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The river basin organization. Reflections on politics and performance.


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“For the last 25 years, prescriptions of the water policy literature have centered upon two themes. The first is that “the watershed” is the appropriate scale for organizing water resource management [...]. The second is that since watersheds are regions to which political jurisdictions almost never correspond, and watershed-scale decision making structures do not usually exist, they should be created” (Schlager and Blomquist, 2000) => RBOs, and preferably strong RBOs.

River basin organizations popular



**Idea development
Invention, recombination,
exploration**

**Evaluation: effective,
impactful and lasting?**

**Diffusion: emulation,
adaptation, exploitation**

Governance innovations have constituencies (Voß, 2007). They occur in an 'innovation triangle' (Jordan and Huiteima, forthcoming in Environmental Politics)



- How have river basin organizations been designed and how were their boundaries chosen?
- Who were propagating and resisting the founding or reform of river basin organizations?
- How well do the river basin organizations function, in terms of democracy, coordination, and environmental effectiveness?

The three questions for the book “The Politics of River Basin Organisations” (EE, 2014)



Four ideal types distinguished on the basis of Ostrom's rules:

1. Autonomous RBO (independent position, controls over water, own finances)
2. Agency type RBO (derived position, founded for enhancing cost effectiveness, set budget)
3. Coordinating type RBO (limited authority, plan making focus, derived and limited budget)
4. Partnership type RBO (authority shared, voluntary entry and exit, common interest focus)

Our proposed typology for analyzing design

Much activity at the international level (World Water Forums, world bank, European Union); but also national actors (Ministries of Environment, etc.)

Strategies (Huiteema and Meijerink, 2009):

1. Idea development
2. Coalition building
3. Windows of opportunities
4. Venue manipulation/shopping
5. Networking

Who is advocating RBOs?



How to evaluate performance?

1. Democracy: accountability, legitimacy
2. Coordination – avoiding contradictory policies, conflicts, redundancy?
3. Environmental effectiveness: e.g. does water quality improve?

Evaluating RBOs?

Global	Jaspers and Gupta
Mackenzie River Basin, Canada	De Loë and Morris
Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, USA	Lach and Calvert
Westcountry Rivers Trust, UK	Cook, Benson and Inman
Erftverband, Germany	Hüesker and Bernhardt
National discussions in Portugal	Thiel and Guerreiro de Brito
Breede–Overberg Catchment Management Agency, S. Africa	Meissner and Funke
Western Bug River Basin Administration + Council, Ukraine	Hagemann and Leidel
Lower Kunduz and Taloquan RBAs + Councils, Afghanistan	Warner and Thomas
River Basin Councils + Administrations, Mongolia	Dombrowsky, Houdret and Horlemann
Ping River Basin Committee + Mae Kuang Sub-basin WG, Thailand	Ganjanapan and Lebel
Murray–Darling Basin Authority; M-D Basin Ministerial Council	Ross and Connell

Cases in the book



Chapter	Type(s) found
Canada	Coordinating
USA	Agency
UK	Partnership
Germany	Agency
Portugal	Autonomous
South Africa	Agency
Ukraine	Agency
Afghanistan	Agency/coordinating
Mongolia	Coordinating/agency
Thailand	Coordinating/coordinating
Australia	Agency/coordinating/coordinating

Empirical findings: designs observed (not randomly selected)!



How designed?

- 1. Geographical delineation of RBOs is a matter of hydrological criteria, mixed with financial, practical, and political-institutional considerations**
- 2. In few of the countries studied did we find autonomous types of RBOs. The set of governance functions RBOs fulfil is often limited**
- 3. Partnerships are found in small basins; as the basins grow in size the coordinating type becomes prevalent**



Who was involved, what were their strategies?

1. Confirmed that the designing of RBOs is a highly political process, reflecting diverging interests
2. Data is a key issue/resource in design
3. RBO discourse global, donor agencies carry it to countries like the Ukraine, Mongolia, Afghanistan
4. Role of downstream jurisdictions: pushing for greater authority



What were the effects?

1. Obviously difficult to judge, given the attribution problems
2. Goals and tasks vary considerably, but they are often quite modest so the potential contribution is small
3. Resources allocated to RBOs are often very limited, hindering performance.
4. Very moderate effects, esp. in an environmental sense
5. Importance of existing institutions (hindering, ameliorating).

