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"Water, Policy and Governance"

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There is growing consensus that the global water crisis is mainly a crisis of 'governance'. In most countries plentiful water resources can no longer be taken for granted. More and more people in an increasing number of countries are experiencing water differently—as a limited resource that must be carefully managed for the benefit of people and the environment, in the present and for the future. The emerging paradigm is one of resource constraints, conservation, and awareness of the fragility of water's life cycle. Yet, it is still open to debate what 'water governance' exactly means. Moreover, simple definitions of water itself have become obsolete and there is a heated global debate on the topic. Water has multiple functions and values, most of which are incommensurable. While in some of its uses water has increasingly become a commodity, in many other functions water takes the form of a social or public good. For many, the hydrosphere is a common good that must be governed and managed as such. Is the access to essential volumes of safe water a human right or not? Does it really matter? Water serves many roles depending on the wider political, economic, social, cultural and environmental context. Perhaps the crucial question is: Is there truly a new paradigm of water governance emerging, or are we simply engaging in delusionary rhetoric? Many signs all over the world suggest that the way water is perceived, governed, and managed is indeed changing, but the direction of this change is highly uncertain. This is reflected in the ongoing contradictions that characterise the global debates about water governance policy, some of which were captured in the papers presented at the IWHA Conference that we summarise here.

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