



# The politics of river basin planning and state transformation processes in Nepal

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## ABSTRACT

Since the late 1990s, river basin planning has become a central idea in water resources management and a mainstream approach supported by international donors through their water programs globally. This article presents river basin planning as a function of power and contested arena of power struggles, where state actors create, sustain, and reproduce their bureaucratic power through the overall shaping of (imagined) bureaucratic territory. It argues that river basin planning is not an antidote to current 'dysfunction' in water resources management, rooted in overlapping jurisdictions, fragmented decision making, and bureaucratic competitions between various government agencies. On the contrary, it illustrates how river basin planning becomes a new 'territorial frontier', created and depicted by different government agencies as their envisioned operational boundary and as a means to sustain and increase their bureaucratic power and sectoral decision-making authority, amidst ongoing processes of federalism in Nepal.

## 1. Introduction

With the introduction of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) concept globally (Biswas, 2008; Chikozho, 2008; Dombrowsky, 2008; McDonnell, 2008), water resources management policies in both developed and developing countries have been geared towards river basin approaches, while positioning the basin as the envisioned scale for integrated water resources planning, development, and management (Merrey, 2008; Molle, 2008). Supported both discursively and financially by major international donors such as the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as well as international organizations such as the Global Water Partnership, river basin approaches have become the dominant flagship and mainstream approach of global water programs (Butterworth et al., 2010; UNEP, 2012; UN-Water, 2008; van der Zaag, 2005). In Nepal, the idea of river basin planning was first initiated by Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (Suhardiman et al., 2015) and later also supported by other international donors including the ADB, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Government of Australia.

This article looks at river basin planning processes in Nepal and how they are shaped and reshaped by state actors' sectoral development interests and strategies, while placing it within the wider trend to

rescale environmental governance (Cohen, 2012; Cohen and Bakker, 2014; Harris and Alatout, 2010; McCarthy, 2005; Reed and Bruyneel, 2010). Cohen and Bakker (2014: 129) argue that this trend is driven by "the desirability of 'depoliticizing decision making through alignment with ecological (rather than jurisdictional or geopolitical) boundaries'". Scholars have discussed this move towards 'watershed' approaches and its challenges in terms of accountability, public participation, and integration (Cohen, 2012; Cohen and Davidson, 2011). They have also brought to light how the current conceptualization of river basin planning views and positions river basin boundaries as natural boundaries, impenetrable by power relationships and power struggles (Allan, 2003; Blomquist and Schlager, 2005; Gyawali et al., 2006; Venot et al., 2011; Wester et al., 2003). Referring to these neglects of power structures and processes, scholars have urged the need to recognize that water resources management decisions are made based on political choices and contestation (Cohen and Bakker, 2014; Warner et al., 2008; Wester et al., 2003).

Building on this literature, we argue that while the idea of river basin planning and management fits with the need for better coordination and integration in water resources management (e.g. irrigation, hydropower, water supply infrastructure for domestic use, navigation, among others), rescaling the governance unit, in this case to basin level, would not automatically resolve the fundamental political

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questions. As stated by Blomquist and Schlager (2005, p. 102): “*The watershed does not resolve fundamental political questions about where the boundaries should be drawn, how participation should be structured, and how and to whom decision makers within a watershed are accountable.*” Drawing institutional boundaries is indeed a political act: “*Boundaries that define the reach of management activities determine who and what matters*” (p. 105).

River basin planning processes are shaped by power structures and relationships, manifested in bureaucratic competition between sectoral ministries, as well as overlapping operational boundaries between government agencies working across the different administrative levels (e.g. national, provincial, local). Linking river basin planning with state transformation processes in Nepal, this article shows that basin planning is not an antidote to current ‘dysfunction’ in water resources management, rooted in overlapping jurisdictions, fragmented decision making, and bureaucratic competition between the different segments of governments. On the contrary, it illustrates how river basin planning becomes a new ‘territorial frontier’, created and depicted by various government agencies as their envisioned operational boundary, amidst ongoing processes of federalism. Most importantly, it shows how government ministries’ preference for basin planning approaches is rooted in their interest to preserve and increase their bureaucratic power and sectoral decision-making authority, through the framing of basin scale as the scale where the country’s water resources should be governed, vis-à-vis ongoing processes of federalism to transfer decision making authority to provincial and local government bodies.

