



Socio-hydrology: A New Perspective on Mountain Waterscapes at the Nexus of Natural and Social Processes

Author: Nüsser, Marcus

Source: Mountain Research and Development, 37(4) : 518-520

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/MRD-JOURNAL-D-17-00101.1>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Socio-hydrology: A New Perspective on Mountain Waterscapes at the Nexus of Natural and Social Processes

The research field of socio-hydrology emerged recently as an attempt to better understand the interactions and feedback loops within water management systems (Sivapalan et al 2012). While acknowledging that the human impact on natural processes has reached unprecedented levels—a period now often termed the “Anthropocene”—the socio-hydrological perspective sheds light on the integrated character of water geographies and its implications for water supply and management. Departing from a critical perspective of political ecology, the hybrid nature of human–water relations has also been explored under the umbrella of waterscapes. In these studies, the importance of biophysical forces is recognized, but greater emphasis is placed on the role of politics and culture in shaping them (Swyngedouw 1999). This perspective, which has a stronger constructivist angle, is also evident in research dealing with the hydrosocial cycle, with a number of regional examples from the Andes of Chile (Boelens 2014; Linton and Budds 2014; Prieto 2015; Usón et al 2017). Despite critical commentary (Sivakumar 2012), the socio-hydrological perspective provides for a comprehensive understanding of water systems and aims at solution-oriented recommendations (Di Baldassarre et al 2013, 2015; Sivapalan 2015; Pande and Savenije 2016; Pande and Sivapalan 2016). Thus, socio-hydrology offers novel entry points for a more fertile engagement between the natural and social sciences across different scales ranging from the plot level to entire

watersheds. Its interdisciplinary nature encompasses (and integrates) various methodological approaches: from the air (remote sensing), on the ground (empirical field studies), and in the laboratory (modeling).

Even though the coevolution of hydrological and social processes has existed since ancient times, little attention has been paid to the nexus of human–water relations and its applicability under diverse conditions. It was only in 2012 that the term “socio-hydrology” was coined, almost simultaneously, in 2 independently authored papers (Nüsser et al 2012; Sivapalan et al 2012). Since then various reviews and papers have explored the usefulness and applicability of conceptual approaches within this research field (Blair and Buytaert 2016; Wesslink et al 2016). The growing interest in concepts of socio-hydrology reflects its validity as a lens with which to identify problems and find solutions toward critical human–water relations (Figure 1).

Mountain regions are characterized by dynamic water-related processes and associated risks, and they are important water towers that serve the demands of huge populations both in uplands and adjoining lowlands (Viviroli et al 2007). These regions are renowned for their diverse range of environmental and social variables—which lead to highly site-specific particularities. The integrated perspective of socio-hydrology provides a flexible and nuanced way to deal with a multitude of water-related issues across various scales. Examples of coupled systems most prominent in mountain environments include glacier changes, flood dynamics, and irrigation networks (Nüsser et al 2012; Carey et al 2017) as well as mining activities and water quality (Rojas and Vandecasteele 2007; Huang et al 2010) to name but a few. These advances in understanding waterscapes in mountain regions have also been a focus of several

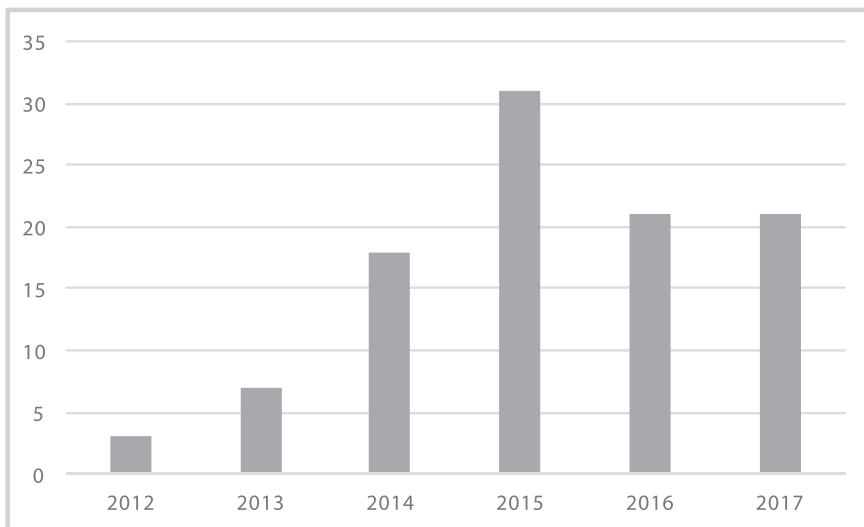
papers published in this journal (*MRD*). Though these papers have not explicitly used a socio-hydrological conceptual framework, they do employ an integrated perspective in analyzing critical human–water relations (Paerregaard 2013; Prieto 2015; Ali et al 2017).

