Aligning Agendas

Practitioner Practices to Navigate Situations of Misaligned Agendas in South Caucasus' Donor-Funded Water Management Projects

A Research Paper presented by:

Adilet Akmatbaev
Germany

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:

Governance and Development Policy Major
(GDP)

Specialization:

International Political Economy and Development

Members of the Examining Committee:

Farhad Mukhtarov
Sunil Tankha

The Hague, The Netherlands
December 2024

Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the International Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

Inquiries:

International Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands

t: +31 70 426 0460
e: info@iss.nl
w: www.iss.nl
fb: http://www.facebook.com/iss.nl
twitter: @issnl

Location:

Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands

Acknowledgements

This is the first research project that I have conducted 'in the field' and am beyond grateful for the experiences, challenges and people I have encountered along the way. Doing fieldwork is an exciting, yet humbling, stressful and, at times, lonely effort. Above all, however, it was a privilege made possible by those, whose support helped me make this journey a reality.

To my supervisor, Dr. Farhad Mukhtarov, I am deeply grateful for introducing me to this fascinating topic, and for your care, understanding, guidance and encouragement along the way. You helped turn this MA into a truly memorable experience. Thank you!

I am also grateful to my second reader, Dr. Sunil Tankha. Your feedback helped me reflect, refine my ideas and deepen the quality of my work. Thank you for your guidance and direction!

To Alen Amirkhanian, thank you for your warmth and hospitality, which made me feel at home in Yerevan! To the practitioners who took time out of their busy schedules and agreed to be interviewed, I am incredibly grateful. This research would not have been possible without your contributions.

To my family, whether in Buenos Aires, Bishkek, Frankfurt, Berlin or Den Haag, I dedicate this work to you. I am forever indebted for the opportunities you give me, your silent sacrifices, and for your unwavering love and trust. As I am finishing my academic journey, I can't thank you enough for helping me each step of the way. This all would not have been possible without you.

Contents

List of Tables

List of Appendices

List of Acronyms

EU	European Union
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit / German Agency for International Development
KfW	Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau / German State-owned Investment Bank for Development
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Abstract

The agendas of primary project stakeholders in donor-funded water management projects are often misaligned. While the existence of divergent priorities is not an uncommon phenomenon in policy contexts, it is particularly prevalent in the South Caucasus, given vested donor interests, as well as inter- and intra-government tensions. On-the-ground practitioners act as bridges between the project's contending parties, harmonizing misaligned agendas into viable project practices. Literature points to the practitioners' central role in this harmonization dynamic but its underlying processes remain a black box. This study builds on practice theory to investigate (1) how practitioners exercise their agency to deal with situations of misaligned agendas, (2) what strategies and practices they employ, (3) what roles beyond formal responsibilities they assume, and (4) how their perceived positionality shapes their practices. Freeman et al.'s (2011) framework was expanded to analyze the practices of interviewed practitioners in Georgia and Armenia as "configurations of actions, norms, knowledge" and positionality. Findings reveal that practitioners are creative and powerful agents, assuming a variety of informal roles to employ practices of creative compliance, adaptive mediation and indirect coercion. The extent of their agency, however, is limited to the scope of harmonization by the donors' inherent detachment from what is feasible, demanded or needed on the ground. Perceived positionality is also influential in determining the extent of their agency and the type of practice that emerges. Additionally, the analysis highlights underlying power relations in the region's water management domain. It brings into the foreground the image of strong states, which despite their donor-dependence, hold significant power to shape project efforts.

Relevance to Development Studies

In many ways, donor projects are seen as a major source of development. Countless donor-funded initiatives are undertaken, which are paralleled by a similar amount of literature that concerns itself with their effectiveness, approaches and relevance. In line with that, valid concerns are raised that question the motivations and needs for donor interventions. This research looks beyond that, focusing on the actors that are often overlooked in broader development debates. Practitioners, despite the criticisms and constraints are on-the-ground, continuing their work and are thus enacting development. In assuming a practice-based approach to study their lived reality, this paper pragmatically argues that development is as much the practical reality of its implementors, as it is the macro of its planners and academia. Looking at practices offers valuable knowledge on the nature of development, its actors and the 'field'.

Keywords

Water Management; Practitioners; Donor-Funded Projects; Practice Theory (Theories of Practice); Practices; South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia); Misaligned Agendas.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

During an interview with a program director of a donor-funded water management project in Georgia, I asked Leon (pseudonym) whether he thinks that the agendas of the donor organization and the national government are aligned. After thinking for a moment, he replied that the "boss" – a way of referring to the donor he used throughout the interview – has good ideas "but they don't necessarily do projects that align." He continued by outlining a trend he has observed. When a project is "in the works," the donor will meet with the corresponding ministry initially, before designing the projects behind closed doors. Leon affirmed that "they don't spend enough time with the ministry to align priorities." In many ways, project policies are developed in isolation from their pertinent reality and are then handed over to the project practitioners to make them work without a clear indication of the how.

Mosse (2004), who has spent over a decade working as an embedded researcher-practitioner in a development project in India, highlights that this is not a solitary phenomenon but a broader tendency in international development. Efforts are invested into conceptualizing macro-level considerations that frame a project, its declarative policies. However, in doing so, "there is surprisingly little attention paid to the relationship between these models and the practices and events that they are expected to generate or legitimize in a particular context" (p. 640). This, the author argues, does not make project policies 'bad' but idealistic, spawning an inverse relationship to the intended. Rather than "policy producing practice, practices produce policy, in the sense that actors in development devote their energies to maintaining coherent representations regardless of events" (p. 640). Practitioners thus largely become reactionaries, tasked with, on the one hand, the responsibility of maintaining a unified project image and on the other, meeting local agendas that allow projects to work. The experts, consultants and researchers, among others, assume roles beyond their formal duties and are thus responsible for thinking and acting politically, particularly in situations where the agendas of primary project stakeholders are misaligned.

