Mathias Polak’s dissertation deals with the governance of the water sector in central northern Namibia in the context of ongoing societal transition processes. The focus here is on the contradictions between international models of good water governance and the experiences with implementation at local level. It shows how community-based management (CBM) and the commercialization of water supply are integrated into the institutions of local water governance, and the challenges that arise as a result of the inadequate adaptation of global approaches to local conditions.

Up until 1990, only sections of Namibia’s population had access to adequate drinking water. Since independence and the end of Apartheid, the Namibian government has sought to make the public water supply available to the entire population even though Namibia is the driest country south of the Sahara. In central northern Namibia, formerly also known as Ovamboland, rainfall only occurs from October to March, surface waters are hardly existent and groundwater is mostly saline. To adapt to these natural conditions, the inhabitants developed a very extensive settlement structure with shallow wells close to the households. Thus, a limited amount of potable water was available and rainwater could be collected. The then colonial power South Africa pursued a large-scale technical solution and built an open canal from the Angolan-Namibian border river Kunene. A pipeline system distributed this water primarily to military facilities, government offices and to inhabitants in some parts of the area. After independence in 1990, the Namibian government extended this system. Today, almost all villages in central northern Namibia are connected to the pipeline scheme which is one of the largest in rural Africa. Such a sophisticated infrastructure presents significant management requirements and is costly. In response to these challenges, the Namibian government is implementing a CBM system based on the international principles of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM).

These changes in the water sector should not, however, be understood as being isolated, but are part of a transition process that Namibia has been going through since 1990. Three major lines of changes are striking here. (1) A massive programme of infrastructure expansion has been undertaken, which goes beyond the expansion of the water pipeline scheme and also involves, for instance, roads, schools and hospitals. These developments have been made possible by the revenue raised from the exploitation of the country’s abundance of natural resources, especially mineral resources, but also by the extensive support the country has received from the international community. Namibia is one of the largest per capita beneficiaries of development aid, especially from Germany. However, it has not yet been possible to foster economic development from which all sections of the population benefit. (2) Processes of shifting competences to lower levels can
be found in numerous policy areas such as land use, nature conservation or health. Decentralization in the water sector is a feature of CBM. In all these sectors, committee structures play a prominent role as novel institutional arrangements. (3) The third major transition line is the increasing tendency to merge state functions and party functions. The authoritarian and neo-patrimonial tendencies within the governing party are focused on centralizing power and resources within the party hierarchy, or at best decentralizing them along the party structures. Real and far-reaching participation by the general population and thus serious consideration of critical opinions are not compatible with this.

In the water sector, the new governance arrangements have led to a fundamental change in the policy structure, in which not only certain technical and institutional aspects of the public water supply have been reorganized, but also the relationship between citizens and the state has been newly defined. These changes in the nature of statehood are discussed by political scientists under the concept of governance.

In Polak’s dissertation, the ambiguous concept of governance is used in two ways: on the one hand, as a key political sciences concept, which allows an expanded view of the state, focusing on a changed relationship between state and non-state actors. On the other hand, it is a political agenda that welcomes the dissolution of governmental steering capacities and sees opportunities for a deliberate policy-making in which the state and the citizens face new institutional arrangements. With regard to governance in practice, it is explained how the World Bank's development model of good governance has become a framework for policy in Africa and how the international paradigm of water policy, IWRM, fits into the notion of deliberative governance. Despite its history as an explanatory model of the OECD world’s corporate state, governance is suitable as an analytical concept because it allows an analysis of the African reality without understanding it as an imitation of Western institutional models.

However, with the portrayal of politics as deliberation by all parties concerned, the governance concept neglects decisive factors in politics, in particular power relations. This neglect, however, does not lead to their disappearance, but rather to their consolidation, since they are no longer part of the political conflict. The new governance models are therefore accompanied by a reduction in the scope of policy. Fundamental decision-making is no longer at the centre but rather factual issues are decided in a participatory way. The alleged strengthening of citizens’ participation is therefore a weakening.