Building on Molle’s (2009b) analysis on how the concept of river basin has been used by particular social groups or organizations to strengthen the legitimacy of their agendas, this article positions river basin planning as a function of power, contested territorial boundary, and arena of power struggles (Molle, 2009a; Warner et al., 2008), where state actors create, sustain, and reproduce their bureaucratic power through the overall shaping of (imagined) bureaucratic territory. As stated by Molle (2009a: 484): “*Beyond its relevance as a geographical unit for water resources development and management purposes, the river basin is also a political and ideological construct, with its discursive representations and justifications*”. Here, river basin planning processes become an arena where government ministries compete for influence, jurisdiction and responsibility. Consequently, the basin becomes the newly envisioned, albeit overlapping, bureaucratic territory.

Based on a review of policy documents and legal frameworks, as well as series of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with respectively 12 government officials from various government agencies at the national level, 3 international donor representatives, and 5 civil society organizations, we highlight the central positioning of river basin planning approaches in different government ministries’ policies and legal frameworks in Nepal. Next to these national level interviews conducted in Kathmandu, we carried out 11 semi-structured interviews with officials from the different government and non-government agencies at various administrative levels (provincial, district and municipality) within the boundary of Karnali and Mahakali basin as our study area. Through these interviews, we gather information on how the different actors perceive current challenges in water resources management and how they view river basin planning approaches as part of their strategies to cope with these challenges. Both series of interviews took place from December 2016 to March 2017. Interviews were transcribed word-for-word. Each transcription was coded using predefined nodes, including nodes defined by the first author before the fieldwork, and new nodes for information that emerged during the interviews. The coding process was done manually and designed in line with NVIVO 10 tool.

## 2. River basin as new territorial frontier for sectoral egoism

Scholars have highlighted the political characteristics of scale, and how it can be used to shape and reshape power structure and power

relationship (Delaney and Leitner, 1997; McCarthy, 2005). Marston’s (2000) conception of the politics of scale shows that scale is neither natural nor given, but is constantly shaped and reshaped as a result of contestation and power struggles by various actors. Or as stated by Newstead et al (2003: 486): Scale is usually defined as “*the temporary fixing of the territorial scope of particular modalities of power*”. Similarly, Molle (2009a) shows how the choice to focus on specific scale (e.g. basin level) resembles not only the interests of those in power, but also the process of inclusion and exclusion. Cohen and Bakker’s (2014: 131) define scales as “*fluid rather than fixed, constructed rather than pre-given, and political in both construction and function*”. Scale has also been understood as an important dimension of the political opportunity structure available for political agents and social groups to resist (Staeheli, 1994).

This is in line with Harvey’s modern adaptation of space, which reinforces ‘spatiality’ as not just a representation of human rationality but also as a tool for asserting particular rationalities (Hubbarb and Kitchin, 2011: 237). Like scale, space is therefore, “not absolute, ... [but something that] depends on the circumstances” (Harvey, 2004: 3). Or, as stated by Lefebvre (2009: 186): “*These circumstances involve subject positions, or actors, who permeate and support the spatial constructs that designate social interactions*”. Policy actors conceive of space in terms of their socio-economic, cultural and political positions within that space. Shome (2003: 40) asserts that space is neither a “metaphor” nor “backdrop” for these subjects but a flexible construction that emerges from human interactions, while simultaneously molding these interactions into a kind of spatialized reality.

Drawing upon the concept of the politics of scale and spatialized reality, this article presents river basin as (imagined) bureaucratic territory, shaped and reshaped by national government ministries’ sectoral development interests, strategies, and changing perceptions of power. It illustrates how river basin planning as a concept has evolved from a holistic approach to integrate and coordinate sectoral ministries’ development plans and activities in water resources management (e.g. irrigation, industry, drinking water, environmental conservation), to become a new territorial frontier, bureaucratic means and arena of power struggles.

The article contributes to the current discourse on river basin planning and rescaling governance in two ways. First, it shows how river basin planning could serve as a new territorial frontier for sectoral egoism, amidst the ongoing process of federalism and despite the conceptual contradictions. Many have brought to light sectoral egoism, resembled in bureaucratic competition between the different government agencies as one of the key drivers behind the current ‘dysfunction’ in water resources management. Centering on how international donors have promoted the idea of river basin planning, by conflating river basins with IWRM (Cohen and Davidson, 2011), basin planning has been presented as the antidote to address such ‘dysfunction’. Our Nepal case study shows, however, how bureaucratic competition and sectoral fragmentation prevail within the very context of river basin planning processes, thus proving not only the ineffectiveness of such antidote, but also how it has become a means to extend sectoral egoism, following the country’s political move to federalism. Unlike before where sectoral ministries view river basin planning as potential threats to their sectoral decision-making authority and bureaucratic power that comes with it (Suhardiman et al., 2015), river basin planning has now become an integral part of sectoral ministries’ strategies to sustain, reproduce, and justify their role in water resources management vis-à-vis provincial and local level governments’ to be defined roles and responsibilities.

