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(EN)GENDERING WATER DIPLOMACY

Gendering hydro-diplomacy in Central America

BY MAUREEN WALSCHOT · 05/10/2021

The participation of women in negotiation processes can lead to more sustainable transboundary water agreements. The fourth post of the series “(En)Gendering water diplomacy” explores how to tap this potential in Central America.



Daysi Carrillo, environmental activist in the Cabañas region of El Salvador, and a member of MUFRAS-32, a coalition that successfully blocked a gold mine that threatened to pollute the Titihuapa River. Author: James Rodríguez (Source: ONUAIDS)

Central America is a region interconnected through 23 international watercourses and 18 transboundary aquifers. As such, the joint management of transboundary water resources often lies in a difficult balance of different interests and uses between the relevant riparian actors. The peace process case studies from the Council of Foreign Relation have pointed at how the participation of women in negotiation processes leads to agreements and treaties that last longer. The active participation of women in water diplomacy is therefore critical to ensure the sustainable management of shared water resources, peace and stability. However, the role of women in Central America is subject to particularly heavy patriarchal patterns, and women often occupy a secondary place in the private and public sphere. Building on existing studies on gender mainstreaming in water management (see the latest report by Global Water Partnership (GWP) and UNEP-DHI for example), this blog post discusses the opportunities and challenges of gendering water diplomacy in Central America.

Water Security and Gender in Central America

Due to volcanic mountain ranges crossing the region, Central America experiences great diversity in terms of climate and natural environments. In the 1990s, rural development

policies and environmental conservation measures were implemented to enhance transregional cooperation between the seven countries. Since then, the national legal systems for water governance have been developing sound and explicit national regulations that serve as a pre-condition for transboundary cooperation. These efforts aim to support cooperation and joint management that is critical to minimize tensions and unsustainable use in the internationally shared water resources of the region. However, the impacts of these actions have been limited. According to Global Water Partnership (GWP), while the region is endowed with water resources, water scarcity remains a concern in the region given the lack of mechanisms and actions regarding water resources allocation and development. Moreover, vulnerability to climate change, such as droughts, is a critical issue in Central America. As stated by Sindico, despite the existence of several joint management projects, cooperation over transboundary water is still nascent in the region. Moreover, GWP reported that “the intergovernmental instruments signed so far have proved insufficient to establish and implement agreements for managing and integrating development of international watercourses”.

Gendering water diplomacy through a local and transnational approach

Given this lack of institutional capacity and joint instruments, it is harder to accommodate conflicts of interest between the different stakeholders. As long as these elements are missing, they will not only limit the transboundary aspect of integrated water resources management but can also impact the various modalities and dynamics of gender in the context of water security in Central America. Because environmental insecurities are different for men and women, the relation between the environment, security and gender is a relevant issue to address. Furthermore, because regular discourses shape the policy making process, bringing in new perspectives and approaches to address security and the environment in the most relevant way possible is crucial, as does the gendering of water diplomacy. Therefore, we assess the spaces for gendered participation and policies in the context of Central America transboundary water governance.

The gendering of transboundary water diplomacy in Central America is shaped by formal institutions and non-state actors. These practices interact with the notion of regionalism, where actions and solutions are taken at the regional level to face shared insecurities. Regionalism, however, experiences some particularities in Latin America and thus in Central America. For instance, as stated by Hoffmann, regional organizations tend to regulate less in the areas of gender and more generally, social policies, and literature has

rarely assessed the role women's leadership at this scale. Furthermore, within Latin America, regional organizations are characterized by weak institutional frameworks with very limited supranational powers. These organizations often have regional parliaments, with representatives which are rather indicated from the national parliaments than directly elected. Controlled by national governments and with weak institutional power, these regional organizations are made more of intergovernmental diplomacy than of regional integration. As a result, according to Malamud, regionalism in Latin America is characterized by a phenomenon called 'presidential diplomacy'. This means that Presidents have a great influence on the member states' foreign policies within the regional organizations, where they often try to advance their respective agenda. Finally, Latin America is known for the involvement of its civil society, be it in social movements, NGOs or advocacy networks. The activities of these actors on the topics of gender and human rights have led to the creation of norms and policies in the area of gendered violence, abortion or family issues. Given these three main characteristics, two interesting avenues for gender participation emerge from Latin American regionalism, namely the role of women leadership in the presidencies and civil society. These two areas represent opportunities for women leadership in hydro-diplomacy. However, the role of women leadership in civil society must be further addressed.



Young people from Latin America and the Caribbean at the Regional Conference of Adolescence and Youth to Beijing+25, a forum to involve them in spaces of decision making and political participation. (Source:

ONU AIDS)

Scholars such as Medina have illustrated the importance of localized transnational networks in Central America. We thus highlight the possibilities for women leaders from civil movements to have an increasing role in hydro-diplomacy in the region. Gendering water diplomacy is a great opportunity to go over non-decisions and/or status quo at the national levels. Indeed, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance argues that “the commitment of feminist organizations and women from political institutions, including international and regional organizations, and the forging of alliances has been key to explaining progress”. Transboundary cooperation at the local level may give space to the prevention of conflict at the regional level, therefore giving great importance to water diplomacy emanating from the civil society level. However, as illustrated by Koff, these opportunities also come with challenges, as “local transboundary water politics generally reflect local power (a)symmetries, while regional norms highlight the shared values of cooperation”. Furthermore, Koff, Maganda and Kauffer argue that the implementation of norms decided at the regional level can therefore face some resistance “due to the disconnect between localized power-based discussions and regional influence-based norms”. Gender can also be a component of these local asymmetries.

A potential solution to overcome these gendered asymmetries in water management at the local level can lie in the empowerment of a regional institution in Central America such as the Central American Integration System (whose members are all Central American countries plus the Dominican Republic), which could represent a tool to enhance local and transnational female leadership in water diplomacy. For instance, in 2013, SICA approved the Regional Policy for Gender Equality and Equity of the System Central American Integration. This regional public instrument enhances gender equality and non-discrimination against women through the implementation of measures in seven strategic areas. The sixth area is dealing with the political participation and decision-making. It establishes a regional roadmap for national legislation to coincide with the international legal mechanisms adopted by the States in matters of political rights and citizenship of women. According to Ayala, it has also shown an impetus with the creation of the Agenda for sustainable water use in 2017, that aims at dealing with water issues as a matter of discussion and cooperation. The development, integration and merging of both agendas is now the next crucial step to ensure an effective gendering of water diplomacy at all levels in the region.

Therefore, avenues exist for greater inclusion in regional decision-making over transboundary basins. Woman leadership from localized transnational networks combined to regional instruments enhancing gender equality and non-discrimination

against women create opportunities for gendering water diplomacy in Central America.



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