Academia has picked up on this trend, backing these considerations with concrete examples. Bergh (2021), for instance, in her analysis of donor-driven decentralization reforms in Morocco and Tunisia, identified that the German development agency (GIZ) does not systematically analyze and consider the countries' political dynamics ex-ante, "mostly rely[ing] on political economy expertise found within its large pool of local staff as well as expertise acquired on-the-job by its international staff" (p. 190). Similarly, Hasan et al. (2022), in their analysis of the Dutch delta policy transfer approach in Vietnam and Bangladesh, highlight how the effectiveness of projects "does not so much depend on the technical planning skills or the water expertise" of project practitioners but rather on their abilities to form "alliances" and enable "political buy-in" (p. 58). While these accounts identify the practitioners' central role in driving project policies through their scope of agency, they do not explore the underlying situations and processes, the nuances of the political and social dimensions that shape their work. How do they navigate the everyday politics of their operational environments? Why are specific strategies and practices employed, and how are they improvised to fit a given scenario?

Considering, what informs our understanding of development should not be limited to macro-level theorizations on the problems, complexities, politicized natures of- or the generalized remedies within a given context. These accounts should be enriched with the on-the-ground realities, concrete manifestations of problems, its actors and their practicable answers. Practices are the engines of development work, the situated efforts of practitioners to make their projects happen. The aim of this paper is to show that donor-funded water

management efforts in the South Caucasus' water management domain are inseparable from and are constituted by the specific practices of practitioners tasked with implementing these projects. By conceptualizing the enacted practices as "specific configurations of action, norms and knowledge" (Freeman et al., 2011, p. 128), as well as perceived positionality in the sense of organizational embeddedness and proximity to key actors, this study puts a face to the complexity of the task practitioners are faced with. Drawing on first-hand accounts, this research highlights the actual "challenges, strategies, traps and possibilities" (Forester, 1999, p. 8) practitioners navigate and employ in situations of misaligned agendas, assuming different roles and drawing from a variety of attributes to foster harmonized project narratives.

In doing so, this paper paints a picture of their lived reality and of the immense effort needed to ensure this continuity of appearance. The naturalization of this phenomenon signals that idealistic project policies that demand such efforts are consequences of the donors' inherent disconnect from local conditions. Driven by soft-power motivations, they are not focused on designing context-specific solutions, relaying the burden of enacting development to project practitioners. Trapped in constellations that require them to think and act politically ultimately leaves little scope to focus on driving tangible and sustainable solutions. By systematically dissecting practitioner practices to bring this to attention, this study hopes to stimulate a debate on the efficacy of current donor-funded water management initiatives and stimulate learning for better interventions.

The subsequent sections are structured in the following manner. First, the nature of the research problem, along with the research questions and the scope of research will be presented. Consequently, the second chapter will outline the conceptual framework that was employed, providing insights into practice theory, positionality and broader applications of practice-based approaches. Chapter three details the methodology, methods, ethics and positionality statements, as well as the limitations of this study. The findings are presented in chapter four, divided into the three major themes of practices of creative compliance, adaptive mediation and indirect coercion, and dissected into actions, norms, knowledge and positionality. Chapter five discusses the implications of these findings, before concluding remarks and directions for future research are highlighted in chapter six.

1.1. Nature of Research Problem

The action arena of donor-funded water management projects in the South Caucasus is complex. Donors have been present in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia since their independence in 1991 and "play a significant role in supporting national and transboundary water management" (Altingoz et al., 2018, p. 23). In the past 25 years, over a dozen cross border and even more in-country water management project have been implemented, signaling an implied alignment between development partners' continued interest in the region and the national stakeholders' acceptance of their development support (Altingoz et al., 2018; Tonayan, 2019; Vener, 2007). Below this layer of continuity, however, it becomes evident that donor-funded water management efforts are structured around misaligned agendas, which are translated and reproduced into viable, externally observable project practices. While the persistence of varying interests is not uncommon in policy processes, it is particularly prevalent and sensitive in the region, given intra and inter-country tensions, as well as geopolitical motives of the donors. Campana et al. (2012), for instance, highlight that donor "interest in the South Caucasus [is] a new version of the Great Game" (p. 28), who use water management as a gateway to pursue their own agendas. The focus of this paper lies on practitioners, the experts, consultants, managers and researchers, who are often overlooked and under researched in this particular context but are central in understanding

how donor-funded water management projects take shape in light of these misalignments. Particularly, attention is given to an elusive part of their job – their practices.

Practitioners operate as bridges between primary project stakeholders. Mitchell (2018) outlines that "development organizations have their own sets of interests and requirements for projects, reflecting donor priorities and global trends and targets that are not always congruent with state priorities" (p.12). Nonetheless, project implementation requires the buy-in of national governments, as an alignment with domestic priorities is crucial to gain a political blessing and lasting legitimacy. This is further highlighted by Altingoz et al. (2018), who, in their analysis of donor-funded water quality initiatives, state that "national institutions are the main stakeholders and decision-makers" (p. 18). The zero-sum nature of water management presents an additional source of intra-government pressures that practitioners encounter. Vener (2007) explains that "water [in the respective countries] is used for municipal, industrial, agricultural, irrigation, fishery, recreation, and transportation purposes" (p. 26). The author continues that in Armenia, there are "various ministries […] involved in water resource management" (p. 30) and similarly, "several ministries oversee different aspects of water management [in Georgia]" (Altingoz et al., 2018, p. 19). Consequently, national governments, donors, and each respective ministry try to prioritize their own agendas, which exacerbate pressures on the project and demand greater harmonization measures.

While these considerations are a central element in understanding the nature of development work in the South Caucasus, they are not the focus of this study. Rather, the "concern is not whether but *how* development works" (Mosse, 2004, p. 641, original emphasis), given the varying interest of primary project stakeholders. The active donor presence in the region hints towards a trend in consensus reaching: a finding of a middle ground that harmonizes competing demands in pursued project policies. Mosse (2004) acknowledges this unification, stating that "clearly common narratives or commanding interpretations are supported for different reasons and serve a diversity of perhaps contradictory interests" (p. 647). The difficulty remains in operationalizing this marriage in on-the-ground practices. "Strategies, models and designs express policy at the project level" (p. 640) and, in turn, the practices through which those are implemented are concealed by policy considerations. In more concrete terms, seemingly harmonized project objectives mask the divergences in interests, worldviews and positions, and by looking at specific practices, those differences are brought to light.

