River Basin Organizations in the Global Water Discourse: An Exploration of Agency and Strategy

Authors: Farhad Mukhtarov (VU University Amsterdam), and Andrea K. Gerlak (University of Arizona)

Today, river basin organizations (RBOs) constitute one of the principles of good water governance. Increasingly, RBOs are promoted by various transnational policy entrepreneurs, including intergovernmental organizations and government-based aid agencies, international NGOs, global knowledge networks, and private sector actors who advance various initiatives and help to conclude agreements. Yet, we understand little about the staying power of the RBO discourse, the trajectory of its development into global prominence, and the role of transnational policy entrepreneurs in promoting and maintaining RBOs on the international agenda. A better understanding of the factors associated with the rise and prominence of RBOs would allow for strategic positioning of key actors in this policy field and offer insights into possible scenarios of evolution of the discourse. Integrating across three broad streams of literature -- discourse analysis, political economy and political ecology -- we derive a number of strategies to explain the role of transnational actors in the rise of RBO discourse. These strategies include (1) respond to changing values of the global civil society, (2) leverage incentives for stakeholders, (3) construct and market 'best practice' examples, and (4) link to other discourses and concepts. We explain the rise of RBOs with the use of this typology and draw on a wide variety of cases of both domestic and international RBOs to illustrate how transnational policy entrepreneurs employ these strategies. Of the types of transnational policy entrepreneurs studied here, we find that global knowledge networks are the most expansive in reach, utilizing all four strategies to define the boundaries of the RBO discourse and serving as the oil in the machine of global water discourse around RBOs. Yet, this raises important questions around the nature of the networks and strategies employed in the broader global water governance discourse as well as compelling questions related to governance.

Keywords: river basin organizations, discourse, scale, politics, agency, transnational policy entrepreneurs, political ecology, political economy, networks
Introduction

With globalization and the rise of transnational communities of experts, interest is renewing in the river basin as the ideal scale for water management (Barrow, 1998). To institutionalize a river basin management approach (Dombrowsky, 2008), river basin organizations (RBOs) are increasingly promoted by organizations and donor groups supporting good governance concepts in developing countries (Gupta, 2009: 52; Scheumann et al., 2006). As such, RBOs are on the rise globally today (Gerlak and Grant, 2009; Conca et al., 2006). In the past two decades, both domestic and international RBOs have been established in virtually every region of the world (Barrow, 1998; UNECE, 2009; OECD, 2011).

Yet, RBOs are not altogether new organizations. Historically conceived as boundary" or "frontier" commissions, international river commissions were seen as the organizational dimension of progressive development in the 19th century (Wescoat, 1996). River commissions were re-established as regional organizations with League of Nations support in the early 20th century. The idea of river basin management received considerable zeal with industrialization and development of technology for multi-purpose river development (White, 1969) and became manifest in 1933 with the Tennessee Valley Authority, the first modern river basin organization. This technocratic and expert-driven model spread throughout the world (White, 1969; Mukhtarov, 2007), and by the 1950s, RBO discourse came to be framed in the ideals of democracy, modernity, economic development and part of the larger fight against communism in the height of the Cold War (UN, 1970; Ekbladh, 2002; Turton et al., 2004).

RBOs represent just one element of a broader governance framework and institutional environment. Around the globe, RBOs vary in their form and function, depending on the type of problems to be addressed, and the resources dedicated (Correia and da Silva, 1997: 333). RBOs may represent advisory committees, authorities, associations, commissions, councils, corporations, tribunals, trusts and federations (Gupta, 2010: 52). In a domestic context, RBOs enact functions such as water allocation, resource management and planning, public education, and resource management (Hooper, 2005: 27). International RBOs can promote cooperation between upstream and downstream states, resolve disputes, help standardize water policies, serve as a forum to bring together diverse stakeholders, and promote the exchange of data and information (Dombrowsky, 2007: 113; Pahl-Wostl, 2007: 55). Domestic RBOs are more common in developed countries, whereas international RBOs may be found in abundance both in developed and developing countries (Dinar et al., 2005: 48-49).

There is a rich case study literature associated with the performance of RBOs (e.g., Zawahri, 2008; Kibaroglu, 2002; Siegfried and Bernauer, 2007; Dombrowsky, 2008; Gerlak, 2004a; Hooper, 2010; Kliot and Shamir, 2001; Marty, 2001, Bernauer, 2002, Mostert, 2003). Related literature discusses challenges in practice, including challenges of institutional capacity, coordination, implementation, transparency and inclusiveness (Barrow, 1998;
Hooper, 2005: 44-45; UNDP, 2008; UNESCO, 2009; UNECE, 2009). But even despite such concerns, the belief in the utility of RBOs is firm and RBOs are prominent in the contemporary debates on water governance (OECD, 2011).