One specific example is the case of glacier-fed irrigation networks in the semiarid western Himalayan and Karakoram ranges (Kreutzmann 2011). Here, socio-hydrological interactions are highly spatially and temporally dynamic, having been shaped by the interplay of (glacio-)fluvial runoff, water distribution mechanisms, socioeconomic conditions, and external development interventions. Case studies in relatively close spatial proximity within these mountain ranges (from the Hunza Karakoram and the Nanga Parbat region) reveal singularly unique adaptation strategies to cope with variations in water supply and risks associated with glacier lake outburst floods (Parveen et al 2015; Nüsser and Schmidt 2017).

Another small-scale study, this time from the Trans-Himalaya of Ladakh, India, focuses on the innovative so-called “artificial glaciers,” which are cascading ice storage dams introduced in several tributaries of Indus River. These artificial structures, located at altitudes below the glaciers and above agricultural settlements, seek to minimize the risk of water scarcity for smallholder irrigation. Such ice storage dams utilize the physical process of icing to facilitate the freezing of stream water during the winter to be later released as meltwater in the critical growing period in spring (Clouse et al 2016; Nüsser and Baghel 2016).

The construction of dams for hydroelectricity, flood protection, and irrigation continues apace in almost all mountain regions and has led to a massive transformation of river systems and significant socioeconomic outcomes. Such large projects represent the results of complex and

FIGURE 1 Number of peer-reviewed publications with the term “socio-hydrology” between 2012 and 2017. (Source: Web of Science, data collection: 20 September 2017)



competing actor interests as well as feats of engineering that seek to control and harness nature through the fragmentation of fluvial environments. The socio-hydrological nature of dam building under diverse socioeconomic, political, and technological settings becomes apparent through the implementation of new water and energy governance (Erlewein and Nüsser 2011; Nüsser and Baghel 2017).

The analyses of these site-specific human–water systems benefit from a socio-hydrological perspective, which is not a set of static predetermined steps and methods but a flexible concept that better engages with the fluid and complex interactions of waterscapes at various scales. In addition to providing a sound conceptual lens for human–water research, this approach has great potential for informing policy frameworks within the context of mountain development and adaptation strategies to global environmental change in mountain regions and beyond. With its broad perspective, promoting systems, targets, and transformation knowledge for sustainable development, *MRD* is an ideal platform to foster socio-hydrological research. Therefore, it is hoped that more contributions adopting the

socio-hydrological lens will be submitted to this journal.