Project practitioners are hence central in understanding *how* donor-funded water management projects materialize. They mediate the project's contending parties and their agendas, engaging in "the constant work of translation (of policy goals into practical interests; practical interests back into policy goals), which is the task of skilled brokers […] who read the meaning of a project into different institutional languages of its stakeholder supporters" (ibid, p. 647). The practices that underlie this process are thus more than just mere actions but are meaningful, deliberated and highly context dependent reactions within specific situations. Dissecting what a practitioner does in circumstances where the agendas of primary project stakeholders are misaligned allows for a deeper understanding of the often overlooked dynamics of the region's donor-funded water management landscape.

What is externally observable, the tangible project lines, are extensively consequences of strategic political maneuvering, manifested through practitioner practices that are grounded in their interpretation of the social situations in which the action is set. This process of harmonization is a black box and is constituted by the deliberate actions of practitioners. Inevitably, given the improvised, subjective and context-dependent nature of practices, these processes will remain a black box and can only be examined through individual cases. Systematically unpacking and highlighting the processes that shape these efforts reveals a

lived reality, reflective of the larger project dynamics in the South Caucasus. Projects, distancing themselves from the inceptive "purpose of policy […] to shape and order practice" (Freeman et al., 2011, p. 127), demand practitioners to merge away from their formal roles as drivers of development work and revert to maintaining project continuity in light of evident constrains. This paper, based on the first-hand accounts of practitioners working in donor-funded settings in Georgia and Armenia, will shine a light onto these in-practice challenges, and reveal how project policies necessitate them to think and act politically through deliberate actions, informed by their understanding of norms, tacit knowledge and perceived positionality. Thus, this research sets out to inspire a reflection on development work through the eyes of the practitioner, encouraging a recalibration of the donor's project policies with their intended practices.

1.2. Research Question and Sub Questions

How do practitioners working in donor-funded water management projects in the South Caucasus exercise their agency to deal with situations of misaligned agendas?

- What strategies and practices do different practitioners develop to harmonize the agendas of primary project stakeholders?
- What roles beyond formal responsibilities do practitioners assume?
- How does their perceived positionality shape their practices?

1.3. Scope of Research

The study is limited to the exploration of practitioner practices specifically in international, donor-funded water management project contexts. It is a practitioner-based and not project-based study. In line with that, it does not discriminate between the types of practitioners, including insights from experts in technical, research, consultant and managerial positions. Within each country, practitioners from a wide range of different donor organizations, civil society and independent research institutes were included.

Fieldwork was conducted within a sixteen-day timeframe, given the time and financial constraints of this research. A week was spent in Tbilisi and Yerevan respectively, after discounting for the travel and acclimatization time. Due to the politically tense situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the latter was excluded from the scope of fieldwork, as it is not recommended to travel between those countries at this time.

Chapter 2 – Conceptual Frameworks

2.1. Practice Theory

Practices cannot be solely reduced to the meaningless or inconsequential expression of an individual's actions. The focus on the analysis of practice is a valuable source of knowledge in a variety of disciplines, offering a novel and critical perspective towards modern interpretations of the "philosophical and social scientific significance of human activity" (Schatzki, 2001, p. 10). This reference to human activity is not an abstraction of the individual but rather a call for an analysis of employed actions in relation to their environment, as "the social world appears as a vast array or assemblage of performances made durable by being inscribed in human bodies and minds, objects and texts, and knotted together in such a way that the results of one performance become a resource for another" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 2). Practice theorists acknowledge this complexity and view actions as the central element through which our world can be examined, including the phenomena of international development, policy and politics.

Practice theory is not uniform but is an umbrella terms for a range of analytical lenses. It is also referred to as theories of practice, which "constitute, in fact, a rather broad family of theoretical approaches connected by a web of historical and conceptual similarities" (ibid, p. 1). Hence, looking at practices as an explanatory variable is not a radically new idea and inspired various foundational ways of thinking in contemporary social sciences. Anthony Giddens' (1984) conceptualization of recursive duality, for instance, calls for a continuous interplay between the agential (individual's actions) and structure (formative social); he views practices as constituted by the social but it is through practice that the social is formed or transformed. Similarly, Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus reflects an individual's active role in shaping and being shaped by the social. In light of this, a look towards practices offers much more than an uninspired outline of behavior but has the potential to nurture an understanding of the broader nature of structures, institutions and interaction, as well as how they are cultivated, acted within and sustained. Development efforts are inherently social situations, driven by the practices of practitioners embedded in particular constellations of actors, roles and power, and are hence not exempt from the lens of practices.

This section, rather than dissecting the plethora of theories of practice, will outline the core distinctions of the practice approach that give it its analytical efficacy. The aim of the study is not to infer the theoretical composition of broader social existence but to focus on the constitution of practices that were employed in situations of misaligned agendas. Considering, the overlapping elements of practice theory will be presented before outlining this paper's adopted practice framework, which was inspired by Freeman et al.'s (2011) considerations of "practices as specific configurations of action, norms and knowledge" (p. 128) and expanded with the dimensions of positionality. Lastly, to demonstrate the value of the practice-based approach, similar empirical attempts from the fields of urban planning, international relations and policy development that have leveraged the practicality of practice theory will be introduced.

2.1.1. Core Differences of Practice-Based Approaches

At its epicenter, practice theorists diverge from top-down narratives and posit that practices are responsible for the maintenance of all phenomena of social life, as "family, authority, institutions, and organizations are all kept in existence through the recurrent performance of material activities, and to a large extent they only exist as long as those activities are

performed" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 3). In project-contexts, the practitioner's activities are thus lenses into to the underlying dynamic of the development effort and situation in which those practices were enacted. This is partly because practice orientations are "inscribed in [our] habituated bodies" (p. 4) and are representative of the conditioning social the individual is embedded in. This embodiment ties practices to physicality as both their medium and boundary, like the uniformly interpreted symbolism of a handshake, or the expectations infused in societal gender norms. What informs these predispositions is a "shared practical understanding" (Schatzki, 2001 p. 11).