Despite the rise of RBOs and this widespread attention to them by both practitioners and academics alike, the trajectory this concept has traveled to reach its position of global prominence and the role of individual and collective actors in advancing and maintaining RBOs is relatively unknown (Molle, 2009: 484). We understand little of the ‘how and why’ discourse and policy initiatives have emerged in this context (Mollinga et al., 2006: 30), and what role transnational actors play in the promotion of such policies as ‘best practices’. We address this gap by examining the role of transnational policy entrepreneurs and their strategies in the rise of the modern discourse around RBOs. We see discourse as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is reproduced through an identifiable set of practices” (Hajer, 1995: 44). Unraveling the working of a discourse helps us to challenge the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of ideas provided by a dominant discourse, uncover which and whose agendas are being served, and ultimately, offer pathways for strategic positioning of actors in the debates on water governance.

Although there is rich literature on discourse theory and its application to the environment, no unified analytical framework exists for examination of the path through which discourses become dominant (Pal, 1995). Some authors argue that discourses are influenced by major economic and political developments at the global scale, such as the rise of neo-liberalism and the fall of communism or globalization (Buscher and Whande, 2007; Hajer, 1995). Others claim that stakeholders inevitably shape discourses and the most powerful actors set the frame of interpretation (Fairclough, 1992; Cox, 1993). Some argue that the rise of discourses is influenced by changing values and emphasize the need to respond to pressing problems which a society, and increasingly, a global civil society (Abdelal et al., 2010; Sabatier, 1993). Finally, some scholars have emphasized the importance of discourses to remain loose and be easily linked to other discourses in order to maximize their uptake and policy impact (Kingdon, 1995; Hajer, 1995, 2003).

However diverse these approaches may be, they all underline the importance of agency in promoting the rise of a certain discourse, and suggest that those actors operate in a specific manner in order to enact their preferences. While the literature on discourse analysis, political economy and political ecology pays attention to individuals and organizations which pursue change, the rise of discourses have not been previously analyzed through the agency lenses. An agency approach suggests explicit attention to policy actors as change agents and their strategies as the means to instigate or block the RBO discourse. Through an integration of these approaches, we identify particular strategies of transnational actors in water governance, and apply this typology to illustrate how different actors make use of these strategies. We begin with a brief overview of the theoretical foundations of our inquiry and a call for integration. Next, we outline the types of transnational actors and their preferred strategies. We then discuss implications for the current status-quo
including issues which require further attention in the development of the RBOs discourse in the future.

An Argument for Integration

Discourse and agency approaches are often presented as incommensurate, or difficult to account for simultaneously. According to discourse analysts, agency is shaped by discourses which form ideas, interests and preferences. In turn, according to agency scholars, discourses are created, maintained and fade as a subject to political action of agents. The complementarily of these two approaches is likely, and scholars such as Hajer (2003) and Giddens (1984) have proposed a middle ground. However, there are few accounts of a discourse analysis that would explicitly discuss actions and strategies of actors.

We address this gap by applying an agency perspective to study the rise of the RBO discourse. We draw on three streams of literature that are well grounded in International Relations scholarship - discourse analysis, political economy and political ecology – to derive strategies that transnational actors may use to advance discourse. Collectively, these streams highlight issues of power, the role of language in constructing meaning and the importance of material incentives versus ideas in motivating actors. From the perspective of agency-structure, the political economy and political ecology approaches accentuate the role of agency in shaping institutions. Discourse analysis accentuates the role of structure, institutions, symbols, identities and language in constituting ‘agents’ and shaping their preferences and behaviour. An integration of these approaches allows us to help bridge realist and constructivist perspectives, which help offer new insights into the study of the rise of the RBO discourse.

Discourse analysis scholarship

Modern approaches to discourse analysis are inspired by the work of Foucault (1974), Berger and Luckmann (1966), Fischer and Forester (2003), Hajer (1995, 2003), and others. While there are fine nuances between different discourse approaches, they all hold the view that reality is a collectively held social construct, and language shapes perceptions, preferences and interests of actors. For discourse theorists, a policy arena is never monodiscursive (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Fairclough, 1992; Fischer and Forester, 2003). Rather, discourses exist in plurality and compete for structuring meanings (Newell and Levy, 2005). According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Hajer (1995), discourses obtain domination by blocking the flow of difference in the meanings, and setting itself up as the centre of interpretative process. Discourses must be loosely defined and open for multiple interpretations in order to allow different actors to buy into them (Hajer, 1995; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005: 177). Importantly, discourse analysts see the rise of a concept to prominence and its spread across jurisdictions as linked primarily to ideational factors.
Some international relations scholars argue that attention to discourse can help shed light on indirect effects of power (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 48; Sharman, 2008: 637). In the environmental realm, discourse scholars have well explored how a dominate discourse can bias how a particular environmental problem and its subsequent solution are conceptualized (Pal, 1995; Jensen and Richardson, 2004). In the context of international river basins, some scholars have called attention to the use of discourse to highlight or subvert particular dynamics of state relations (Zeitoun and Warner, 2006: 448), or to reinforce particular problems and solutions (Mirumachi, 2010).