Second, it reveals how river basin planning processes are more closely linked with conflicts than integration. Following the country’s move to federalism, different sectoral ministries sustain and expand their bureaucratic operational boundary and respective sectoral decision-making authority, while relying on the centrality of river basin planning approaches. Here, the prevailing sectoral egoism results in

national government agencies' sectoral development interest driving the overall process of transfer of decision-making authority to federal/provincial and local governing bodies. As such process renders the latter to either resist or being co-opted by the national government ministries' sectoral development interest, we argue that it also makes the overall transition process to federalism more prone to conflict. Consequently, national government agencies' strategies to position river basin planning as their means to sustain bureaucratic power might result not only in horizontal power struggles between agencies working at national level, but also vertical power struggles involving provincial government and local governing bodies, as the latter emerge as key actors in the country's overall development following federalism.

### 3. Background

Nepal's decade long civil conflict between Maoist insurgents and state forces ended in November 2006 with a Comprehensive Peace Agreement that opened the most democratically contested chapter in a process of state restructuring (Shneiderman and Tillin, 2015; Stepan, 1999). Consensus on federalism is hard to achieve as political actors hold not only different but also conflicting ideas about what federalism should entail (e.g. by ethnicity, and/or by means of political recognition) and what it should achieve (Lawoti, 2012; Lecours, 2013; Middleton and Shneiderman, 2008; Paudel, 2016). Nonetheless, political parties agreed that the federal system would be comprised of three levels of administrative governments at respectively central, provincial, and local.

In line with the ongoing processes to move to the federal system, the government held election for local government bodies in three stages during May to September 2017. Through this election, four categories of local governing bodies are being formed, including 6 metropolises, 11 sub-metropolises, 276 municipal councils and 460 village councils. These local governing bodies are part of district, and formed primarily based on population size and annual revenue. For example, each metropolis has minimum population of 280 thousand and annual revenue of at least 100 million Nepalese Rupees. Each sub-metropolis has minimum population of 150 thousand and annual revenue of at least 400 million Nepalese Rupees. Further, each municipal council has minimum population of 20 thousand and annual revenue of at least 4 million Nepalese Rupees. Each of them has similar function within their territory with the district acting as a coordination unit. The elected local bodies would serve for 5 years.

Nepal follows a two-tier local government system based on the Local Self Governance Act (LSGA) of 1999. Nonetheless, the last elected representatives left office in 2002 when their terms expired. While past attempts to hold election for local government bodies were thwarted due to political unrest, this resulted in the government representatives under the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (MoFALD) to take over instead. The lack of accountability and accessibility of these local institutions have hampered planned developmental activities, including controversies related to corruption and misappropriation of funds (Asia Foundation, 2012). After an 18-year hiatus, the recent local election plays an important role to provide power to the people under the existing government structure.

For water resources management in particular, at the time of writing, ten different ministries are responsible for dealing with water-related issues in Nepal (see Table 1). In general, these ministries manage their activities through line agency offices at provincial and district level. Some of the ministries include (semi) autonomous agencies, in addition to the dedicated departments. For example, Water and Energy Commission Secretariat (WECS) and Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) are parts of Ministry of Energy (MoE) but they work as independent agency.

The idea of river basin planning originated from the development of the Karnali and Mahakali river basin master plans in 1993, supported by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and continued to

gain traction since then. Partially driven by the global push and the agenda of major international donors to promote IWRM, the Government of Nepal formulated its Water Resource Strategy (2002) and National Water Plan (2005), which both endorse river basin planning approaches for the country's water resources management. In 2005, WECS<sup>1</sup> developed a draft act, outlining the institutional frameworks need to be established for integrated river basin management. In 2010, WECS also prepared the Koshi River Basin Management Plan together with World Wildlife Fund. In practice, however, sectoral ministries resisted the idea of river basin planning, as they viewed the latter as potential threat to their sectoral decision-making authority (Suhardiman et al., 2015). This resistance is most apparent from the way the draft act was never approved, because of MoE's objection. Similarly, the river basin management plan was drafted mainly involving international organizations, hardly taking into account sectoral ministries' development plans. In the next section, we discuss how this resistance towards basin planning approaches evolves over time, following Nepal's political move to federalism.

