



Water and Culture Policies: An Illustrative Case of Updated Collaborative Transformation Policies

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Water and culture have been closely linked to human beings since ancient times. These connections were often lost in the process of industrialization. New water culture policies and initiatives reflect new attempts at collaborative transformation. They provide a way to transcend the current crisis-management discourse and related narrow policy answers offered by policy makers in Europe. The EU foresight scenarios describe potential future developments. They can serve as a starting point for cross-sectoral cooperation and policy making that can help solve the current and upcoming challenges and make it possible to take advantage of opportunities. Collaborative ecosystems need to be brought forward by policy makers and leaders as well as staff in culture and water organizations. This can change the dominant practice of policy making, which is sectored in silos and often can't provide sustainable solutions. A set of interlinked initiatives provide a basis for integrated policy making and multi-stakeholder collaboration that can bring about positive change.



< Fig. 1 Changing water-related practices in cities: Miroir de l'Eau, Bordeaux (Source: Tony Hisgett, CC BY 2.0 , via Wikimedia Commons).

Introduction

The twenty-first century's major transitions have become increasingly apparent since the acute phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, the effects of the digital revolution and of climate change have become increasingly tangible and affect water and culture in ways that policy makers must address. Agribusiness practices pose additional danger to water resources. Agricultural heritage is not well protected as an intangible asset.

Major research on transformation scenarios was already being published before the pandemic. These publications also include the EU foresight work being carried out by the European Commission. However, this knowledge remained limited for a long time to exchanges among experts. The EU foresight scenario report (European Commission 2021a) refers to main disruptive elements, namely shifts in global order and demography, digital hyperconnectivity and technological transformation, climate change and other environmental challenges as well as pressure on democratic models of governance and values.

The pandemic and its major disruptions challenged most of the (cultural) policy makers. They demonstrated a lack of preparation concerning risk awareness and appropriate institutional settings and plans. This absence, and the types of policy responses implemented, underline an emergency and crisis-driven approach. A crisis-response focus entails, for example, the use of funds budgeted for culture or water policy objectives for emergency help rather than for structural changes.

The reconstruction of historic buildings after inundation in flood-prone places illustrates this. Future-oriented policies would focus on preven-

tion and innovation, however, current policy often focuses on rebuilding. Both prevention and innovation require an in-depth understanding by decision makers about future risks and opportunities. Such an approach needs updated water and culture policies adapted to the specific requirements linked to the future scenarios ahead. Which types of policies and actions should be considered?

Transformative Frameworks for Active Water and Culture Policies

Culture and water policies aim to generate positive impacts on society and economy or to prevent damage to the population. A lack of reflection on future scenarios by policy makers, in organizations as well as by individuals, avoids generating the desired effects and risks harming the objective of a sustainable and just transition. Policy makers need to understand the underlying dynamic frameworks in which their action is expected in order to develop future policies that advance positive societal and economic developments.

These interrelations can be best illustrated with one of the key dynamic elements on Earth – water. Irrigation systems or (historic) port infrastructures address the dynamic nature of water as such and by the means of political frameworks. Investment in water-related infrastructures like dams aims at transforming these contexts in favor of the investors and in the best cases also of the population. Ignoring rising water levels due to the effects of climate change, for example, will cause undesired effects and require policy makers to focus on crisis intervention. These effects in turn can hinder the development of preventive measures. Crisis intervention is also likely to negatively impact investments in innovation to achieve an updated



^ Fig. 2 Cultural heritage and water: Jardin des Grands Explorateurs, Marco Polo et Cavalier de la Salle, Paris (Source: Sylvia Amann, 2022).

sustainable water (management) culture.

From a European point of view, future policy making should be based on the major EU scenarios. In the context of the European Union, the EU Joint Research Centre identified main scenarios of future action and all link to water and culture policies (European Commission 2017).

The first scenario imagines shifts in global order and demography, including a fundamental increase in the global population as well as a decline of 16 per cent of the available workforce in the EU. This would mean that scarce water resources globally will generate migratory movements and related intercultural challenges on the European continent.

According to the second scenario, climate change and other environmental challenges

will impact the EU Member States and will have considerable further effects on biodiversity and food production. As a result, the strong impact of climate change on the water cycle will also cause water-related damages to historic coastal cities. These changes will affect opportunities for cultural tourism and creative industries.

The third scenario assumes that the pressure on democratic models is accelerating and that it challenges governance and values. Water and heritage commons are topics related to the stabilization of democratic models. An understanding that the whole population co-owns common water and cultural heritage, morally and financially, is far from universally shared. Its greater acceptance would contribute to more stable democratic models.

In the fourth scenario, digital transformations



^ Fig. 3 Arts-based communication on water-related challenges: Bruges Whale Sculpture (Source: Falk2, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons).

comprise hyperconnectivity as well as recent developments like the metaverse and artificial intelligence. These are also linked to cooling systems that require a continuous supply of water to ensure the use of the digital platforms by the creative economy as well as digital audiences.

Further reflections on these frameworks bring forward a critique of the current crisis-response approach and the necessity for a shift toward the notion of “permanent transformation.” The context for water and culture policy makers is permanently changing, as a result, for example, of new types of water pollution involving medical goods during the pandemic and evolving use

patterns of the Black Sea shores and beaches due to the war in Ukraine. These changes can be more or less disruptive. In the years 2020 to 2022, many policy makers focused on coping with immediate crises. At the same time, many policy makers lost sight of the need for a wider perspective based on permanent transformation.