**Political ecology scholarship**

Broadly, political ecology calls attention to social relations of production and power as they shape human relations with nature (Walker, 2006). Political ecology scholars place an emphasis on the discussion of scale, which is ‘of mounting theoretical and practical relevance’ (Smith, 2000: 727). The discussion of scale as socially constructed and historically contingent can contribute to the discussion of water governance, which often presents debates about the appropriate scale of water management (Newmann, 2008).

To better understand conflict in international river basins, Sneddon et al. (2002) emphasize the importance of examining nested spatial scales -- such as the river basin -- the interaction of scales and human-related water activities, along with the socially constructed character of some spatial scales and their relationship to power. Some scholars argue that scalar constructions of hydrologic geographies have helped in the consolidation and maintenance of strong, centralized states (Harris and Alatout, 2010). In their work to integrate the various strands of water research around scale into a broad framework that more comprehensively explains scale dynamics, Feitelson and Fischhendler (2009) provide a typology of literature on scale, and argue that scale dynamics are not just a function of power and economic factors, but that scale also reflects shifts in dominant ideologies and in sanctioned discourse.

**Political economy scholarship**

The political economy approach puts emphasis on the working of power, with specific attention paid to non-state actors (Stone and Maxwell, 2005; Newell, 2008). Cox (1993: 1) has summarized the essence of this approach in emphasizing the key role of material production in shaping the reality and power: production creates the material basis for all forms of social existence, and, the ways in which human efforts are combined in productive processes affect all other aspects of social life, including the polity. For Gramsci (1971), the three pillars of power offer an account in which power that originates from material production is blended with the forms of authority derived from organizational order and the ideational power which is linked to the claim of superior knowledge.

International political economy is a well advanced sub-field of international relations discipline. The working of power, and increasingly, attention to scale are the major tenets
of this approach. For example, other authors accentuated the role of constructivism in international political economy, especially regarding perceptions and meaning in the working of power (Abdelal et al., 2010). A political economy approach to water governance provides valuable insights into power structures and economic forces that determine scale and the deliberate use or manipulation of the choice of scale as part of larger political and economic struggles over water (Swyngedouw, 1999; 2004; Molle, 2007).

**The Role of Transnational Policy Entrepreneurs**

A more integrative approach calls attention to the issues of ideas, scale and material interests. These analytical categories are well presented through the concept of agency, or the ability to exercise authority and influence policy change (Dharwadkar et al., 2000; Stripple and Pattberg, 2008). The concept of agency is intrinsically linked to actors as agents of change who influence the course of policy events. To understand these agents of change in RBO discourse, we embrace Huitema and Mejerink’s (2009, 2010) notion of ‘policy entrepreneurs’, or actors who invest their energy and time to instigate or block particular policies. While we recognize important links to governmental and non-governmental actors at the national and local levels, we maintain our focus at the transnational level.

Reflecting broader trends in global governance away from a system of decision-making and collective action dominated by a few key intergovernmental institutions (Forman and Segaar, 2006), global water governance is increasingly multi-level and fragmented (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2008; Hoff, 2009). As such, we build from Rodda’s (2007) classification of institutions active in water governance, and identify a number of key transnational policy entrepreneurs which may be classified in four categories: (1) intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and government-based aid agencies, (2) international NGOs, (3) global knowledge networks, and (4) private sector actors. Broadly, these actors possess the expertise and funding necessary to frame RBOs as a vehicle to solve a number of development-related problems.

IGOs constitute the most visible group of actors who promote RBOs in the course of their development activities. The IGOs active in the discourse tend to be highly bureaucratic in structure and highly networked, well-funded and with broad international visibility. In Latin America, for example, organizations such as the World Bank, the Organization of American States and the United Nations (Solanes and Jouravlev, 2006; OAS, 1978) have actively promoted river basin management (World Bank, 1993). Similarly, the Inter-American Development Bank has financed dozens of projects in many Latin American countries to help develop institutional and legal frameworks to manage water at the regional level through river basin authorities (Rogers, 2002: 19). In Former Soviet states, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and UNECE have been active in promoting river basin planning (UNECE, 2008). The Global Environment Facility is a strong advocate of RBOs through its International Waters program (Uitto and Duda 2002; Gerlak, 2004a), particularly in newly independent states. The UN Development Programme advocates for
integrated water management, and often highlights the importance of well-performing domestic and transboundary institutional arrangements in this regard (Alaerts et al., 1991, 1999; UNDP, 1998; UNDP, 2008).