### 4. The shaping of power struggles

This section illustrates and discusses the central positioning of river basin planning approaches in shaping the country's water resources management following processes of federalism. Viewing river basin planning as an arena of power struggles, we look at WECS' recent initiative to formulate Water Resources Policy, vis-à-vis different sectoral ministries' strategies to sustain their bureaucratic power and sectoral decision-making authority. We look at how these strategies transformed the overall notion of river basin planning as a new territorial frontier, with basin as the newly envisioned, albeit overlapping, bureaucratic territories. Ongoing state transformation processes in Nepal manifested in highly complex and dynamic institutional landscape in water resources management. This is revealed not only in the different roles of national, provincial and local government, but also how different sectoral ministries and national government agencies define their strategic maneuver, based on how they perceive the changing power relationship and its potential implications for water resources management. This complexity and dynamism is most apparent in both WECS' and the sectoral ministries' proposal to establish basin offices, resulting in stacked institutional set up in river basin planning and management.

#### 4.1. WECS' strategy to formulate Water Resources Policy

Recently, WECS formulated the draft Water Resources Policy to guide the country's water resources management amidst the ongoing processes of federalism. In the time of writing, WECS has received comments from relevant government agencies, donors and international organizations following its national consultation, as well as from local stakeholders attending the basin-level consultation meetings. The first national consultation was conducted in Kathmandu in December 2016, and was followed by a series of consultation meetings in three selected basins: (1) 22nd of February in Pokhara; (2) 2nd of March in Nepalgunj; and (3) 6th of March in Biratnagar. Following these series of consultation processes, the draft policy is now under revision. According to our key informant at WECS, ongoing discussions centered on the need to restructure the existing water institutions, to make it more aligned with federalism structure as implied in the new constitution.

WECS' move to draft the Water Resources Policy is in line with the Government of Nepal's proposal to form the Ministry of Water

<sup>1</sup> WECS is the permanent secretariat of the Water and Energy Commission (WEC), which was established by then His Majesty's Government of Nepal in 1975 with the objective of developing the water and energy resources in an integrated and accelerated manner (ADB, 2004).

**Table 1**  
Government ministries responsible for water-related issues.

Ministry	Area of responsibility
Ministry of Energy (MoE)	Electricity generation and overall power sector development
Ministry of Irrigation (MoI)	Irrigation development
Ministry of Water Supply (MoWS)	Drinking water supply and water sanitation provision
Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MoAC)	Crop production and agricultural development
Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MoFSC)	Forest management and soil conservation
Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD)	Water related to urban development
Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (MoSTE)	Innovation and scientific research
Ministry of Population and Environment (MoPE)	Environmental conservation, pollution prevention and control
Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport (MoPIT)	Development of physical infrastructure to link rural areas
Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (MoFALD)	Development of local infrastructure in the rural areas

Resources and Energy (MoWRE),<sup>2</sup> as an overarching institutional set up where MoI, MoE, WECS would be located. This proposal is derived from the government's decision to have only 16 ministries at the central level, as stated in the new Constitution. The proposal would benefit WECS in several ways. First, it would increase its bureaucratic profile, as a government agency working under a powerful ministry (MoWRE), while keeping both MoI and MoE and itself at the same bureaucratic level. Second, it would secure its access to development fund from government revenue that fall under MoWRE. Still related to the second point, as part of MoWRE, WECS would be justified to request for permanent staffing, which is currently lacking.

