

Do river basin committees contribute to the transition from centralized management to adaptive governance? Reflections from Uruguay

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The formation of river basin organizations as multistakeholder forums involving government and non-government actors is usually a sign of a shift in governance. In Uruguay, the water reform had a legal landmark in a referendum in 2004, when the society voted to approve a Constitutional Reform which included the participation of civil society in planning, management, and control of water resources. Since the National Water Policy was passed (2009), 14 Basin and Aquifer Commissions have been formed. Presided over by the Ministry of Environment, they are composed of members of the national/subnational governments, public/private users, and civil society (social organizations, academic institutions). The objective of this research was to assess the contributions of basin committees to different dimensions of adaptive water governance, namely collaboration/coordination, participation of non-government stakeholders, and flexibility. We conducted a multiple case study approach, focusing on three basin committees in Uruguay: Laguna del Sauce Lake (formed in 2010), Santa Lucía River (formed in 2013), and Laguna del Cisne Lake (formed in 2014). Our research took place from 2019 to 2021. Methods included semi-structured interviews with participants of these committees, participant observation during the committees' sessions, and document analysis (legislation, minutes, management plans). Collaboration and coordination among actors, particularly between different government organizations (national-national, national-subnational), were identified by participants as highlights/accomplishments of the three committees. Despite progress, however, coordination still faces the challenge of fragmentation (lack of integration). The creation of basin committees as participatory forums involving non-governmental actors was also identified as an accomplishment. Nonetheless, and to varied degrees in the three cases, participants were dissatisfied with the limited decision-making power of the committees given their consultative/advisory nature, as well as the limited attention given to concerns of social organizations. The degree of flexibility of the committees (actions or responses undertaken to address certain issues or water crises) also varied from case to case. In two of the cases there is a risk of rigidity given that the operation of the basin committee depends almost exclusively on the National Water Directorate (Ministry of Environment). Our research suggests that concentration of power in upper government levels (in this Ministry), a trait of centralized and hierarchical governance, hinders the potential of basin committees in the transition towards adaptive water governance. We discuss the findings from the three cases in a comparative fashion, shedding light on the factors that enhance and hinder adaptive water governance in a Global South context.