Government-based development agencies also contribute to RBO discourse. The Swedish International Development Agency, the German Development Cooperation Agency, the US Agency for International Development, the Australian Agency for International Development, and the UK Department for International Development contribute to the rise of RBOs (Schlüter and Herrfahrtd-Pähle, 2011). For example, government-based development from the US, Netherlands, UK, Denmark, and Canada have contributed to cooperative and institutional development in the Danube-Black Sea region (Gerlak, 2004b: 407). Since the 1980s, USAID and the Canadian International Development Agency have supported domestic RBOs in Africa (Barrow, 1998). In South Africa, Swedish and German development agencies promote international RBOs (van der Zaag, 2008: 256). According to the IWPP (2007), where there is a river basin organization in Africa, there is a greater chance of donor support.

International NGOs act in the role of representatives of global civil society and advocates of environmental and poverty eradication values. They play an important role in defining RBO success criteria and establishing their legitimacy in the circles of water policy analysts and policy-makers alike. For the World Wildlife Fund (2002), river basins are the appropriate unit for the struggle against poverty, and may serve as a vehicle for conservation (McNally and Tognetti, 2002). Other environmental NGOs, like Green Cross International see the creation of integrated river basin authorities as appropriate forums to “oversee the interests of all states, peoples and ecosystems in the basin” (Green Cross, 2000: 14). The International Union for Conservation of Nature (2011) recognizes various degrees of cooperation that may be present in a transboundary river basin and advocates for a phased approach to joint management of shared river basins.

Global knowledge networks also play a crucial role in developing the RBO discourse. These networks “incorporate professional bodies, academic research groups and scientific communities that organize around a special subject matter or issue” (Stone, 2002: 2), with membership based upon professional and/or official recognition of expertise, as well as more subtle means of validating scholarly credibility. The primary motivation of such networks is to share, spread, and, in some cases use that knowledge to inform policy and apply to practice. In water governance, examples of these networks include the International Network of Basin Organizations (INBO), the World Water Council (WWC), Global Water Partnership (GWP) (Barrow, 1998: 175; UNESCO, 2007; OECD, 2011; Mukhtarov, 2007: 176; Conca, 2006; Varady et al., 2008; Molle, 2009).

Finally, the private sector represents an important policy entrepreneur engaged in the discourse and dissemination of RBOs. Private water business has often been linked to knowledge networks as to advance the discourse that may benefit their interests (Goldman, 2007). Environmental and engineering consultants represent another type of transnational
policy entrepreneurs, who transfer experiences from one country to another, and represent a powerful agent of water governance (Bouteligier, 2011). These actors have been playing an important role since the 1940s when the American experiences were exported world-wide (White, 1969), and more recently, with the involvement of transnational consultants in the projects related to dissemination of experiences from the EU Water Framework Directive, including RBOs.

**Agency and Strategies of Transnational Policy Entrepreneurs**

With a better understanding of the various types of transnational policy entrepreneurs, we turn our attention to the strategies utilized. By drawing on the discourse theory, we take language, meaning and symbols into account. The political ecology perspective allows us to account for scale and the power relations linked to the construction of problems and solutions as pertinent to a particular scale. Finally, the political economy approach allows us to take a materialist perspective by accounting for interests of actors in advancing and maintaining discourses. By integrating these streams of literature in the context of water governance and river basin management, we discern four strategies of transnational policy entrepreneurs.

**Respond to changing values of global civil society**

With the rise of the environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the environmental destruction associated with water development projects led to increasing protests internationally and the passage of many national environmental laws which allocated water to the environment (Allan, 2000, 2003). In many developed countries, new organizations and commissions were established with the explicit power to address and enforce water quality standards. In the US, for example, the Susquehanna River Basin Commission (1970), was given power to define and enforce water quality standards as a response to rising environmental values (Goetze, 1980). Similarly, the Rhine Commission, the earliest RBO, embraced water quality following the Sandoz accident in the mid-1980s (Cioc, 2002: 45, 141). Sustainability and quality concerns advanced the river basin concept (Molle and Wester, 2009: 5), and by the 1990s, actor interests coalesced around the idea of the river basin as the appropriate unit of scale for management.