In anticipation to the above proposal and according to the draft Water Resources Policy, WECS is to have 3 basin offices, to be located in respectively Eastern (with the basin office covering Koshi to Bagmati), Central (up to Panjang), and Western (from Rapti to Mahakali) region of Nepal. As mentioned by WECS Joint Secretary: *"This decision to establish basin offices was made because we need an institution that keeps the overview of basin planning at central level, following the ongoing processes of federalism. This is needed not only from basin planning perspective, but also to prevent potential conflicts between provinces."* (interview with WECS Joint Secretary, February 2017). The framing of river basin as the scale where the central government should keep an overview of water resources management and prevent potential conflicts between provinces is key for justifying WECS' proposal to establish basin offices to expand the scope and degree of its organizational activities, and thus increase its bureaucratic power. Here, basin planning is presented as a means to insert WECS' importance in water resources management, amidst the ongoing processes of federalism. With its three basin offices, WECS would be equipped with staff to support its role and responsibility. It would no longer have to depend on sectoral ministries' willingness to support its work through their respective provincial and district offices. Moreover, WECS would be in charge of all licensing related to water use. For instance, when provincial and local governments issued a license to use groundwater, this needs to be initially approved by WECS basin office. Nonetheless, it is unclear as to whether the proposed three basin offices would have to report to WECS alone, or also to MoI and MoE, following the Nepal government's proposal to put these three government ministries under MoWRE.

According to the draft Water Resources Policy, provincial government would play an important role in connecting the federal and local government, with the latter having more decision making power under federalism.<sup>3</sup> At institutional level, provincial offices will be formed.

<sup>2</sup> Following the government restructuring in 2017, MoE and MoI were merged into the Ministry of Energy Water Resources and Irrigation (MoEWR) in 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Currently, the government still discusses as to how they should transfer central government's decision-making power to local government. As said by the WECS Joint Secretary: *"As it stands now, there are more than 3000 VDCs in Nepal. This is too many in terms of coordination. Ideally, they would have 300–400 local governing units, but the number will probably be increased to 750 units due to political parties' request"* (interview with WECS Joint Secretary, February 2017).

These offices would incorporate 8–9 ministerial representatives at provincial level, including those from the water sector. Each provincial office will have different organizational structure, depending on the prominence of water resources development activities at specific provinces. For example, if a hydropower dam is going to be built in a specific province, the provincial office should include the Department of Electricity Development under MoE. In other provinces without hydropower facility, on the other hand, such representation might not be needed.

The ongoing formulation processes of Water Resources Policy give a pretext and provide an entry point for WECS to take part and to a certain extent lead the discussion on institutional change and bureaucratic restructuring in the water sector, amidst ongoing processes of federalism. It provides WECS with the opportunity to insert its position in river basin planning, while urging the latter's importance for the country's water resources management. Most importantly, WECS' proposal to have three basin offices formed and established following processes of federalism brings to light how it uses river basin planning as a means to increase and extend its bureaucratic power, from the central to the local, through the basin. Here, river basin planning becomes an integral part of WECS' strategy to justify its bureaucratic existence and increase its bureaucratic importance. In the next subsection we discuss sectoral ministries' strategies to protect their sectoral development interest, while inserting the latter as part of river basin planning processes.

#### 4.2. Sectoral development perspectives driving river basin planning processes

In line with WECS' initiative to draft the Water Resources Policy and its proposal to form and establish basin offices, sectoral ministries have also endorsed the need for river basin planning approaches for the country's water resources management following federalism. This is most apparent from the way they put basin perspective central in their respective policies and legal frameworks. The Groundwater Resources Development Board (GWRDB) under the Ministry of Irrigation (MoI) adopted river basin planning approaches in its Groundwater Act formulation processes, emphasizing the need to link groundwater and surface water management at basin level throughout the country. At the time of writing, Department of Water Induced and Disaster Prevention (DWIDP) under MoI and Department of Soil Conservation and Watershed Management (DSCWM) under the Ministry of Forestry and Soil Conservation (MoFSC) were formulating respectively Watershed Policy and River Law. Both legal frameworks emphasize the importance of river basin planning approaches in the context of watershed and river management.

While river basin planning approaches have become sectoral ministries' common strategy to sustain their bureaucratic power, as implied in the above policies and legal frameworks, they are neither inclined to link their envisioned roles nor seeing the need to fine tune their overlapping bureaucratic territories in the basin planning processes. On the



contrary, bureaucratic power struggles are most apparent from the prevailing sectoral egoisms shaping and reshaping different government agencies' views on river basin planning processes. Different sectoral ministries competed with each other, while arguing that their respective roles in water resources management are more important than others'. As expressed by WECS official: "WECS' role is to manage the overall water use in the basin, as water use forms the core element in river basin planning" (interview with WECS official, February 2017). This view is counter argued by DSCWM official, who expressed that: "WECS' role is to manage the overall water use, while DSCWM's role is to manage the whole watershed, from its source of water (upstream) to its different uses" (interview with DSCWM official, February 2017). This illustrates how DSCWM perceives its role as more holistic and thus more important than WECS', given its emphasis on the whole watershed. Similarly, DWIDP's idea to formulate the River Law is based on the need to insert its role as the government ministry in charge for managing the river, vis-à-vis WECS' and other sectoral ministries' role in water resources management. As mentioned by DWIDP official: "MoI is in charge for irrigation, while MoE is in charge for hydropower development. But who is managing the river? Currently DWIDP is already doing this, so this needs to be clarified and formally recognized by others" (interview with DWIDP official, February 2017).

