez-García, 2000). This universalizing logic also leads to the neglect of history and context-specific processes that require locally particular or tailor-made solutions rather than one-size-fits-all water policies that aim to solve urban water needs through universalistic water supply approaches. While the lack of access is certainly a problem that needs to be tackled in many places, such references to a supposed universalism (which is implicit even in the Human Right to Water; see Harris, Rodina, & Morinville, 2015) may overlook the fact that locally experienced lack of access is often an outcome of decades-old histories of complex socio-environmental and political processes that affect populations differentially. Instead, universalizing notions paper over inequalities within and between urban and rural areas, and the socio-political reasons for unequal positions within these heterogeneous spaces. The contributions to this issue have made these dynamics explicit and a focal point for analysis, rather than glossing over the context specificities, histories, and associated power dynamics.

This points to another crucial issue when discussing policies, rural–urban water struggles and newly evolving connections, discourses and identities: it bears repeating that the rural and the urban are not clear-cut, distinguishable, nor homogeneous spaces. Rural–urban studies have made clear how rural and urban domains strongly overlap and increasingly entwine. In this issue, for instance, Hoogendam (2019) accentuates the complex but crucial role of peri-urban spaces for rapidly changing water governance frameworks in Bolivia. These spaces with profoundly dynamic and porous borders have a particular importance, being situated in between the categories of 'urban' and 'rural' – in geographical terms as well as culturally, politically and normatively. Next, also within these categories, all rural and urban spaces contain a large diversity of actors, each with their particular demands, interests, identities, powers and, accordingly, access to and control over water resources. Goldman and Narayan (2019), for example, point out that 'urban' is not *one* homogeneous water-user group, but a contested space in itself, with differentiated access regimes between urban peripheries and privileged (business) areas. In a similar manner, Hoogendam's article shows how rural spaces in Cochabamba, Bolivia, harbour diverse actors and interests that are continuously changing over time, in the process reshaping hydro-territorial notions, water claims and water solutions. This clearly demonstrates the fluidity of spaces, people and water, and consequently

calls for caution in analyzing rural–urban relations along and within clear-cut categories. Indeed, as various scholars have shown, the reality is much more complex, dynamic and interwoven: people, ideas and water flows are not fixed in only one particular category of space. Wessels, Veldwisch, Kujawa, & Delcarme (2019) illustrate that historic privilege can also align very differently with social groups along the rural–urban spectrum, with power centred in a white rural elite profiting from high-tech irrigated agro-export production while successfully portraying historically disadvantaged groups of black urban dwellers, who still lack access to basic sanitation and water supply services, as polluting their water sources. Here, an analytical lens that highlights urban water flows, discourses and connections helps make these equity concerns and power dynamics clear

As these Bolivian and South African cases manifest, power dynamics often include cultural politics and specific discursive practices in which identities and legal-political-cultural categorizations of water user groups are framed, assigned, deployed and also self-constructed: between ‘the urban’ and ‘the rural’ and also inside, to either legitimize or invalidate claims to particular water resources and services. The cases of Ecuador (Hidalgo-Bastidas & Boelens, 2019), Bangalore (Goldman & Narayan, 2019), Spain (Duarte-Abadía & Boelens, 2019) and Peru (Damonte and Boelens, 2019) also show this strategic-political (and sometimes unconscious) use of identity framing to justify rural–urban water transfer projects and undemocratic water decision making: it often relates to dualistic and stereotyped images of modernity (e.g., city) and backwardness (e.g., countryside); professional expertise (e.g., scientists and hydraulic experts) and non-formal knowledge (e.g., peasants); productivity (e.g., export growers) and wastefulness (subsistence farming) – but equally relates to class-, gender-, caste- and ethnicity-related labelling. As these same contributions show, cultural-political classifications and prioritization also convey water-related identity labels that speak of ‘water consumers’ (which makes seeing these subjects as water governance protagonists very difficult), ‘clients’ (assigning water users a specific role in the market), ‘beneficiaries’ (which delegitimizes any questioning of water-transfer projects), et cetera. In many cases, such labelling or assigned roles are inscribed in, and in turn consolidated by, specific infrastructure designs, the most prominent example being the functioning water tap in urban households that creates ‘clients’ in some neighbourhoods and ‘non-clients’ in other, often historically already disadvantaged zones (see in this issue Torio, Harris & Angeles, 2019; Wessels et al., 2019). In this way, water infrastructure can be both a source and the result of particular unequal social and political positions.