Practice theory thus views actions as engrained with knowledge, which requires "learning how to act, how to speak (and what to say), but also how to feel, what to expect and what things mean [in a given situation]" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 5). It is implied that such knowledge, although not exclusively, is inherently social, hinting at a level of determinism yet leaving room for the unique agential in the construction of meaning. This may explain, for instance, why some social phenomena are sustained or lead to novel outcomes. Practitioners operating in distinct political circles, for instance, may know how to act based on their knowledge of political agendas and experience in similar situations. Conversely, practitioners may use their knowledge to depart from expectations of conduct and "use discretion and judgement to carve out autonomy, to take risks" (Forester, 1999, p. 10). Hence, individual knowledge, or rather interpretations of the conditioning social factors, are essential in shaping deliberate actions.

Lastly, practice approaches posit that actions are formed with considerations to "the centrality of interest in all human matters and therefore put emphasis on the importance of power, conflict, and politics as constitutive elements of the social reality we experience" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 6). In individual actions, aspects of one's perception of self within the broader social environment are thus inevitably considered and are constitutive of the practices that ultimately emerge. Considering, practice theory is much more than a powerful tool for understanding the actions of practitioners. By calling attention to their compositional nature, they echo the broader story of project work and the environment in which it is conducted, highlighting its interconnected and dynamic nature. In the development context where practice theory is understudied, it offers a novel perspective for understanding the true complexity of its everyday politics, as well as how and why practitioners navigate it.

2.2. Constitution of Practices

Despite the plurality of approaches, no uniform definition of practices exists, as "most thinkers […] conceive of them, minimally, as arrays of activity" (Schatzki, 2001, p. 11). Ergun and Sayfutdinova (2021), for instance, in their analysis of informal practices in Azerbaijan, propose a definition of "persisting *strategies of action* which circumvent or manipulate formal rules and procedures established for dealing with a *particular set of problems*" that arise in consequence to "the structural constraints of the [post]socialist economy" (p. 932, emphases added). Their perspective integrates activity with an individual's understanding of their context's norms, which condition and drive specific practice formation. Similarly, Rawluk et al. (2020) expand the concept of practices with the co-constitution of actions with knowledge, writing that "what we do shapes what we come to know and the reverse" (p. 61). At their core, practices are actions but cannot be limited to them. An individual's observed action is a consequence of and a medium for a wide range of its constitutive components.

This totality of add-ons to practices' constitutional complexity shapes the "field of practices," and is reflected in Schatzki's (2001) understanding of "practices as *embodied*, *materially mediated* arrays of *human activity* centrally organized around *shared practical understandings*" (p. 11, emphases added). The grounding of activity within a shared

understanding is his attempt to sum the relevant elements of the field of practices in a uniform ontology, incorporating knowledge, and the processes of meaning making that prescribe it. This made him a seminal and commonly quoted figure in practice theory. However, while his definition informs a holistic understanding of practices, it does not provide the tools for their systematic analysis and a concrete framework to outline their formative elements.

2.2.1. Practices as Actions, Norms and Knowledge

Freeman et al. (2011) introduce an analytical framework, "develop[ing] a conception of practices as specific configurations of action, norms and knowledge" (p. 128). The authors posit that practices are actions, which are socially embedded and grounded in materiality. Practitioners interact within their social environment, aware of their relation to other actors, constructing meaning based on their interpretation of roles, structures and power dynamics. At the same time, these "interactions" are supported by and (re)produce "objects, tools, instruments and artefacts" (p. 129). Secondly, practices are dependent on underlying norms that inform and guide actions. Nonetheless, the authors point out that practices are not bound to prescribed outcomes but are "always improvised, [where] the practitioner rehearses and reinvents their practice in respect to each new client, each new situation and each new set of circumstances" (p. 129). Lastly, practices are also filled with "knowledge on when and how they are to be performed" (p.129). This knowledge is not explicit but remains tacit so that a performed action is a deliberate, yet seemingly subconscious reaction within a given situation. In such, the practitioners are more than carriers of specialized knowledge. Their practices are emblems of a wide range of embodied expertise that stretch far beyond the technical aspects of water management.

2.3. Practices and Positionality

Initially, this study set out to solely employ the aforementioned framework to analyze the practices of water management practitioners in situations of misaligned agendas. Their accounts, however, indicate that their actions are not solely driven by norms and knowledge, inspiring a revision of the framework to introduce the dimension of positionality. Particularly, perceived positionality not within its traditional interpretation of a researchers positioning but rather a practitioners' stance within a specific social situation and vis-à-vis its key actors, which influences how they interpret their roles, what strategies of engagement they may choose, and ultimately what practices they employ. The inclusion of positionality as an analytical variable allows to explain why certain practitioners employ similar or different approaches to dealing with situations of misaligned agendas.

2.3.1. Theory of Positionality

Positionality is a product of identity formation processes. Used in various disciplines, including philosophy, psychology and sociology, identity enjoys a plethora of fitting definitions and uses (Buckingham, 2008; Rogers and Syed, 2021). The overarching theme of the term's varied examinations, however, centers, similarly to practices, on its interplay between the self and the social; the multitude of reflections on identity anchor themselves somewhere along this continuum. This is evident in the scrutiny of the term by aforementioned influential thinkers of modern social theories, Anthony Giddens and Michel Foucault (Buckingham, 2008). The former sees identity as definitive construct of the self. Albeit being guided by the social, or rather societal advice, an individual's decision-making is ultimately a product of the self-instilled sense of identity; "Giddens suggests [that] modern

individuals have to constantly be 'self-reflexive', making decisions about *what they should do* and *who they should be,*" and "ultimately the individuals are required to make these choices *on their own behalf*"(p. 9, emphases added). Foucault, on the other hand, manifests a strict social framework, permeated with diffused constellations of power, that determines an individual's sense of identity. Hence, "who we are – or who we perceive ourselves to be – is far from a matter of individual choice" (ibid, p. 10). Consequently, it is through the social and our interpretation of our position within, that "individuals are now encouraged to regulate themselves and to ensure that their own behavior falls within acceptable *norms*" (p. 10, emphasis added). While these considerations are evidently grounded in an agency vs structure, or, in practice terms, a norm-compliance vs innovation logic, they are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the aforementioned solely highlights the diversity of probable answers to the central question of identity: "Who am I?" (Brinkmann, 2021, p. 102; Rogers and Syed, 2021).