Centering on their respective sectoral development interests and perspectives, sectoral ministries envisioned river basin planning merely as a means to sustain and increase their bureaucratic power amidst processes of federalism. Here, basin scale is used merely as a means to extend and insert respective government agency's role in water resources management, without linking these with the overall notion of integration and coordination in river basin planning processes. On the contrary, while sectoral ministries formulated policies and legal frameworks that incorporate the need for river basin planning approaches, these served mainly as their legal back up to formally justify their leading roles in basin planning processes, without any intention to fine tune these roles with each other.

Bureaucratic power struggles occurred not only at inter-ministerial level, but also between departments under the different government ministries. This is most apparent from the GWRDB's strategy to formulate Groundwater Resources Act as a legal means to justify their bureaucratic existence amidst federalism. If approved, the Act would give the Board the authority to regulate groundwater development and use at national level. It would also take over the authority of Kathmandu Valley Water Supply and Management Board (KVWSMB) under the Ministry of Water Supply and Sanitation (MoWSS). As it stands now, KVWSMB is in charge for groundwater management, including permit and licensing for Kathmandu area, especially in relation to the ongoing Melamchi drinking water project. Following the passing of the groundwater Act, KVWSMB would retain its authority until the Melamchi project is completed. After the project completion, GWRDB will take over the authority. As expressed by GWRDB official: "KVWSMB was not happy about this as they also have an Act that legally supports their mandate. However, as this Act concerns mainly KVWSMB role in one specific area, and not nationally, the Act will automatically loose meaning when the new Act is promulgated" (interview with GWRDB official, February 2017).

Sectoral ministries formulated policies and legal frameworks to legally back up their envisioned roles in water resources management, while also presenting it as a means to compete and remove potential bureaucratic opponents. Referring mainly to the to be promulgated Groundwater Act, GWRDB justified its plan to take over KVWSMB's role and responsibility in groundwater use for drinking water in Melamchi project. We argue that the real issue at stake here is not about how GWRDB could fulfill its role and responsibility, but rather, how they could gain more power and authority in relation to other government agencies. As to whether or not this authority would be meaningful in terms of water resources management, it is much less important. For example, GWRDB officials we interviewed did not see the transition

period as a matter of concern, even when this could potentially result in disruption of drinking water supply, when the take over did not happen smoothly. On the contrary, as long as GWRDB could expand its power by recruiting more staff, they would support the transition, rather than acknowledging and recognizing the role of KVWSMB in delivering the existing services in drinking water provision. Similarly, referring to the draft Watershed Policy, DSCWM used the idea of watershed management as its means to insert its role in water resources management, while also emphasizing its higher importance compare to MoI's and MoE's roles in respectively irrigation and hydropower development. For example, rather than trying to link the idea of watershed management with existing irrigation and hydropower development plans, DSCWM official we interviewed would rather present watershed management as key measure for forest protection. Similarly, envisioning the basin offices to function under MoFSC, the same official presented forest management as the core issue for watershed management.

River basin planning approaches serve merely as sectoral ministries' bureaucratic means to sustain their bureaucratic importance through the preservation of their sectoral development roles and perspectives. Here, basins serve merely as a new bureaucratic territory, both substantially and contextually. Substantially, river basin becomes the conceptual embodiment of prevailing sectoral egoism. Contextually, it becomes a mere reflection of how different government agencies envisioned their new, albeit overlapping, bureaucratic territories. In the next sub-section, we discuss how the envisioning of these new bureaucratic territories results in stacked institutional set up, albeit imaginary, in river basin planning and management.

#### 4.3. Common strategy with stacked institutional set up

River basin planning becomes national government agencies' common strategy to impose their roles in water resources management vis-à-vis provincial and local-level government bodies. At policy level, this is most evident in the way various government agencies' policies and legal frameworks highlight the need to use basin perspective as the overarching operational boundary and new bureaucratic territory to govern water resources. At institutional level, this imposition is most apparent from the way the different government agencies propose the formation, establishment, and/or sustenance of their respective, albeit overlapping, basin offices throughout the country.