Polak uses the case study approach as a method which suggests that it is possible to distinguish general characteristics of an area of investigation from the individual case. Three survey villages in the central north of Namibia, Amarika, Epyeshona and Onjongulume, were selected on the basis of previously defined criteria, i.e. economic level, social infrastructure and type of water supply. Two of the villages were specifically selected as extreme cases with particularly good (Epyeshona) or
bad (Amarika) water supply and infrastructural equipment as well as particularly high (Epyeshona) or low (Amarika) level of economic development. However, the third village, Onjongulume, was selected according to characteristics which are typical for central-northern Namibia. Amarika and Epyeshona were project sites of the Namibian-German research project CuveWaters.

A quantitative household survey was carried out to find comparable information on water supply and water use as well as on the economic level of households. In conjunction with numerous statistical data published by the Namibian Government, a relatively detailed picture of village life and local water use and supply emerged. However, the most important part of the data collection consisted of qualitative in-depth interviews conducted with villagers, politicians and representatives of the state authorities. The interviews were supplemented by information gathered through participant observation. Polak had a dual function as a researcher and an employee of the research project which is why he had the advantage of easier access to information while communicating with government representatives for instance.

The research shows that the households’ livelihood strategies in the study area as well as the types of water supply are very diverse. At the same time, the vernacular economy continues to be the basis for the economic survival of the vast majority of households. However, work, self-employment or transfer payments are now an indispensable complement to agriculture and the key to economic advancement. Farming is still a basic element of food security in practically every family. Wild resources have become a mere safety net for the poorest. Decades of dominant livelihood strategies have not simply disappeared but have been supplemented by new economic possibilities and can include involvement in the market economy. From the economic situation in central northern Namibia, a picture of the regional population’s water-related vulnerability can be obtained. A household is vulnerable when it combines a low economic level with a poor infrastructural situation in its environment. The infrastructure in the main settlement area of the central north is generally good, while the sparsely populated areas east and west of the Cuvelai are generally less well supplied.

The introduction of CBM and commercialization are the main reforms in the water sector since independence. CBM is seen as the implementation of the prototypical model of deliberative governance. Through local committees, citizens participate in the political process and decide on their level of water supply. At the same time, management tasks are transferred to them. These committee structures are now widely established at the local level, but at a higher level, where this is planned especially by the river basin committees, the process is ceasing.

The introduction of water prices is the second major theme of Namibian water policy. The main aim of this was to shift costs to the water users as well as to professionalize the entire water supply
through the privatization of the water utility (NamWater). However, it has become clear that NamWater is still having problems with implementing the principle of payment for water. Because of the social importance of water supply, there has been political intervention, for instance, to prevent NamWater from cutting off customers in default. As a result, NamWater continues to operate at a loss. These losses must then be borne by its owner, i.e. the state.

The third major reform theme since independence with regard to the water sector is decentralization. Of particular interest is the relationship between Rural Water Supply (RWS), as a department of the Ministry of Water, and the Regional Councils or the Councilors elected in their constituencies. Theoretically, the regional administrations have broad powers in infrastructure planning. In practice, however, the Water Ministry decides on construction measures as it controls the financing and implementation. The Councilors enjoy considerable authority, on the one hand, due to the close links with the SWAPO government party, and on the other, due to their direct legitimation through elections. Hence, they are indispensable partners for RWS when it comes to interacting with local communities. However, Councilors do not necessarily agree with the policy of RWS, particularly with regard to the widespread introduction of water prices. The cooperation was unproblematic as long as it dealt with the massive expansion of the pipeline scheme. However, with its near completion and the focus on the enforcement of water prices, the differences are becoming more prominent.

In line with the ideas of deliberative governance, a whole series of other committees have been set up within the framework of decentralization in Namibia, for instance Community Development Committees, Regional Development Coordinating Committees and River Basin Management Committees. In reality, however, Namibian politics functions much more according to classic top-down management. On paper, the Namibian water sector would appear to be a model of comprehensive implementation of modern governance. In practice, those strategies which are in the direct interest of the central government, such as commercialization, are the ones being promoted.