Global knowledge networks like the International Law Association (ILA) would come to influence RBO discourse by supporting notions of good governance including transparent decision-making, the rule of law and non-state participation (Hildering, 2004: 89). The ILA played a role in promoting the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses (1997), and the Berlin Rules on Water Resources (2004), which encourage states to establish joint mechanisms or commissions to facilitate transboundary cooperation and undertake integrated management. When Conca et al. (2006) examined the convergence in norms governing international rivers found in the 1997 UN Convention, they found that most principles or norms inherent in the convention have not been applied extensively by riparians, with the exception of a few trends,
including the establishment of joint river commissions. Dominant norms, either reflected in institution building process at the global scale (Conca, 2006) or in international regimes (Young, 2002) set the framework within which RBOs are created and function.

A new consensus also formed internationally around a management paradigm focused on efficiency and decentralization in the 1990s (Dinar et al., 2005; Conca, 2006; Varady et al., 2008). The neoliberal, market paradigm that emerged from the Johannesburg Summit (1992) and was codified in the Dublin Principles (1992) and new World Bank water resources policies (e.g., 1993; 2003), and implemented broadly across Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa in the past 20 years can be seen as a dominant discourse in global water governance (Gupta, 2009: 43). The concept of water as an economic good is a critical part of this discourse. The neoliberal approaches to water governance include pricing systems to prevent excessive use of water, its pollution as well as related processes of soil erosion and desertification have been applied around the world (WWF, 2002; Huitema and Meijerink, 2010). The most cited model of market-based approaches to RBOs is the French RBO model, with its incorporation of economic principles like “polluter pays” and “user pays” (Molle, 2008: 141). In some cases, RBOs, like Spain’s Confederaciones Hidrograficas, responsible for water development and quality monitoring and enforcement, evolved in the 1990s to serve as an “administrative framework for promoting market-based solutions to water allocation problems” (Saleth and Dinar, 2000: 191).

The inter-weaving of these shifts in values towards greater recognition of environmental value of water along with the neo-liberal paradigm have had great impact of both old and new RBOs. A good example is China, where by the 1990s, water management changed from being guided by engineering-dominated approaches to that of broader water resources benefits, along with experiments with water pricing and markets (Pietze and Giordano, 2009: 115). Such changes along China’s Yellow River, for example, were in part influenced by environmental NGOs, such as WWF (Pietze and Giordano, 2009; te Boekhorts et al., 2010).

**Leverage incentives for stakeholders**

Enrolling stakeholders into a discourse may require providing some material incentives, such as loans, grants and projects. It is not uncommon for material incentives to be widely spread, and donor funding to be conditional upon establishing RBOs. Illustrative examples include funding from the government of Norway, DFID, GWP and UNDP for an IWRM project in Kazakhstan with a component of river basin councils (RBCs) (O’Hara, 2003; UNECE, 2008; Mukhtarov, 2009). Similarly, two Asian Development Bank (ADB) funded projects on river basin planning in Vietnam resulted in the creation of the Red River Basin Organization and changes in the law and water policy documents there (Molle, 2011). In this case, ADB acted as both the ideologist of the reform with its guidelines for IWRM preparation in Vietnam as well as the donor. ADB’s involvement has been complemented with funding from the governments of France and Netherlands to support other projects
for capacity-building and awareness about IWRM issues in river basins, and in broad terms, promoted RBOs as part of the larger IWRM policy.

Unfortunately, donor-induced projects often impose problem definition on ‘beneficiaries’ in a ‘one size fits all’ fashion. Molle (2009), for example, observed that donors encouraged the Red River RBO in Vietnam identify and target IWRM issues, even if stakeholders voiced different concerns. The same dynamic of imposition could be observed in the case of water reform in Kazakhstan and other newly independent states (Mukhtarov, 2009). The expansive reach of environmental consultants, in turn, reinforces uncritical treatment of popular management concepts, such as RBOs. Consultants apply particular design models across a wide range of countries, by which they spread RBOs and promote homogeneity in institutional design (Bouteligier, 2011; Hodson and Marvin, 2010), despite a broader recognition of the contextual nature of institutions and adaptation (Merrey and Cook, 2012).

Direct non-material incentives for national decision-makers may include travel to international conferences, the opportunity to acquire international status, and heightened professional reputation both domestically and at an international arena. An important attraction of RBOs to states, multilateral donors and NGOs is the potential participatory venue (Warner et al., 2008: 131), or vehicle for bottom-up planning (NGO Forum, 2005) that RBOs may provide without over politicisation.

Not always the trigger for the development of RBOs from the very start, but often an important factor in making sure that an approach progresses, is the opportunity for practitioners and government officials to participate in international networks. Global knowledge networks provide opportunities for policy-makers, bureaucrats and scientists alike to connect to each other and enhance their knowledge and reputation (Mukhtarov, 2009). By implementing river basin policies, individuals may acquire legitimacy in the international circles, as well as at home. Organizations such as the International Water Resources Association, the International Water Law Association, International Water History Association, and the on-line platforms such as Water Wiki and WaterWords all provide such networks (Mukhtarov, 2009).