WECS, DWIDP and GWRDB (both under MoI), and DSCWM under MoFSC all proposed to have basin offices as the organizational unit to manage the country's water resources. In line with the draft Water Resources Policy, WECS proposed to have three basin offices in respectively Eastern, Central, and Western region of Nepal.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, DSCWM planned to establish four basin offices in respectively Gandaki, Mahakali, Karnali, and Koshi basin. Moreover, GWRDB would focus on four basin offices located in Bagmati, Gandaki, Karnali, and Koshi basin. See also Fig. 1 for the location of major river basins in Nepal.

While WECS proposed to form and establish these basin offices from scratch, DSCWM would rely on their 61 district offices for the establishment of the basin offices. As for GWRDB, it would continue working in its four basin offices, while also reducing its staff coverage from its initial nine basins operation. This reduction in operational coverage is based on how GWRDB positioned provincial government as the responsible agency in charge for water resources management following federalism, on the one hand, and how it perceived the importance of centralized groundwater management, on the other hand. As expressed by GWRDB official: "Following federalism, provincial governments would be responsible for water resources management within their provincial

<sup>4</sup> According to our key informant from WECS, the exact location of basin offices will only be defined following the completion of ongoing federal and provincial elections, or upon the finalization of provincial headquarters location.

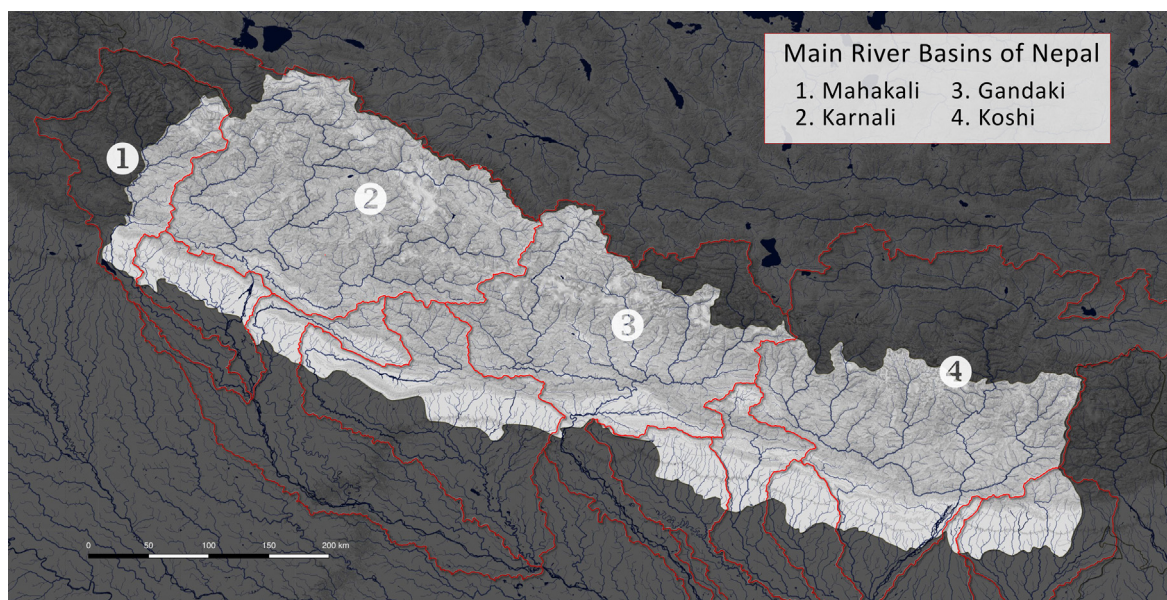


Fig. 1. Location of major river basins in Nepal.

boundary. At the same time, we need to keep the four basin offices, because centralized groundwater management is eminent for the country's water resources management" (interview with GWRDB official, February 2017). In addition, the National Planning Commission (NPC) also envisioned the establishment of basin offices as part of its apex body for water resources planning.

While basin offices have been presented as the overarching bureaucratic territory, it is unclear as to how WECS and the different sectoral ministries would coordinate their role in their respective, overlapping and stacked basin offices throughout the country. For instance, while DSCWM could in principle incorporate its district offices into the four basin offices, the question remains as to how this will be linked to other sectoral ministries' district offices and their plans to form basin offices as well. Moreover, as WECS and sectoral ministries are envisioning the same idea of basin planning approaches through basin offices, the question remains as to whose basin offices would prevail.