The inherent weakness of the local committees is the main reason for their problems with the accomplishment of the tasks assigned by the state. This weakness results mainly from the fundamental problems with the committees, such as the unwillingness to cooperate with the population and capacity problems as well as the character of the committees as newly created political actors with no historical basis. The committees can only overcome the resulting problems in enforcing the rules by involving superior authorities. This leads to a hierarchical relationship between the committees and the state authorities, in particular RWS. Water Point Committees (WPC) and Local Water Committees (LWC) see themselves as being bound to RWS because they are not in a position to carry out assigned tasks without drawing from RWS’s resources.
The relationship between committees and local headmen is also characterised by questions of authority. The weakness of the WPCs can be overcome in individual cases by a close involvement of the headman in the work of the committee. However, there are no government guidelines on this. The mechanism of bringing in the headman as an additional member is too weak and undefined. Thus, it comes down to the willingness of the individual headman to become involved in the CBM. The traditional authorities, however, have already been very critical of the principle of water prices which is why their commitment to the implementation of these water prices is not to be expected.

Ultimately, the implementation of CBM has been reduced in the eyes of the users to the aspect of commercialization, i.e. the introduction of water prices. WPCs are not the result of a collective choice process, in which users form self-determined institutions of resource management. They have not emerged from a bottom-up process, but were clearly set up top-down by the government to create a decentralized administrative structure for commercialization. Thus the WPCs are now seen as actors in a market process, which reduces them to the role of retailers on behalf of NamWater. RWS is thereby tasked with facilitating these sales. This greatly reduced role of local committees is a major reason for the barely existent deliberative aspects of committee work.

On the basis of his conclusions, Polak then makes recommendations that have the potential to remedy some of the defects in the design of Namibian water governance. The aim here is to demonstrate, in particular, contradictions between government policy and the local framework conditions. The goal of the Namibian policy should be to adapt the IWRM concept more closely to the conditions in its own country and thus to make the local structures more robust. (1) The lack of the local committees’ enforcement power could be countered by the greater involvement of traditional authorities in water management. For example, elders’ councils could be conceived as the highest instance of WPCs, which would be activated particularly in conflicts. (2) An alternative way of increasing the efficiency of local committees could be the commercialization of local water management. The sale of water falls no longer to an elected committee but to an entrepreneur who could also sell goods of daily necessity. Such a system would, however, completely abandon the idea of a self-governed local water management. (3) A further recommendation is the free basic supply of drinking water for the poorest. A solution to the problem of a poverty test is, for instance, provided by the free delivery of a basic amount of water to each household. (4) To reduce financial pressure on poor households, traditional water sources could be strengthened or new water sources could be developed. These techniques comprise, for instance, rain and floodwater harvesting or the improvement of hand-dug wells. (5) By means of decentralized water harvesting techniques, possibilities could be created to engage in horticultural or other income-generating measures, for
example fish farming, which would in turn strengthen the vernacular economy.

The starting point for Polak’s dissertation was a critical review of ostensibly universal political concepts, in particular the concept of IWRM which has been strongly influenced by the governance discourse. The water reforms in Namibia are a neo-liberal project in the Foucauldian understanding, since the introduction of market control instruments has been pre-politically defined and implemented via soft instruments of control. Ultimately, highly relevant problems with the new local water governance structures have been identified and these prevent those structures from actively taking on additional tasks and becoming truly relevant actors in local politics.

Polak’s work is one of a number of dissertations that were written in the run-up to or during the research project CuveWaters and dealt with several aspects of the water supply in central northern Namibia. In addition to Steffen Niemann’s\textsuperscript{1} anthropogeographical work on water-use practices and the reviewer’s\textsuperscript{2} work on technological transformation potentials of alternative water supply techniques, Polak’s dissertation provides an excellent complement from a political sciences point of view. Polak delivers a profound as well as comprehensive analysis of the political and institutional conditions and shows great expertise based on experiences and observations made on the ground. His findings are absolutely up-to-date and he realistically captures the local governance challenges in the water sector. However, one could argue that Polak overestimates the role that traditional authorities could play in improving the enforcement power of the WPCs, e.g. due to unclear power structures which might cause subsequent problems. Furthermore, more attention could have been paid to the lack of education and capacities at the local level which is certainly a major obstacle to decentralization processes, particularly in a country with only two million inhabitants. Nevertheless, unlike many other works of the social sciences and humanities, the strength of Polak’s work is its application orientation: Polak provides feasible suggestions for the improvement of local water governance in central northern Namibia.

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