**Construct and market ‘best practice’ examples**

Models of ‘best practices’ demonstrate that a certain institutional design can serve as a blueprint for implementation. Adoption of a model which has been successful elsewhere is more politically conducive and less costly than internal innovation, and such models are attractive to development banks in that they offer a blueprint for development that can be used universally in preparing and executing projects (Molle, 2008: 146). For national elites, they offer possible solutions to water management problems but also because they come with significant donor investment (Molle, 2008; Chambers, 1997). Models also bring perceived legitimacy (Mollinga and Bolding, 2004) and may be used in national struggles to justify certain bureaucratic restructuring or as a tool to reorder power in decision-
making or change existing institutions (Molle, 2008: 145). For example, the French model has been used to support a pollution tax in Indonesia and new administrative budgeting processes in Brazil (Meublat and Lourd, 2001). The Upper-Colorado river scheme and the TVA have in turn been used in the ‘turf wars’ between the Southeastern Anatolia Regional Development Administration and the State Water Agency of Turkey (SHW) (GAP-RDA, 2002). Private sector actors, like environmental consultants, also promote discourse and best practice examples which have the potential to create new business opportunities for them, as de Bruin et al. (2005) demonstrates with implementation of EU WFD and river basin planning in EU accession countries.

Historically, the Tennessee Valley Authority represents a classic best practice model promoted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and practitioners worldwide (Delli Priscoli, 2007; Ekbladh, 2002). The French model of *Agences de l’Eau* has been influential in the developing world, and can be seen as a predecessor of the EU Water Framework Directive. The model became popular in the 1990s among the ex-Soviet states, such as Kazakhstan, (Mukhtarov, 2009) as well as Asian states seeking to institute financial self-sufficiency of river basin organizations (Lee and Kim, 2009). Australia’s Murray-Darling River Basin Commission is thought to be one of the most successful models across jurisdictional borders (Saleth and Dinar, 2000; Linn and Bailey, 2002), and of adaptive management applied to water resources (Allan, 2007). The Australian federal government widely supported the model which has influenced developments in countries such as China, Sri Lanka and Vietnam and has contributed to the creation of the Mekong Basin Commission and its ongoing operations (Malano et al., 1999; Birch et al., 1999, Pigram, 2011; Molle, 2005; MRC, 2011). After the fall of communism in Europe, the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (ICPR) served as a model for the establishment of commissions along the Elbe, Danube, and Odra in the 1990s (Holtrup, 1999). Many experiences of ICPR were also considered in the design of the EU Water Framework Directive.

Models of ‘best practice’ are often presented as part of the guidelines for water sector reform. While many authors criticized the “cook-book” approach, global knowledge networks recognize this as an effective way to shape discourses. A trend to standardize the guidelines for the creation of RBOs began in the 2000s with GWP, INBO and CAP-Net publishing reports with clear guidelines to be followed. For example, the GWP Tool-Box for IWRM (2003) highlights a five-stage framework for river basin management and which includes the formation of a river basin authority. These guidelines afford a generous timeframe to develop a functioning RBO, often upwards of a half century to really take shape (UNESCO-IHP, 2007; GWP, 2005: 31).

**Link to other discourses and concepts**

Historically, RBOs have been advanced within different paradigms, such as comprehensive rational planning and conservation movement in the early 20th century (Hays, 1959; Biswas et al., 2005), or with sustainable development in the 1990s (Barrow, 1998).
Beginning in the mid 1990s, global knowledge networks, such as Global Water Partnership and World Water Council together with numerous academics helped frame RBOs within IWRM, an approach to water management which aims at holistic and multi-level governance of water and related resources (GWP, 2000; Serageldin et al., 2000; Molle, 2008; Molle and Wester, 2009; Mollinga et al., 2006). The EU WFD, which includes river basin management plans as a key requirement, is a policy manifestation of this connection between IWRM and RBOs (Ker Rault and Jeffrey, 2008).

In addition to IWRM, the RBO discourse is often linked to the broader neo-liberal discourse particularly, decentralization. The WWC’s statements at numerous World Water For a as well as those of the World Commission on Water provide good examples (Goldman, 2007). Representing the modern decentralized model, Basin Authorities have been developed from the 13 regional offices of the state water agency in Mexico, with responsibilities for formulating regional policy, designing programmes, conducting studies, and administering water user fees (Dourojeanni, 2001). Some research suggests that the Mexican example of decentralized management is more about improving efficiency and sustainability of water services rather than decentralizing power – and decisions on water policy remain strongly under federal control (Wester et al., 2009: 407; Scott and Banister, 2008). Recurrent failure of the river basin councils to guide development in the basin however indicated at the complexity of r reform that is not limited to passage of a law and creation of RBOs (Cortes et al., 2011).