More contemporary analyses of identity spawn at the consensus point of the two factions. Calder-Dawe and Martinussen (2021) write that "identity is […] the meeting place of the 'micro and macro, the exterior and interior,' [which is] a site where broader social formations are refracted through individual lives" (p. 131). Their interpretation acknowledges that identity formation is embedded within a social environment that is ultimately perceived through one's individual awareness. This notion is paralleled in Brinkmann's (2021) mapping out of "identity as self-interpretation" (p. 103), which is guided by Taylor's (2004) conceptualization of "social imaginary" as "the ways in which people *imagine their social existence*, *how they fit together with others*, how things go on between them and their fellows, the *expectations* that are normally met, and the deeper *normative notions* and images that underlie these expectations" (p. 106, emphases added).

In other words, individuals form a perceived identity through reflexive, value-driven processes, which "derive their contents and legitimacy from the self-interpretations of society and from the social imaginary" (Brinkmann, 2021, p. 104). Ultimately, with practices being performed in the same social and material contexts that are formative of an individual's identity, a link between the two concepts is evident. A practitioner's deliberations on their social fit within a situation influences their perception of roles and consequent strategies for action. In a professional setting, "work identities" emerge, which "are self-meanings tied to participation in work-related activities, such as organizational, occupation, and role identities" (Caza et al., 2015, p. 889). In a particular situation, through reflexivity, an individual then shapes their "dominant identity positions" (Calder-Dawe and Martinussen, 2021, p. 135), a "defining identity" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 635), or, simply, their perceived *positionality*.

2.3.2. Positionality, Power and Vulnerability

Positionality is a product of self-driven identity formation processes and attests to the notion that an individual's perception of their roles influences the extent of their interaction with others. In other words, it refers to the "positioning [of] self-identifications," considering "one's marginal social position, and the benefits and burdens associated with it" (Massaoud, 2024, pp. 3, 4). How an individual sees themselves in different situations translates into how they present themselves, how they interpret problems, what roles they self-assign and, importantly, what actions they see as possible to undertake. This is because "positionality results in different expectations, risks and dilemmas in the field" (Dall'Agnola and Sharshenova, 2024, p. 2). Practitioners navigate water management's political terrain and consider their positionality within existing relational and power structures. Considering, Bilgen et al. (2021) posit that "the reflection on these structures has once again demonstrated that our positionalities […] influence the process of how we perceive reality" (p. 531). A

practitioner's actions, both in terms of the performed practices to the considerations that underlie them, are a balancing act of the everyday politics of the project's social environment, its actors' interests and their own place within. The practitioner is reflective and reflexive, building their practices on what they perceive to be optimal and doable based on the boundaries of their perceived positionality.

The sense of connection with the donor and relevant authority figures drives the type of practice that emerges. Bayeck (2022) and Dean et al. (2018) highlight how researchers and practitioners navigate social and institutional contexts through assumed levels of alignment. A practitioner, for instance, reflects on their position vis-à-vis the donor or the ministry representatives, which allows for different perceptions of power, security and vulnerability to emerge, framing the extent of possible actions. Considering, Acevedo et al. (2015) affirm that "our positions are informed by the duties and expectations particular to the roles and social discourses we inhabit," and "play a critical function in the production of interpersonal behavior" (p. 32). As such, a practitioner, who is embedded in the organizational structure of the donor may employ different practices compared to a practitioner who is onboarded as a third-party consultant in similar scenarios. Considering, this study assumes a specific perspective on positionality, which builds on but is different from its traditional interpretations in research contexts. It emphasizes the professional identities of practitioners, looking at their alignment with key-actors and organizational embeddedness, which translate into varying degrees of perceived agency and power.

2.4. Applications of Practice-Based Approaches

While examples of the practice theory's application to the development domain are limited, there is a wide variety of applications elsewhere. These accounts offer insights into the usefulness of practice theory and inspired this study's transfer to the donor-funded water management domain. Forester (2012), for instance, reflects on the redefining moment he incorporated the *practical* – accounts of real-life experiences of planner-practitioners – to enrich the theoretical when teaching a course on the "politics of planning" (p. 11) at Cornell University. Enlightened, he recalls that the stories from the field "accomplished something that so much other work in sociology and political science, economics and urban studies had not" (p. 14). Particularly, isolating the practices "helped [him] to see how the theoretical arguments could come alive" (p. 15). In such, attention shifted from what practitioners should do and how their operational environment might be, an often-presumptive macro-perspective, to what they actually do, the evident nature of their work, and their environment. He writes that when "faced with power imbalances, in settings of everyday action deeply permeated, staged and structured by relations of power, reputation, and identity, how might oppositional planners, for example, ever 'get anything done', ever really act (as theorists put it) 'counter-hegemonically'?" (p. 12).

A practice lens provides the tools to meet such inquiry through an "explor[ion of] the challenges, strategies, traps and possibilities of planning through actual practice stories" (Forester, 1999, p. 8). The author acknowledges that operating in complex environments, practitioners are ultimately responsible for making policies and projects work, often through situations of conflict. This feat is achieved through their deliberate practices in specific situations. In his eyes, a practice turn is inherently effective, as it is a "focus on performance and not trends, on politically staged action and not general strategies" (p. 14). Taking such bottom-up approach to mapping out the social environment in which practitioners operate, however, is not inherently at odds with the theoretical. It is rather mutually beneficial, enriching our macro-level understandings with "the particulars of the situations we are in" (p. 21). Lastly, Forester points towards, perhaps most importantly, the educational value of

practice stories for like practitioners, potentially helping them learn and improve. He writes that when "faced with such stories and paying careful attention to them, planners and policy analysts learn in practice about the fluid and conflictual, deeply political and always surprising world they are in" (p. 26).