The articles also show the need to look beyond those conceptualizations of rural–urban hydrosocial territories that assume rather bounded geographies and fixed, limited spaces, in order to comprehend the broader rural–urban water interactions and struggles (Hoogesteger, Boelens, & Baud, 2016; Veldwisch et al., 2018; Vos & Hinojosa, 2016). Rural areas and cities are also deeply interwoven in global dynamics, through the flow of goods, ideas, money and people from places far beyond the nearby rural areas. Water philosophies and ideologies promulgated at the global level affect cities and their water management decisions. The examples are numerous, ranging from neoliberal economic policies to Integrated Water Resources Management paradigms that may originate in global arenas but play out in particular shapes in local spaces (Harris, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2015; Zwartveen, 2015). Even though it is not the primary focus of this

issue to show the impact of global dynamics on place-bound local rural–urban territories, global aspects are inevitably to be found in a number of studies. For example, Goldman and Narayan (2019) show how global capital and ideas about solutions for Bangalore’s water scarcity affect the city’s hydrosocial regime and the different water user groups. Likewise, cases from South Africa and Peru (Wessels et al. and Damonte & Boelens, 2019) show how foreign (largely urban) market demands for certain agricultural products are reconfiguring local rural–urban spaces and relations, promoting water flows to profitable large-scale agro-business (to be exported as product-embedded ‘virtual water’) rather than to marginalized urban users. PES implementation in Lima is a clear example of how globally promoted ideas materialize and become adopted in a local context, and in turn feed back into global policy discussions as implementation examples (Bleeker & Vos, 2019). Thus, even though research might be focused primarily on local dynamics, political ecology approaches at times make visible the linked multiscale processes that entwine scales and processes from local to global (e.g., Harris, 2015; Hommes et al., 2018; Swyngedouw & Boelens, 2018).

### **Water struggles and social mobilization**

The different contributions to this issue make the politics of rural–urban water flows explicit by engaging with some of the connected discussions and the existing diversity of contestations and mobilizations, analyzing different degrees, ways and actor alliances.

First, there are those cases where urban water supply projects are fiercely contested by communities in the areas from where water is to be diverted. As Hoogendam (2019) illustrates, in the case of Cochabamba an irrigators’ movement formed to protest and halt the urban water utility’s groundwater exploitation, because it reduced the availability of water resources for irrigation. Later, this irrigators’ movement joined forces with urban citizens to oppose water utility privatization during the well-known Cochabamba Water War, engaging in both urban street protests as well as roadblocks on the city’s access roads. In a similar manner, affected populations in Ecuador tried to halt dam construction through roadblocks and judicial lawsuits, the mobilization of social networks, and alliances with critical researchers and NGOs (Hidalgo-Bastidas & Boelens, 2019). Strategies and alliances are thus always dependent on the situation, relations and resources at hand, and are dynamically adjusted according to the contexts and issues at stake.

Next to open mobilizations, disputes evolve around problem and solution framings. In the Elgin Valley in South Africa, urban grass-roots organizations and marginalized populations claim water and sanitation service from responsible authorities, not only demanding better living conditions but also challenging how farmers – in line with the above-mentioned cultural politics – depict them as water polluters jeopardizing agro-export production and the overall economy (Wessels et al., 2019). Divisions and finger-pointing are so refractory in this case that, interestingly, no clear action has been undertaken to join forces between the commercial farmers and the urban poor to reduce sanitation challenges and connected water pollution from low-income areas.