Finally, the RBO discourse is also linked to adaptive governance, particularly in the context of large rivers such as the Rhine (Myint, 2008), Murray-Darling (Allan, 2008), Amudarya and Mekong rivers systems (Lebel and Garden, 2008). A significant engine behind linking RBOs to adaptive governance discourse was the European Commission funded scientific project Newater, dedicated to ‘adaptive governance in river basins (Newater, no year) An informal global knowledge network that coalesced around this project has produced numerous academic publications, organized conferences; seminars and training courses and developed syllabi for MSc and Ph.D. courses in adaptive governance in river basins at the University of Osnabrueck, Wageningen University and the Global Water System Project (Newater, no date). Theoretically, frameworks are being advanced to better define and evaluate adaptiveness in river basin governance (Huijema et al., 2008).

Interestingly, there are some emerging arguments and discourses in global water governance that we do not yet see as linked to RBOs. For example, new forms of neo-liberalism are emerging around payments for watershed services, and offsetting of water pollution and abstraction (Francisco, 2008; Wunder et al., 2008). Although not yet institutionalized as such, such arguments may have significant bearing on the RBOs in the future, if new RBOs are formed or existing ones adapted to implement payments for ecosystem services and possibly administer offsetting of water footprints. Importantly, water security represents an emerging discourse in water governance (Cook and Bakker, 2012), and RBOs may well be framed in these terms in the coming future. Securitization of the environment and sustainable development have been treated in the literature since the
end of the Cold War (i.e. Zeitoun and Warner, 2006), and the discussions on transboundary water cooperation have been framed in security terms (Blatter and Ingram, 2001). However, RBOs so far have not been subjected to securitization, although this may be a possible scenario.

**An Expansive Reach for Global Knowledge Networks**

Our research suggests that the RBO discourse is not monolithic and represents an amalgamation of various ideas, symbols, and functions by which transnational policy entrepreneurs shape meanings in a particular manner and context (Stone, 2008; Kingdon, 1995). Importantly, our findings detect a pattern of specialization in the work of transnational policy entrepreneurs. IGOs and donors have the strength of leveraging both material and non-material incentives for actors to 'buy into' the RBO discourse. Global knowledge networks are most efficient in promoting ‘models’ of best practices and linking RBOs to other discourses, such as planning, development and IWRM (Conca, 2006), and therefore boosting legitimacy of these instruments. International NGOs are perhaps less influential in shaping discourses, but are instrumental in legitimizing these by replicating ideas and models supplied by IGOs, donors and knowledge actors. The private sector is powerful in linking the neo-liberal agenda to RBOs and disseminating the ‘models’ of best practice based on this paradigm. Such ‘division of labour’ is not exclusive to water governance and may be observed in public health, poverty eradication and other policies (Finnemore and Sikking, 2003; Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 2011). Table 1 illustrates how diverse actors pursue multiple strategies to promote RBO discourse.

**Table 1: Transnational policy entrepreneurs and their strategies**

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<td>Respond to changing values of the global civil society</td>
<td>Global knowledge networks, International NGOs</td>
<td>- The Rhine and Susquehanna Commissions change their missions to address water quality</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Evolution in management practices to reflect neo-liberal reform (e.g., Spain, China, France, Mexico)</td>
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<td>- ILA influence in global water agreements</td>
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<td>Leverage incentives for stakeholders</td>
<td>IGOs &amp; government-based development agencies, Global knowledge networks</td>
<td>- Creation of new RBOs (e.g., Kazakhstan and Vietnam)</td>
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<td>- Membership in professional legal and water networks</td>
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<td>- MSc and executive courses on IRBM/RBOs</td>
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Although all types of transnational policy entrepreneurs examined here participate in the advancement of RBOs, our research finds global knowledge networks to be most expansive in reach. This finding supports earlier research on the role of networks in providing information, creating knowledge and forging norms in global environmental governance (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 2011). More specifically, this finding reflects a strong body of research on the increasingly notable role of transnational policy networks as vehicles for policy processes (Stone, 2002, 2008; Stone and Maxwell, 2005). Our study on the rise of RBO discourse highlights how global knowledge networks define the boundaries of the RBO discourse and effectively determine the parameters of the community and the discourse by issuing the guidelines, organizing seminars and discussions at global water fora and conferences worldwide. Global knowledge networks like those examined here, including INBO, GWP, WWC and CAP-NET, legitimize and institutionalize the norm of river basin management, shaping RBOs as a natural ingredient in good governance reform. Indeed, without careful normative framing of RBOs, the funding conditionality of IGOs and donors, the private investment of water corporations, and the professional expertise of environmental consultants would have had much less stability against the ever-present resistance of environmental and human rights advocacy groups. In this way, knowledge networks may be seen as the oil in the machine of global water discourse around RBOs.