While different proposals on the future institutional set up following federalism will be discussed at the parliament level, following the recommendation from the Council of Ministers, the question remains as to how they will take forward WECS' and sectoral ministries' proposal to adopt river basin planning approaches, while also trying to address the problem of stacked institutional set up. The issue of stacked institutional set up and how it is originated from sectoral ministries' strategies to sustain and increase their sectoral bureaucratic importance reveals both policy and institutional complexities in basin planning processes. Obviously, it is not only about drawing the institutional boundaries between various government agencies and their respective basin offices, and thus as to where these basin offices would be located and to whom they would have to report to with regard to their overall functioning. Most importantly, it is also about to whom these basin offices would be accountable to and whether the latter would also have any say in drawing the actual boundaries.

## 5. Discussions and conclusion

This article highlights the political characteristics of river basin planning processes. It contests the central positioning of river basin planning approaches as an antidote to current dysfunction in water resources managements, resembled by fragmented decision making and bureaucratic competition between different government agencies

operating at various administrative levels. Most importantly, it illustrates that river basin planning are no match to sectoral egoisms, as revealed from how it has been transformed from a holistic approach in water resources management, to become a new territorial frontier for the prevailing bureaucratic competitions.

Linking river basin planning with state transformation processes in Nepal, it illustrates how the first becomes a new territorial frontier, where national government agencies insert their envisioned roles and positions, while persistently pushing for their respective sectoral development interests and perspectives. Here, river basin planning becomes a means for national government agencies to sustain and increase their bureaucratic power and importance, amidst ongoing processes of institutional change and bureaucratic restructuring following federalism. Through the presentation of river basin as a scale where water resources management should be referred to, national government ministries drive the ongoing processes of federalism in the water sector, thus partially sidelining provincial and local government bodies' emerging importance and roles.

Viewing river basin planning as an arena of power struggles, the article reveals how such planning processes are more closely linked with conflicts than integration. The way different government agencies have adopted basin perspectives as their means to sustain and gain bureaucratic power amidst processes of federalism highlights constant power struggles in basin planning processes, taking place at both policy and institutional level. At policy level, this is manifested in the overlapping, conflicting policies and legal frameworks, formulated in parallel with each other, for the purpose of supporting the different government ministries' leadership roles and responsibility in river basin planning. At institutional level, it results in overlapping, stacked institutional set up for river basin planning and management. While WECS' and the different sectoral ministries' envisioning of their respective basin offices reveals their common strategy to sustain their bureaucratic power, overlapping operational boundaries between their respective basin offices brings to light prevalent bureaucratic competition as one of key institutional challenges in managing the country's water resources. We argue that while bureaucratic competition is a common phenomenon in water resources management, in the context of federalism, it might also make the overall transition processes, from central government to provincial and local level government bodies, more prone to conflict.

From a policy perspective, this article highlights the importance of



WECS consultation processes of the draft Water Resources Policy as potential platform where state actors could share and discuss their overall views on how river basin planning should be done through cross-sectoral collaboration, involving not only national level government agencies, but also incorporating development needs and aspirations of provincial and local government bodies. While WECS designed the consultation process merely as a means to gather other government agencies' and local bodies' inputs on the draft Water Resources Policy, linking this process with the outcome of local election is pertinent. Put differently, if the policy is to have any actual significance, it needs to also incorporate provincial and local government bodies' views and perceptions on water resources management across scales.

We argue that incorporating these views and perceptions could serve as the first step in the right direction, to fine tune national, provincial, local development perspectives on water resources management. Moreover, it could also serve as a starting point to develop institutional mechanism to prevent potential conflict concerning actual water use, following actual transfer of decision-making authority in water resources management, from the central ministries to provincial and local bodies. In the aftermath of the local election, local government bodies would gain decision-making authority on water resources management, among others. Hence, when they view the policy as lacking actual significance in water resources management at local level, they would contest it. Also, bearing in mind that the new governance structure once the federal structure is activated could be entirely different, a series of consultation processes involving the newly elected local governments in selected sites would be required.

While politics and power relationship will continue to shape and reshape the overall process of power struggles with regard to river basin planning, it is pertinent that the actual outcome of the envisioned basin planning processes will be significantly derived from informed and accountable decision-making processes, involving key stakeholders across scales.

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