There are also more subtle ways of contesting water access and control, as well as situations in which acceptance and adjustments prevail. In Bangalore, for example, communities have ‘illegally’ accessed water from an urban water supply pipeline that

passes through their territory ('illegal water users' being another powerful legal-cultural-political identity label). They thereby materially challenged and 'reconstructed' the urban-serving water infrastructure and their assigned role as 'non-consumers' inherent in that infrastructure (Goldman & Narayan, 2019). In a different manner, in the Guadalhorce Valley in Spain, affected communities memorialize past injustices to claim recognition for them, and participation in decision making regarding new policies that transform their hydrosocial territory (Duarte-Abadía & Boelens, 2019). Here, contestations are not merely about water access and control but also about recognition of needs, identities, knowledges and pasts that have become forgotten, intentionally sidelined or sometimes literally submerged under water – communities that are actively 'unimagined' (Nixon, 2009). Such recognition efforts and identification politics exist side by side with people trying to recover, reframe and react, in order to be able to move on. As this issue's contributions show, reactions of affected water users, both rural and urban, are multiple and ambivalent, ranging from acceptance (Damonte & Boelens, 2019), to consideration of compensation for damages and losses (Torio et al., 2019), to aiming to benefit from urban-based water projects (Bleeker & Vos, 2019), to active uprising and protest (Hidalgo-Bastidas & Boelens, 2019; Wessels et al. 2019). Frequently, multiple and seemingly contradictory reactions and coping strategies coexist inside a group or even within one person.

There is thus an impressive complexity and diversity of mobilizations, day-to-day negotiations, strategies and alliances, which continuously question, renegotiate and reconfigure rural-urban water connections and relations. It is almost never a clear-cut story of deprived rural communities versus powerful urban elites but complex and cross-cutting networks of interests, relations, resources and topics that transcend rural / peri-urban / urban categories, spaces and roles. Likewise, as Wessels et al. (2019) show, actors might be present as different water users in different places at the same time: as urban water user suffering from lack of sanitation services and consequently involuntarily co-contributing to water pollution, and as agricultural wage workers depending on high-quality irrigation water for employment. Scholarship thus needs to debunk these schematic water-user-identity labels and unpack the multidirectional, multiscale complexities and micropolitical ecologies to understand justice and equity concerns (e.g., Horowitz, 2011; Rasch & Köhne, 2016; Rocheleau & Roth, 2007; Scott, 1990) and to point towards possibilities for positive rural-urban engagements.

## Concluding remarks

Given the accelerated and changing urbanization dynamics, and the shifting transformations affecting nearby peri-urban and rural territories, it is important to move beyond a focus on the urban. Instead, our analyses and policies need to consider the multidimensional linkages and concerns that connect rural, urban, and peri-urban areas, taking into account issues related to justice, social mobilizations, and shifting political and ecological dynamics. Concurrently, there is a need for new approaches and methods to study these in more careful and systematic ways. Here we do not offer a unifying framework to do so, but rather provide a series of starting points to enable movement in that direction.



In so doing, the articles of this special issue bring forward the diversity and multifaceted nature of this topic, cutting across personal, community, regional and global scales, and involving a wide range of actors. The relationship between cities, peri-urban spaces, and surrounding rural areas cannot be understood without analyzing shifting water resources and flows in conjunction with concerns related to identities, knowledges, imaginaries and discourses. As has become clear in this introduction, these facets should be considered as both source and result of the permanently negotiated and contested reconfiguration of rural–urban hydrosocial territories. The analytical focus on water flows allows analyzing, understanding and making visible their multidimensional, multidirectional and multiscalar entanglements.

Several things have stood out from the provided analyses, which we believe point to new trends and issues that should be explored in the future. First, the different case studies have exemplified the multifaceted triggers and driving forces behind urbanization processes and resulting water supply endeavours: ranging from systematic promotion of IT development and the associated upholding of a modern green illusion detached from ecological realities in Bangalore; to agro-export production in the Elgin and Ica Valleys that demands both clean, international-standard-fulfilling irrigation water as well as low-wage labourers; to nation-building efforts and commercial tourism development in Spain. This makes clear that urban development does not proceed along a natural path of development that is replicated the world over. This type of supposition is often implicit in development and urbanization reports that highlight urbanization shifts as proceeding hand in hand with societal movement from agricultural to industrial economies, from underdevelopment to development. Considering the outlined challenges associated with accelerated urbanization in general, it should first be acknowledged and then carefully analyzed how urbanization is an actively constructed phenomenon rather than inevitable or a necessary sign of ‘development’.