Pouliot and Cornut (2015) transfer the practice approach to the domain of diplomacy and international relations, shifting away from macro-level conceptualizations of the global political landscape towards concrete actions that constitute it. The authors point to the significance of practices in not only organizing the global arena but also being disposed of "international order transformation" (p. 309). They define "diplomacy as a bundle of practices" (p. 300), particularly, "embod[ied] forms of know-how and competence that are socially meaningful and recognizable at the level of action" (p. 299). They continue by stating that "practices generate effects that, put together, form the big picture of social life" (p. 309). Diplomacy is thus not solely a reflection of institutional rationales but is actively driven and shaped by the actions of its enactors, who, consequently, contribute to the construction of the global order. A similar bottom-up rationale is assumed to reveal that focusing on what is done allows for a better understanding of broader institutional conditions. Their study offers avenues for transfer into the domain of international development, allowing for insights into rationalizations of project practitioners, as well as the larger accounts into the nature of development work.

Similarly, Freeman et al. (2011), who inspire the analytical framework for this study, apply practice theory to the domain of policy development, advocating for a distancing from the common, outcome-oriented understanding of the process. Rather, they look at it as a sum of various practices, conducted in "multiple and overlapping spaces within which policy is produced, acknowledging the situated or contextualized nature of policy making" (p. 131). Definitional elements of practices as "actions," "norms," and "knowledge" are used as tools to show the fluid, intrinsically social nature of the policy creation and implementation. This also expands the process beyond formal interpretations and traditional actors, including everyday practices of a wide range of stakeholders as a constitutive element of policy creation. They argue that:

> "asking about practice draws our attention back to the complex 'messiness' of policy making, of the twists and turns by which policy is ultimately produced and performed. [The practice approach] counters top-down, macro explanations of policy, which typically appeal to grand narratives of change, locking policy makers into predictable path dependencies or overarching economic, political and social constraints. It renews a focus on the bottom-up translations of policy initiatives by local actors, providing alternative ways of explaining local diversity or differential outcomes" (p. 130).

This highlights the author's attempt to reconcile the planning and implementation phases of policy, which are often separated in theory. Indeed, the manifestation of policy, even along the continuum of what is not done, is a symbiosis of ideation, translation and implementation. Practices are not only the practical but also the building-block of the normative. The authors' focus on the policy arena can optimally be paralleled to the development domain, where macro-level project policies are translated by its practitioners into viable practices. The considerations of actions of its implementing stakeholders are the center piece in understanding how development efforts ultimately take shape.

Practices, through the frameworks of practice theory, offer more than a mere window of practicality into the every-day of practitioners, whether planners, diplomats, policy makers, or development workers. Rather, through their practices, a better understanding of the true nature of their work and the conditions of their operational environment can be derived. Lived encounters, conflicts and dilemmas, thought-out strategies and subsequent actions are reflective of the larger systems that theories can only hypothesize on. A focus on practices

enriches our understanding of purely analytical considerations with lived realities on the ground. By going beyond purely top-down deliberations on development scenarios, practitioners become valuable assets of knowledge. Their practices are not only an enactment of predetermined deliberations but are a manifestation of the organizational, institutional, cultural and political strata of their wider social context.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Gathering preliminary data on donor-funded water management projects in the South Caucasus was challenged by the lack of information beyond official purpose statements, which solely provide a generalized overview of the initiatives' broader goals. On the activities implemented and stakeholders involved information is limited, making it nearly impossible to gauge the specific types of situations of misaligned agendas that emerge, and the practitioners involved. Additionally, given their subjective character, it was unfeasible to grasp the employed practices without first-hand accounts of the respective practitioners. Practices are fluid in the sense that they are a reflection of their enacting individual and can only be investigated individually, on a case-by-case basis. They cannot be pinned down and are rooted in a specific context, are largely improvisational, driven by agency, which is itself in a reciprocal relationship with structural influences. Thus, neither inductive nor deductive logics were optimal for studying the practices of practitioners in situations of misaligned agendas. An abductive approach was assumed, which is a "form of reasoning that is concerned with the relationship between a *situation* and *inquiry*," whose objective "is not to arrive at fixed and universal knowledge through the collection of data" (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 722, original emphases). Rather, using the tools of practice theory, this study breaks down and analyzes practitioner practices in their situational dynamic, making sense of how and why they were employed.

The need for first-hand accounts was evident. Considering the sensitivities of inquiring into politically natured misalignments and the region's socio-cultural emphasis on trust and informality, in-person interviews with project practitioners were the most optimal method. With the plethora of donor-funded initiatives in the South Caucasus and guarded donor attitudes, a gatekeeper was needed to connect with relevant actors on-the-ground. With that in mind, I attended the Third Conference on Environmental Peacebuilding in the Hague as a volunteer, which hosted a panel discussion on "Third Party Engagement in Water Diplomacy and Governance: The Case of South Caucasus." Among the participants was an expert working for a transboundary donor-funded water management project, who presented the difficulties of "balanc[ing] national priorities, regional water security" with donor demands and the agendas of individual politicians. His insights closely aligned with this study's preliminary hypotheses, prompting me to ask him for assistance in identifying and reaching out to relevant practitioners. Consequently, a list of eight individuals working in Georgia emerged, five of whom responded to my interview request. Data collection in Armenia was facilitated by a gatekeeper working on water and environment issues at a university in Yerevan. I was put in touch with him by my thesis supervisor, Farhad Mukhtarov, both of whom are associates at the South Caucasus Water Academics Network (SWAN). After informal meetings to discuss the nature and goals of this research, the Armenian counterpart connected me with four practitioners working in donor-funded water management projects in Yerevan.

