

Transformative Development Pathways: Critical Perspectives on Urbanisation, Land and Water

WaterPower Symposium 2019 in Trier

On 15 - 16 July 2019, WaterPower held its final Symposium at Trier University to connect and reconnect with researchers from the fields of urban and human geography and political ecology, among others. The two days were filled with discussions and debates on current transformations in the context of uneven environments with a strong focus on urban areas in the global South.

The six sessions were linked to WaterPower's research centred on the contested geographies of water in the urban context, drawing on in-depth case studies on urbanisation patterns, practices in the provision of water, uneven access to water, water-related risks, as well as conservation politics in urban aquatic ecosystems in Accra, Ghana. With a range of brilliant contributions from invited researchers and insights into diverse case studies throughout the two days, the sessions provided a rich foundation for debates and reflections focused on socio-ecological inequalities in the context of urbanisation, land and water.

Prof. Michelle Kooy (IHE Delft) opened up the Symposium with a kick-off presentation on "critical perspectives on current development pathways". Her talk focused on unequal and unjust societal orders and processes of change. Her presentation set the stage for questions on what different ways of thinking about social and ecological challenges are needed to make sense of the city and processes that shape transformations.

With insights from diverse case studies predominantly in the global South, a reoccurring key point was the need for an understanding of current transformations beyond given binaries, such as formal and informal, urban development and modern infrastructural ideals, as well as the urban-rural dichotomy. Among many vivid presentations and discussions, one contribution was made by Prof. David Simon (Mistra Urban Futures, Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg and Royal Holloway, London). He explored the peri-urban interface as an important example of theorizing on and in the global South to lead the way to account for the greater complexities and rapid changes encountered, and then retrospectively applied increasingly globally within diverse settings.

Moving on from questions of water access and provision as well as water-related risks, contributions in a session on conservation politics highlighted the role of urban ecosystems, such as wetlands, and the potential as well as the complex of problems around payment for ecosystem services. One of the speakers, Dr. Martin Lukas (artec, Research Centre for Sustainability Studies of the University of Bremen), addressed the risk (surrounding ecosystem services) of distracting attention from historically rooted local, regional, and national problems that are the core obstacles to a more sustainable resource management.

A concluding session around the theme of transformation ideals and transformations in practice considered what could be drawn from the many issues across the breadth of case studies presented during the Symposium. The panel discussion explored development discourses and the possibilities of alternatives to dominant approaches in water provision, such as community-actor-partnerships and more cooperative approaches to engaging with informal settlements' access to water. The Symposium ended with a final outlook on research challenges and opportunities with view to the role of interdisciplinary projects like WaterPower and critical future research directions.

WaterPower is a BMBF-funded research project based at Trier University. For more information, please visit www.waterpower.science.

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