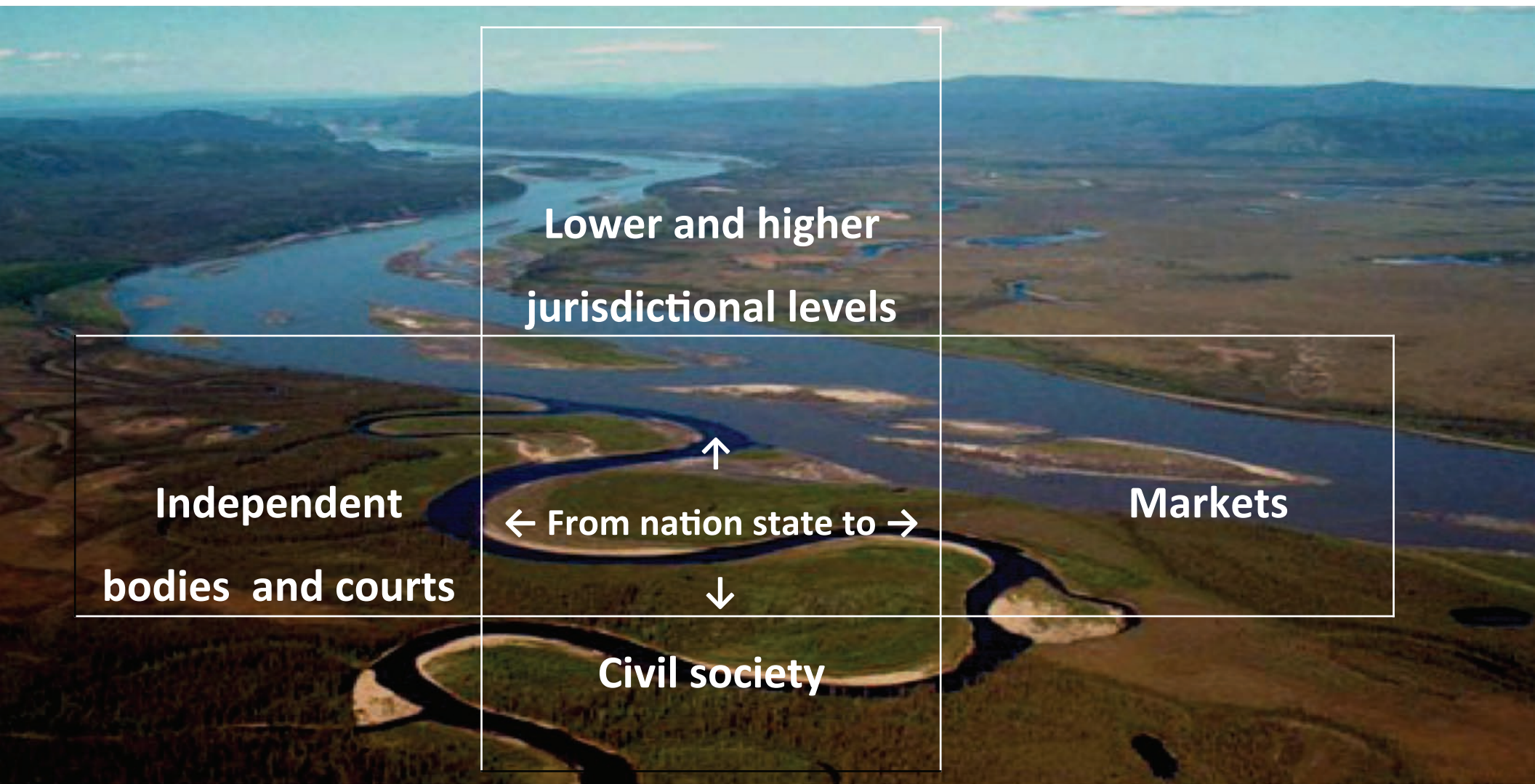
Empirical observations on performance



Implications?

1. RBOs are not a panacea
2. Their introduction not on a blank slate – layering & interplay
3. Design dilemmas – e.g. between centralization and input legitimacy, feasibility and effectiveness
4. Time needed to prove the added value often not given

Some reflections



The design question. So what is an RBO exactly? Shifts in governance