Chapter 15: Water Policy and the Green Transition

Key Messages

Perspectives

- Canadians are starting to realize the climate crisis is a water crisis as they observe fundamental challenges related to flooding, droughts, wildfires, and water quality issues
- Water rights are interconnected with land rights and Indigenous rights, yet colonial approaches still dominate
- Water is fundamentally viewed as a resource for human and economic use, not as a human right or in terms of sustainability to entire ecosystem
- Water is important in all regions in Canada and water issues vary by region
- Powerful vested water users have embedded water rights that permeate water politics
- Water quantity and water quality policy regimes have evolved separately, yet Canada's Green Transition requires integrated, One Water and natural infrastructure approaches
- Canadians and politicians take water for granted
- Indigenous perspectives, knowledges and approaches need to be central to a policy shift based on different values to support a Green Transition
- Traditional water science historically critical to water policy and water data from variety of sources increasingly recognized as critical to a Green Transition
- Perspectives predominantly have a domestic focus; limited engagement and learning from innovative water governance perspectives on the world stage

Processes

- Historical legacies related to water quality and quantity
- Water is subject to multiple uses and abuses; yet low levels of user engagement in governance processes
- Mature governance and policy processes related to basins and watersheds across Canada
- Liberal government announced commitment to establish a Canada Water Agency in 2019 and had national engagement process, yet still not fully established or adequately funded
- Public opinion research indicates Canadians value water highly but are not active participants in water governance and policy, expect governments to protect and govern water

- Value of water is not fully costed in water use and allocation processes from an economic, social, cultural, ecosystem or environmental perspective

Policies

- Water is subject to an intergovernmental set of policies, with asymmetrical responsibility residing with the provinces
- Some intergovernmental work through Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment yet important perspectives absent (Indigenous, municipal etc.)
- Lack of a federal leadership role for decades; low political priority related to climate change and green transition agenda
- Canada Water Act not updated since 1970; Federal Water Policy since 1987
- Clear policy goals related to fishable, swimmable, drinkable waters in basins such as the Great Lakes Basin with mature policy implementation regimes, yet dependent on government-led implementation

Recommendations

- Need for fundamental paradigm and value shift related to water
- Need to modernize national policy framework in collaboration with Indigenous communities, provinces and municipalities
- Need for more intergovernmental policy capacity related to water
- Need to integrate water into current climate policies and priorities
- Prioritize engagement and responsibilities of all water users
- Provide investments in Canada Water Agency that reflect current and future value of freshwater as a national priority
- Need for national investment in water data (surface and groundwater), particularly related to climate change, Indigenous knowledge, community science and open data
- Need to support existing policies at watershed scale which provide flexibility for regional differentiation and federalism, but still have strong water and climate outcomes
- Need for innovation in water policies that address Canadian priorities for equity across vulnerable communities, such as supporting substantive partnerships with Indigenous communities, water as a human right and affordable access to water
- Emphasize costs of inaction in Canada and globally, if water is neglected as part of the Green Transition