3.1. Research Methods

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners in both countries. A total of five practitioners were interviewed in Georgia and Armenia, respectively. Out of the five originally planned in-person interviews in Georgia, only three were held in-person, each in their organization's office. Two interviewees requested to reschedule and due to my limited time in Tbilisi, these interviews were moved online. In Armenia, four interviews were planned. However, because a practitioner's colleague was also willing to be interviewed

impromptu, a total of five interviews were conducted; four were held in person and one had to be moved online. Out of the ten total participants, the insights of seven were used for this study, as the other practitioners had to leave before they could provide the necessary detailed accounts of the situations of misaligned agendas and their practices. Half of the interviews lasted for around an hour, while the others extended for up to two hours, as some practitioners gave lengthier answers, or were more willing to continue the conversation. All conversations were in English, with two the interviewees switching over to Russian towards the end of the conversation. To protect the identities and privacy of the interviewees, the interviews were not recorded and the names replaced with pseudonyms. The questions that were used to guide the conversations can be seen in Appendix B and a brief overview of the interviewed practitioners whose accounts were used in this study are outlined in table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Interviewed Practitioners

Pseudonym	***Gender***	***Country of Engagement***	***Local / Foreign***	***Position***
Leon	Male	Georgia	Foreign	Program Director
Anne	Female	Georgia	Local	Senior Environmental Expert (NGO)
Sal	Male	Georgia	Local	Water Engineer
Adam	Male	Armenia	Local	Water and Data Expert
Davit	Male	Armenia	Local	Water and Sanitation Expert
Aren	Male	Armenia	Local	Water Resource Management Expert
Karim	Male	Armenia	Foreign	Water Expert and Researcher (Academia)

The pool of interviewees included a variety of different stakeholders, ranging from high-level managerial positions to independent experts that were onboarded to consult within the scope of the donor-funded project. The interview strategy focused on gathering perceptions and personal experiences of participants, rather than the technical or prescriptive aspects of their job. Interview questions, for instance, asked practitioners to *characterize* their roles and responsibilities, and map out what they did, as opposed to asking about their on-paper positions and project outcomes. To get the practitioners to open and focus on their personal narratives, the interview started with a less sensitive line of questioning, which prompted the practitioners to reflect on their lived experiences and day-to-day activities. This strategy helped them isolate their own experiences from the organization, refocusing their stories on concrete actions and individual interpretations of events.

The interviews were analyzed in line with the conceptual framework presented above, initially extracting concrete actions from the practitioners' accounts, which inspired the categorization of the employed practices into thematic categories of creative compliance, adaptive mediation and indirect coercion. Key statements were analyzed to extract the practitioners' understanding and interpretation of norms that guided their actions, as well as knowledge that informed them. Positionality perceptions were gauged from the practitioners' own characterization of their roles, as well as their narratives on their networks and positions.

3.2. Ethics and Positionality

The interviews were anonymized and not recorded. Interviewees were informed in advance that their official names, places of employment will not be shared and were aware that participation was voluntary. Before the start of each interview, this aspect of anonymity was reiterated and the practitioners provided verbal consent for their insights to be used as part of this study. In some instances, the practitioners asked for certain statements to remain off record. Their requests have been diligently honored. Additionally, the institute's internal ethics review form has been carefully reviewed, completed and discussed with the supervisor (Appendix A).

I recognize that as an outsider to the South Caucasus region, my perspective and interpretation may be different from those of interviewed practitioners, who have spent a large portion of their careers living and working in the region and are thus more aware of its socio-cultural, as well as political dynamic. Aware of this, I tried to approach this fieldwork with an open mind and reflexivity, providing the necessary space for the interviewees to frame their own narratives. In many ways, I thought of this study as a way to bring this often-overlooked aspect of development work into the foreground, using this thesis as a platform for the practitioners to tell their lived experiences.

Despite my outsider status, having roots in a former Soviet republic myself (Kyrgyzstan), I believe some of the described aspects of their lived environment align with my own observations, beliefs and experiences. Particularly, we share knowledge of Russian, Central Asia's water management disputes in many ways parallels those of the South Caucasus, and both regions are used as an indirect arena by larger powers. These alignments allowed me to connect with the interviewed practitioners, helping me build rapport and trust. Some of the practitioners, for instance, also worked in Central Asia, pointing to some of the parallels between the regions before or after the interviews.

Nonetheless, other elements of my identity did pose certain limitations. As a younger person, living and studying in the Netherlands, I understand that some of the practitioners may have been cautious in pointing to certain situations of misaligned agendas, questioning my motivations for this study. At the beginning of each interview, I explicitly mentioned that "this research is not an evaluation of a project. It is an exploration of the practices of individuals working in the water management field in the South Caucasus." In doing so, I have tried to emphasize my intent on studying practices, trying to distance this research from the practitioner's current projects.

Additionally, my own academic background in a governance and development policy major with a specialization in international political economy makes me aware of larger geopolitical motives in development. This shapes my understanding of power dynamics, the dichotomous nature of policies and other macro-level considerations present in water management, which may or may not be shared by the interviewees. Through the thoughtfully constructed interview guide, as well as reflexivity, I have tried to push my own biases into the background and focus on the practitioners' statements to draw on the broader conclusions of this research.

3.3. Limitations

The time this study was conducted presents a potential limitation. The year 2024 proved to be highly uncertain for both nations, with significant externalities spilling over onto the donor-funded water management domain. Georgia introduced its foreign anti-agent law and was gearing up for crucial presidential elections. Across its borders, Armenia and Azerbaijan recently overcame a violent conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Given this study's focus on

situations of misaligned agendas, the practitioners may have been cautious in opening to the full picture of their operational environment. Aware of this challenge, I have tried to isolate the interviews from the broader (geo)political environment, asking practitioners to reflect on their actions, rather than the specifics of the political landscape. While it is impossible to fully control this limitation, the practitioners' requests for some of their statements to remain off record are a signal of the genuine nature of their responses.