Collaborative Water Culture Ecosystems

Policy makers need to be aware of transformation scenarios; they also need to embrace collaborative approaches due to the cross-sectoral nature of all future challenges. Addressing

connected problems with silo-type actions will not produce the required solutions. Water culture policies are excellent examples. Arts, culture and heritage have considerable potential to (re)connect people with the central role of water in human survival. Culture policy and water policy makers should design and implement forward-looking policy approaches together. However, this kind of collaboration is to a large extent not yet in place in Europe.

In analyzing a wide range of EU water scenarios and related policy papers, it becomes apparent that culture, arts and heritage concerns have not played a major role in defining or implementing sustainable future policies and actions. The EU foresight scenarios highlight the need for international ocean governance in a sustainable and peaceful manner (European Commission 2017). Nonetheless, this EU paper does not reflect further on the role of soft power, including sustainable international cultural relations. A new integrated approach to international relations could be applied to many situations, such as a coordinated attempt to manage heritage and water in international river delta systems.

The so-called Water Mission (European Commission 2022) in the EU research program “Horizon Europe” aims to encourage integrated approaches to addressing major future water-related challenges in the European Union. However, the documents describing the focus of the mission do not include the related positive and negative impacts of culture. (Un)sustainable (cultural) tourism is one example.

A study of structural risks published by the European Parliament (2020) fails to link non-tech innovations for water use to the considerable potential of arts and creative industries to influence water use patterns. Collaboration between policy makers and administration is needed and

conversations need to take place that will establish better cross-sectoral links and to transcend policy-making silos.

A collaborative system needs a collaborative mindset based on horizontal partnerships as well as collaborative individuals, organizations and governance. However, these collaborative ecosystems are difficult to bring into practice. Vertical relations of power persist, generating uneven access to resources, knowledge and the power to make decisions. Water management companies and their relationship to local populations are an example of these complex relations of power.

Furthermore, potentially conflicting objectives related to water use like the generation of hydropower or the protection of sustainable agricultural practices near rivers are complex frameworks for potential sustainable horizontal partnerships. These are further accentuated by party politics that pervade many public administrations and create discouraging settings for those individuals interested in developing cross-sectoral initiatives. How can we remedy this unfavorable situation?

Potential Next Steps for Policy Makers and Stakeholders

Collaborative transformation policies – in the area of water and culture or other thematic fields – require, first, awareness of the need for cross-sectoral cooperation. Also, enhanced cross-sectoral collaboration is required to better understand how the different topics are linked and need consideration in policy making. Thematic interlinkages include the concepts of (water, heritage) commons and democracy and the cultural dimensions of migration flows caused by water scarcity. Systematic studies



^ Fig. 4 Current leisure cultures related to water: pool parties (Source: Club Skirts Dinah Shore Weekend, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons).

of the transversal nature of future scenarios related to water and culture are not yet taking place in the European Union. Such research would have the potential to increase the understanding of water and culture ecosystems and provide the necessary basis for science-based (policy) action.

In terms of the development of integrated water culture policies, common topics of interest include the reduction of plastic litter in oceans or the management of transnational river basins and related heritage practices. Furthermore, the links between non-urban practices in (agri) culture and the international cultural dimension of port cities merit the attention of both culture and water policy makers. Guiding values for common action need to be discussed and agreed upon between the two sectors. They

might include a resolve to overcome touristification that infringes upon water and heritage commons. With such an approach, the social dimensions and the people's needs in terms of water and cultural heritage can be brought to the fore.

In addition, culture policy and water policy should be built on longer-term perspectives. Both aim at ensuring that these precious resources remain available for future generations. Cultural changes related to water-use patterns are needed as the current use of water reflects the dominating value systems in our societies. An illustrative example is the swimming pool culture in Europe promoted by the fashion industry as well as by the music industry that provides cool songs for the pool party.

The relationship between populations and the resource of water needs to adapt to changing conditions and to expected future water scenarios. The creative industries are one sector with considerable potential to generate new narratives for updated water-related lifestyles. These cultural changes are areas of urgent action. Furthermore, the understanding of the global and territory-specific dimensions of future water challenges need to be better addressed. This territorial perspective relates also to international cultural relations and decolonization. Additional linked topics include just transition (European Commission 2021b), sustainable development and global solidarity.

All those working in (public and private) organizations can be agents of positive change. This understanding is not yet sufficiently anchored in many institutions. New collaborative transformation policies are only feasible when operators are willing to and have the necessary skills to cooperate across silos. Policy makers should understand this crucial need and responsible for providing the required frameworks. For example, the European Commission (2019) requires “interservice consultations” – that is, directorate-generals of the European Commission must consult other directorate-generals on proposals with which they have an interest. On another policy level, the OECD supports stakeholders with a whole set of tools and good practice examples regarding mission-driven cross-sectoral innovation initiatives (Larue 2021).

These initiatives show a certain will to encourage cross-sectoral collaboration. However, considerable further innovation in policy making (settings) is needed. It is time to imagine updated practices. These collaborative practices should involve a wide range of strata of the (global) population. These cross-sectoral policies need stakeholders able to understand that

major transformation scenarios of the twenty-first century can be only addressed together in a cross-sectoral, collaborative and sustainable manner.

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