REFERENCES

- Ali J, Nizami A, Hebinck P.** 2017. Mismanagement of irrigation water and landslides in Yourjogh, Pakistan. *Mountain Research and Development* 37(2):170–178.
- Clouse C, Anderson N, Shipling T.** 2016. Ladakh's artificial glaciers: Climate-adaptive design for water scarcity. *Climate and Development* 9(5):428–438.
- Di Baldassarre G, Viglione A, Carr G, Kuil L, Salinas JL, Blöschl G.** 2013. Socio-hydrology: Conceptualising human-flood interactions. *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences* 17(8):3295–3303.
- Di Baldassarre G, Viglione A, Carr G, Kuil L, Yan K, Brandimarte L, Blöschl G.** 2015. Debates—Perspectives on socio-hydrology: Capturing feedbacks between physical and social processes. *Water Resources Research* 51(6):4770–4781.
- Blair P, Buytaert W.** 2016. Socio-hydrological modelling: A review asking “why, what and how?” *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences* 20(1):443–478.
- Boelens R.** 2014. Cultural politics and the hydrosocial cycle: Water, power and identity in the Andean highlands. *Geoforum* 57:234–247.
- Carey M, Molden OC, Rasmussen MB, Jackson M, Nolin AW, Mark BG.** 2017. Impacts of glacier recession and declining meltwater on mountain societies. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 107(2):350–359.
- Erlewein A, Nüsser M.** 2011. Offsetting greenhouse gas emissions in the Himalaya? Clean development dams in Himachal Pradesh, India. *Mountain Research and Development* 31(4):293–304.
- Huang X, Sillanpää M, Gjessing ET, Peräniemi S, Vogt RD.** 2010. Environmental impact of mining activities on the surface water quality in Tibet: Gyama valley. *Science of the Total Environment* 408(19):4177–4184.
- Kreutzmann H.** 2011. Scarcity within opulence: Water management in the Karakoram mountains revisited. *Journal of Mountain Science* 8(4):525–534.
- Linton J, Budds J.** 2014. The hydrosocial cycle: Defining and mobilizing a relational-dialectical approach to water. *Geoforum* 57:170–180.
- Nüsser M, Baghel R.** 2016. Local knowledge and global concerns: Artificial glaciers as a focus of environmental knowledge and development interventions. In: Meusbürger P, Freytag T, Suarsana L, editors. *Ethnic and Cultural Dimensions of Knowledge*. Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, pp 191–209.
- Nüsser M, Baghel R.** 2017. The emergence of technological hydrosocials in the Anthropocene: Socio-hydrology and development paradigms of large dams. In: Warf B, editor. *Handbook on Geographies of Technology*. Cheltenham, United Kingdom: Edward Elgar, pp 287–301.
- Nüsser M, Schmidt S.** 2017. Nanga Parbat revisited: Evolution and dynamics of socio-hydrological interactions in the northwestern Himalaya. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 107(2):403–415.
- Nüsser M, Schmidt S., Dame J.** 2012. Irrigation and development in the upper Indus Basin: Characteristics and recent changes of a socio-hydrological system in central Ladakh, India. *Mountain Research and Development* 32(1):51–61.
- Paerregaard K.** 2013. Governing water in the Andean community of Cabanaconde, Peru: From resistance to opposition and to cooperation (and back again?). *Mountain Research and Development* 33(3):207–214.
- Pande S, Savenije HHG.** 2016. A sociohydrological model for smallholder farmers in Maharashtra, India. *Water Resources Research* 52:1923–1947.
- Pande S, Sivapalan M.** 2016. Progress in socio-hydrology: A meta-analysis of challenges and opportunities. *WIREs Water* 2017:4(4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1193>.
- Parveen S, Winiger M, Schmidt S, Nüsser M.** 2015. Irrigation in upper Hunza: Evolution of socio-hydrological interactions in the Karakoram, northern Pakistan. *Erdkunde* 69(1):69–85.
- Prieto M.** 2015. Privatizing water in the Chilean Andes: The case of Las Vegas de Chiu-Chiu. *Mountain Research and Development* 35(3):220–229.
- Rojas JC, Vandecasteele C.** 2007. Influence of mining activities in the north of Potosí, Bolivia on the water quality of the Chayanta River, and its consequences. *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment* 132(1–3):321–330.
- Sivakumar B.** 2012. Socio-hydrology: Not a new science, but a recycled and re-worded hydrosociology. *Hydrological Processes* 26(24):3788–3790.
- Sivapalan M.** 2015. Debates—Perspectives on socio-hydrology: Changing water systems and the “tyranny of small problems”—Socio-hydrology. *Water Resources Research* 51(6):4795–4805.
- Sivapalan M, Savenije HHG, Blöschl G.** 2012. Socio-hydrology: A new science of people and water. *Hydrological Processes* 26(8):1270–1276.
- Swyngedouw E.** 1999. Modernity and hybridity: Nature, regenerationism, and the production of the Spanish waterscape, 1890–1930. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89(3):443–465.
- Usón TJ, Henríquez C, Dame J.** 2017. Disputed water: Competing knowledge and power asymmetries in the Yali Alto basin, Chile. *Geoforum* 85:247–258.
- Viviroli D, Dürr HH, Messerli B, Meybeck M, Weingartner R.** 2007. Mountains of the world, water towers for humanity: Typology, mapping,

and global significance. *Water Resources Research* 43(W07447):1–13.

Wesselink A, Kooy M, Warne J. 2016. Socio-hydrology and hydrosocial analysis: Toward dialogues across disciplines. *WIREs Water* 2016. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1196>.

AUTHOR**Marcus Nüsser**

marcus.nuesser@uni-heidelberg.de
MRD International Editorial Board member,
South Asia Institute, Department of
Geography, Universität Heidelberg, Im
Neuenheimer Feld 330, 69120 Heidelberg,
Germany

© 2017 Nüsser. This open access article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Please credit the authors and the full source.