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Emulating Capillary Action: Role of Epistemic Communities in Creating a Transformative Network in the Euphrates-Tigris Basin

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Water, more than most of other liquids, has an intriguing ability which is called the “capillary action”. In essence, capillary action is defined as the ability of water to flow in narrow spaces without the assistance of, or even against, external forces such as gravity. A piece of paper towel put on a water droplet may illustrate this phenomenon. The water will climb the paper, contrary to fundamental physical rule about gravitational forces. There is a perfect potential for an analogy in this experiment.

Metaphorically, capillary action symbolizes the capability of epistemic communities in defying the limitations related to decision-making structures characterized by rigid hierarchies (e.g. governments). Norm “infusion” in water management, as I would call it, can be better achieved through utilization and enhancement of “adhesiveness” of the epistemic communities’ and also of “permeability” of the hierarchical structures. Norm infusion, in this sense, differs from the norm diffusion which generally occurs through processes of coercion, competition, learning, and emulation and means “spread of norms” usually from a central point. Infusion means “teaching and impressing by frequent repetitions or admonitions”. This is what epistemic communities can do when suitable conditions permit. In other words, when epistemic communities are enabled to go beyond their role of “provision of knowledge”, norm infusion may occur. Norm infusion thus represents the “esse quam videri point” for epistemic communities.

The strength of epistemic communities’ ability to infuse norms into a system depends on a number of factors. These factors can be divided into two broad categories. While some of the factors are linked to the nature of and limits to the “adhesiveness” of epistemic communities themselves, i.e. their power to have “potential for impact”; remaining factors are related more with the “permeability” of the hierarchical system where norms will be infused. Therefore, in determining the basics of norm-infusion, both agency-level and system-level factors are at work.

In this paper, I propose creation a network (WaterNET: Water Network of the Euphrates and Tigris) of scientists for sharing data regarding the Euphrates-Tigris Basin. In the past, numerous cooperative attempts have been destined to fail because of the bureaucratic and political difficulties. This, in turn, created an atmosphere of distrust among the riparians whereby countries refrained from exchanging data. Creating a reliable and complete set of data is a must for sound water management in a given basin. Such a network would be easier to achieve than many other types of cooperative schemes, since community of science has fewer biases, and has a greater tendency for dialogue and exchange of data and ideas.

When this network (epistemic community) achieves a certain level of maturity, it will have a capacity to influence decision makers through a process, I would call, infusion. Transfer of knowledge will not instantly translate into commonly agreed norms. However, establishing of a positive dialogue setting among the notable experts from three riparians will trigger the process which will incrementally develop into a more concrete outlook.