



Urban Environmental Governance – New Actors and Power Relations?

By Alexander Follmann



Being swamped by receiving millions of liters of untreated wastewater daily, the majority of India's rivers suffer from a high degree of pollution. Degraded to foul-smelling drains filled with industrial, domestic and agricultural effluents, India's rivers, no doubt, create serious ecosystem and health problems. Thus, the rejuvenation of India's rivers is a major challenge. The country's growing mega-cities show "especially threatening scenarios of deterioration of human quality of life and environmental degradation" (Hust 2005:1). In particular, the urban poor often live in highly polluted, unhealthy and vulnerable urban environments.

Certainly, environmental degradation of rivers is a common problem in fast growing cities of the global South, but North India's river *Yamuna*, a major tributary to the wholly river *Ganges*, is one of the saddest examples. Using the river basin as the territorial unit to analyse water governance "enables us to understand the complexity of the system" and we are able to take into account all kinds of water uses along the river as well as "the variety of types of relationships and interactions" between the different riparian demands (Miranda et al. 2011: 14). The river Yamuna, which originates from the glaciers in the Himalayas of Uttarakhand, flows for 1,376km through Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi before merging with the Ganges at Allahabad. Thus, at first sight we are able to define at least five different riparian states: Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and NCT of Delhi. However, we also need to include Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, since more than 70% of the river's catchment area is located within these two states (CPCB 2006: 12). Scaling up to the Ganges river basin the Yamuna is just a sub-basin of the watershed. Scaling down to the city level the Yamuna flows 22km via the urban area of Delhi providing surface drinking water as well as recharging

groundwater aquifers. The river, however, suffers from an insufficient flow of water and an extremely high degree of pollution. Approximately 94% of the river's water is channelled onto the agricultural fields of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, via a system of barrages and irrigation canals (CPCB 2006: 14). Only 4% is designated for domestic use and 2% for industrial users (Ibid.). Inter-state water disputes remain omnipresent. In particular, Delhi accuses Haryana of not releasing an adequate amount of water. Additionally, clashes about the water quality in the river Yamuna challenge the inter-state relationships. Remarkably, Delhi's untreated sewage is responsible for about four fifths of the total pollution load of the river Yamuna (CPCB 2006: 19).

Yet, currently laws and regulations from the colonial times still hold "vested control over rivers and other surface waters" in India (Iyer 2010: 150) and effective measures to clean up the river Yamuna are not in sight. Major investments have been made to rejuvenate the Yamuna under the Yamuna Action Plan (YAP) river restoration programme, a bilateral project of the governments of India and Japan. However, up to today YAP has failed to clean up the Yamuna. Laying of interceptor sewers along Delhi's major drains to discharge the wastewater to sewerage treatment plants is planned in phase III of YAP. It remains in question though, whether the interceptor project will be successful or whether YAP will fail due to corruption and conflicts between different authorities.

This short paper raises the question of who is responsible for environmental conservation within fast-growing mega-cities. Are new actors and power relations needed to achieve better urban environmental governance? Or is it an explicit task of the state to protect the urban environment?

Since the term *governance* has become very popular in a wide range of fields and its meaning is often unclear, we will first define what we mean when using the term *urban*

environmental governance. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) provides the following definition: “Urban governance is the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, plan and manage the common affairs of the city. It is a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and cooperative action can be taken. It includes formal institutions as well as informal arrangements and the social capital of citizens” (UN Habitat 2002: 14). Thus, governance always refers to the coexistence of collective regulations via civil society organizations (like NGOs), cooperation between public and private actors and sovereign government decision making (Mayntz 2004). The term *governance*, thus, implies that the state is no longer able to deal with the challenges of fast-growing cities on its own. However, despite the impression created by the talk of a shift from government to governance, the important role of governments should not be ignored. Since it is the state who defines the rules of the game, there can be no governance without government. Governance, therefore, more precisely describes the “evolving forms of government and regulation that transcend those based on traditional state hierarchies and market systems” (Castro 2007: 102).

Analysing urban environmental governance with respect to rivers hence requires a deconstruction of water governance practices. The interactions between different levels of government, political parties, private businesses, special interest groups (e.g. unions, peasant movements or religious groups), international agencies (e.g. international financial institutions, multilateral development banks) and a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) representing the civil society, have to be analyzed (Castro 2007: 107). Certainly, when a river like Yamuna crosses several state borders and faces all kinds of different demands, environmental governance becomes very complex as multiple actors on different scales are involved. As rivers (or nature in general), however, have no voice to speak for themselves and no power – disregarding natural hazards (e.g. floods) – to influence decision making, environmental protection has always depended on the performance of the state. Environmental urban governance does not deny the

leading role of the state and its legislative powers. Therefore, we understand *urban environmental governance* as all forms of governance, whether by the state or other actors, whether formal or informal, dealing with urban environmental geographies. If the state, however, fails to protect the environment and instead follows a policy of deregulation and externalization of state functions, new actors promoting environmental sustainability become even more important. Who are these actors, speaking up on behalf of the environment, if not the state?

In India, NGOs have become important actors in urban governance, promoting human rights, social justice, citizen participation, anti-corruption, and environmental conservation (Baud and de Wit 2008: 2). Across the country environmental NGOs have been reasonably successful in challenging urban environmental degradation through awareness campaigns and judicial activism (see e.g. Veron 2006). Thus, environmental NGOs can make a difference especially when linking multiple scales and reminding government agencies of their responsibilities. Furthermore, local initiatives like rain-water harvesting and the restoration of old water bodies are already part of national water programs, but “legal changes must be made to enable and facilitate the role of the civil society, and changes must be brought about in the thinking and attitudes of the bureaucracy” (Iyer 2010: 150). On the other hand, money from international funds provided to protect and rejuvenate the environment needs to be spend wisely. All this seems to be possible if the state acts as a trustee holding the environmental resources in a public trust for the people while legislating, regulating, allocating and managing different demands (Ibid.).

The case of the river Yamuna in Delhi outlines the multiplicity of demands and actors being involved in environmental urban governance – especially in water governance. Definitely, new forms of urban environmental governance are needed, but since the environment is still dependent on the state to reinforce environmental legislation on paper as well as on the ground, the state must remain a strong trustee for the environment in India and across the world.

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