This finding raises several important issues related to the nature of RBO discourse in the broader global water governance discourse as well as compelling questions related to governance. First, it calls attention to the un-democratic tendencies in global knowledge networks, such as patterns of exclusion of dissident actors, lack of transparency in operation and accountability gap, which have been outlined in other policy realms such as development, climate change, deforestation and public health (Stone and Maxwell, 2005; Scholte, 2007; Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004; Biermann and Gupta, 2011). Beyond the rare exceptions of GWP and CGIAR (IEG, 2010; IEG 2012), most of activities of global knowledge networks in water governance are self-reported with little or no external validation. Given this, greater attention to issues of transparency and accountability in water governance, particularly governance of RBOs, is necessary.
Second, this finding raises questions about patterns of interaction. In our research, we observe the high intensity of interaction among transnational policy entrepreneurs. For example, links between transnational private sector and global knowledge networks have been discussed with regard to the promotion of neo-liberal discourses around water (Goldman, 2007). While studies of global initiatives suggest that more often than not, transnational policy entrepreneurs tend to cooperate (Varady et al., 2009; Stone and Maxwell, 2005), there are signs of inter-organizational competition as well, notably between the GWP and WWC, two premier global knowledge networks (Varady and Iles-Shih, 2009). To what extent global knowledge networks are characterized by cooperation versus competition is an important question in our understanding of the RBO discourse and governance. Greater attention may be required to study the conditions under which such competition may be beneficial or may need to be transformed into cooperation.

Finally, this finding raises questions about the specific nature of the strategies employed by global knowledge networks. Of the various strategies embraced by global knowledge networks, constructing and marketing ‘best practice’ examples is perhaps most worrisome from a governance perspective. Importantly, ‘best practices’ tend to over-simplify reality and target unattainable ideals (Molle, 2008). Contentious issues of water ecosystem degradation and water allocation in the Murray-Darling (Connell, 2006) or heated debates around the Agences de l’Eau (Flory, 2003) do not feature in presentations of best practices. Further, models of ‘best practices’ may also obscure the political nature of RBOs, and as part of a larger ‘antipolitics’ strategy, models can work to depoliticize an issue and provide an illusion of a broad consensus in an area that is deeply contested (Buscher, 2010; Ferguson, 1994).

**Conclusion**

Our research aims to better understand the rise of modern RBO discourse. An integrative approach of discourse analysis, political ecology and political economy calls attention to issues of ideas, scale and material interests. By emphasizing the concept of agency, we highlight the role of actors – or transnational policy entrepreneurs – in exercising authority and influencing change around RBO discourse. Understanding agency and strategies helps to shed light on the power dynamics involved, as well as the role of knowledge, information and norms in global water governance. We find that transnational policy entrepreneurs deliberately construct the meaning of RBOs and carry out the work of continuous re-interpretation of the discourse in order to maintain it on agenda. Global knowledge networks have the most expansive reach in the RBO discourse, which raises important questions around the nature of the networks and strategies employed in the broader global water governance discourse as well as compelling questions related to governance. Ultimately, we hope that understanding of strategies and nature of actors involved may help democratize global governance, and contribute to more harmonious interaction between transnational policy entrepreneurs as well as these with national state and non-state actors.
Although our research highlights how transnational policy entrepreneurs shape discourses and frame discussions, ultimately it is actors at national and sub-national level who take, appropriate and reconfigure these ideas in the process of governance. Thus, efforts at making the RBOs work better may need to focus at these two distinct levels: first, ensuring the greater democratization and synergy in the work of translational policy entrepreneurs in shaping the discourse; and second, in recognizing and understanding the process of contextualized water governance. The process of ‘hammering out’ of RBOs is highly contextualized and the primacy of the politics of adaptation in determination of their shape and performance occurs at national and sub-national levels. Future research might well move beyond the transnational level of this research to examine national and local actors, including governments, in shaping, maintaining and operating the RBO discourse. Especially interesting could be a study of agency and strategies of a single transnational policy entrepreneur, such as INBO, for example, in its quest to develop, promote and maintain the RBO discourse. In any case, attention to actors and strategies across various policy contexts is a promising direction in the study of discourses, and it in the hope of more research in this direction that we lodge forward the argument of this paper.
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