Second, it is imperative to explore what kind of alternative policies – not just focused on urban development – are possible, and what effects these alternative approaches might have on shifting hydro-geographies, democratic rural–urban relations and attendant equity concerns of the type we have emphasized throughout this issue. Connected to this, one future topic of research would be the particularities of linkages between rural areas and middle-sized or small cities, or providing further accent on the peri-urban and the growing ‘spaces of in-between’ that exist across the borders of urban and rural, informal and formal. The literature in the field has an inclination to focus on large cities; studying other ‘degrees’ and spaces of urbanization is equally important.

Third, besides the triggers and nature of changing rural–urban relations, the different case studies have explored a range of governance techniques that seek to steer and legitimize changing social and material entities, relations and interlinkages to shape urban–rural hydrosocial territories. Again, the diversity is striking: socio-territorial strategies of urban, peri-urban and rural actors range from consciously forceful to discursive discussions about problem framing and truth claims. Yet, one can observe that there is a decisive move, especially by the economically and politically powerful public and private actors, towards governance techniques that employ discourses about modernity, inclusion, multiculturalism and recognition policies, the Human Right to Water, the Sustainable Development Goals, et cetera. Such discourses often underpin or go hand in hand with the construction of water



infrastructure, which in turn reconfigures ecological as well as socio-political relations. Again, other water governance approaches are first and foremost directed towards creating incentives to direct individuals' behaviour in desired directions, and claim specific scientific-technical truths to realize envisaged projects for securing water supply. The agro-export companies in Ica controlling information and declaring exclusive water-use-efficiency practices are one example; the technocratic approach to Bangalore's water problems, and the incentives created for desired conservation behaviour in communities in Lima's watersheds (responding to neo-liberal PES governmentality) are other illustrations. The landscape of environmental governance is becoming increasingly complex and subtle, and different 'arts of governance' strategically combine (Foucault, 1991; cf. Dean, 1999; Fletcher, 2017; Li, 2007; Wynne-Jones, 2012), just as critiques, responses, mobilizations and 'counter-conducts' strategically diversify (e.g., Cadman, 2010; Hall et al., 2015; Horowitz, 2011; Rasch & Köhne, 2016; Scott, 1990; Valladares & Boelens, 2017).

A fourth point extends from the interest in water governance to include explicit focus on the role of different actors in shaping environmental governance. In particular, the role of state institutions *vis-à-vis* private actors has been raised by contributions throughout the issue. In some cases (for example in Spain and Ecuador – Duarte-Abadía & Boelens, 2019; Hidalgo-Bastidias & Boelens, 2019; both this volume), a strong state has had a central role in levelling the ground and implementing large-scale hydraulic projects such as dams for urban water supply and flood protection. Yet, the other cases tell of situations where it is not that clear what role state institutions have in the reconfiguration of hydrosocial territories, particularly *vis-à-vis* other actors: it appears to be increasingly difficult to enforce state regulations in the face of actions that are characterized by self-regulation by other (private) actors (Damonte & Boelens, 2019; Goldman & Narayan, 2019). In yet other cases, such as PES implementation in Lima (Bleeker & Vos, 2019), national policies and decisions set the base and impulse for new rural–urban engagement mechanisms, but remain importantly influenced by international organizations and water management paradigms (e.g., Boelens, Perreault, & Vos, 2018; Harris et al., 2013; Zwarteveen, 2015). In Lima but also in other cases, the municipality plays no particular role, which is interesting given that on a global scale there have recently been recurring calls for attention to the important role municipalities can take independent of national and broader state politics (a very recent example being the hundreds of mayors in the United States committing to uphold the Paris climate goals despite President Trump's announcement of withdrawal – Climate Mayors, 2018). The role or non-role of state institutions and/or the independence and site-presence of municipalities is thus an interesting and important issue to explore in the future, both in terms of its potential to shape a sustainable and equitable future, as well as in terms of potential risks associated with institutional/power vacuums that are filled or purposefully appropriated by other non-public actors that construct rural–urban hydrosocial territories according to their particular visions and interest.

Therefore, finally, even though the topic of rural–urban relations has already been on the research and policy agenda for some time, we believe that the continuously changing dynamics call for sustained, critical research efforts that take into account the new actors and governance modes and latest water management paradigms. Only with

a profound understanding of on-the-ground realities and power mechanisms at work will it be possible to establish steps towards democratic, equitable and sustainable rural / peri-urban / urban relations.

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