

Water accounting with a human face. Can global measurements on water sustainability and local perspectives on resource redistributions engage in a meaningful conversation?

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International donors are increasingly keen on global standardized measurements like Water footprint or Water Accounting+ (WA+) to promote the sustainable use of water resources. WA+ uses global scale remote sensing datasets to provide “independent estimates of water flows, fluxes, stocks, consumption and services” and to promote “hydrological data democracy”. While sympathising with this goal, we argue that WA+ approach foregrounds only a single view of water efficiency, productivity and sustainability, which resonates with specific uses, in particular large scale commercial agriculture. This de-politicises water governance issues, particularly how humans and water infrastructures shape differences in water productivity, and what these differences mean in terms of resources redistribution and related conflicts.

We aim to highlight these issues by bringing into conversation WA+ and ethnographic research and exploring new alliances between seemingly incommensurable perspectives on what sustainability in water resources management practically means. Building on the findings of a visual research using Photovoice, we situate on the satellite based WA+ maps the stories and the pictures of different actors involved in or affected by a large scale investment in irrigation in the Beles valley (Ethiopia). We unpack the pixels of WA+ maps, highlighting issues that cannot be seen from the satellite, like: the plurality of meanings associated to water and related resources (land, labour), and the social, institutional and power relations between different pixels and how they have been affected by the large scale investment in irrigation.

These insights suggest that if international donors and policy makers are truly keen in promoting democracy and equity in water management, they need to carefully rethink the scope and application of global resources measurements like WA+ and to combine these methods with analysis situating water governance and sustainability in local contexts and acknowledging its contentious dynamics.