Additionally, the self-reported nature of the practitioners' responses poses a further limitation. The collected data relies on the practitioners' own narratives, which exposes it to their own biases, agendas or interpretations of events. The interviewees reflect on their own practices in hindsight, giving them the agency to reevaluate their positions and potentially frame the reasonings behind certain actions and decisions. They may have emphasized certain elements in their accounts, while downplaying others. Here, insights from other key actors in situations of misaligned agendas may be useful in understanding the full dynamic at play. This study acknowledges this as an area of further research.

The sampling of this study may pose a further limitation. There is a wide range of different actors involved in water management in the South Caucasus and only ten practitioners were interviewed, and insights from seven were used. This allows for an in-depth analysis of employed practices and lived experiences but may pose challenges to the generalizability of the findings. This research has captured valuable insights into the work of practitioners but acknowledges that there may be more practices that were not employed by the interviewed practitioners.

Due to the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the latter was excluded from the scope of this study. Thus, insights from water management practitioners working in Azerbaijan were excluded. Nonetheless, this paper aims to provide an insight into what it means to be a practitioner working in the broader region of the South Caucasus. Despite the ongoing conflict, the countries' historical dimensions, as well as political and sociocultural dynamics overlap. In line with this, I believe that these insights, although not fully, can be carried over to Azerbaijan's water management domain, particularly given the wide range of transboundary water management project that have been implemented in the past.

Chapter 4 – Findings

The interviews revealed how practitioners working in donor-funded water management contexts in Georgia and Armenia strategically navigate situations of misaligned agendas through unique "configurations of actions, norms and knowledge" (Freeman et al., 2011, p. 128). Additionally, their first-hand accounts demonstrate that perceived positionality vis-à-vis the key actors in each scenario played a crucial role in shaping the type of practice that emerged. The employed practices can ultimately be categorized into three themes of creative compliance, adaptive mediation and indirect coercion. The practice of adaptive mediation pertains to the practitioners' attempts to mediate with the project's competing parties. On the other hand, the practice of creative compliance refers to their attempts to meet demands without creating feelings of extensive compromise. One practitioner's practices, however, did not fall within the two outlined categories, as his approach was drastically different from others'. He employed the practice of indirect coercion. This section will detail the practices of practitioners in line with these categories, systematically dissecting them to demonstrate their composition as actions, driven by specific norms and tacit practitioner knowledge, as well as positionality.

4.1. Practices of Creative Compliance

Creative compliance is a strategic practice through which practitioners reframe project deliverables to meet the varying expectations without compromising the project's broader objectives. The practitioners within this category employed a variety of actions to address misaligned agendas, or even pre-emptively prevent their emergence, subtly navigating each situation's political dynamic to ensure project success. Their practice stories reveal that practitioners are not just passive functionaries but are highly creative agents with significant power to shape the scope and consequently, define the character of donor-funded projects.

4.1.1. Actions of Creative Compliance

Practitioners employed strategies of deliberate framing and reframing, selective disclosure and pre-emptive anticipation to harmonize conflicting priorities. For instance, Leon, a program director of a donor-funded initiative working out of Georgia, noted that he is "squeezed" between the "boss" (the donor) and the "counterparts" (local partners), and is thus frequently confronted with clashing demands. In an example he provided, the objective of the project was to develop small scale public private partnerships (PPPs) for drinking water systems. The donor was seeking a decentralized solution, in line with their framework on PPPs. The government, however, preferred to maintain centralized control over water. On one project site, the donor sought to repair an old Soviet-era drinking water system, which was historically operated by a village association. However, as the association was not fitting the PPP criteria of the donor, they negotiated a handover of the system to the municipality. At the same time, Leon and his team drafted a contract between the association as the system's operator and the municipality as its owner. He reframed this constellation to the donor and called it "a different type of public-private partnership," as the association is non-governmental and is hence 'private', albeit non-profit. This allowed the project to progress without jeopardizing its broader objectives. Leon's practice of creative compliance was characterized by his strategic reframing of project attributes to harmonize misaligned agendas and priorities. He elaborated: "You can do something and present it in a certain way on one side and present it in a different way to the other side," concluding by saying that a

lot of his work is about "selling." It is about showing that even if it was not exactly the name, "it still fits the bill. It still achieves the same purpose." As a result, "both sides were happy."

Similarly, Adam, a local consultant on water resources management working for a donor-funded initiative in Yerevan, sees his role in "linking" international and national stakeholders. He employed a strategy of selective disclosure to handle a situation of misaligned agendas while working for an initiative that was part of a broader river basin management program, where he was tasked with guiding the Armenian government to refocus its policy goals to maintaining "good ecological status," or, in other words, emphasize water quality. This would have been in line with the donor's proposed framework agreement, which aimed to approximate national legislation to EU standards. Adam understood, however, that the main priority for Armenia is not quality but rather water quantity, which the framework agreement did not reflect. He saw an inherent potential for a future debate to emerge and consulted with the donor, proposing the inclusion of an "additional chapter on water quantity." He thought they would agree to it, as the donor's main objective would still be sustained. He noted that the "the government is very short-term thinking. They are afraid to take initiatives." When they were not willing to compromise, he developed a "different text for the government," which placed water quality into the foreground. This signaled an alignment with the demands of the government, while maintaining the donor's priority on water quality. These actions parallel Adam's broader strategy of dealing with similar situations of misaligned agendas. He explained: "If they lack vision, prepare a text on what you are planning to do but not on the full vision of the project." Adam sees information and strategic framing as important tools for his strategy of selective disclosure.

Davit, an expert on water and sanitation with over 20 years of experience working in the donor-funded water management sector in Armenia, faced a situation where the donor's expectations were incongruent with the on-the-ground reality. The misalignment emerged when a water committee at a project site agreed to institutionalize the project efforts after its official run-time. That, he noted, was one of the main donor conditions to ensure the sustainability of their investment in rehabilitating the municipality's wastewater treatment facility. The committee, however, failed to honor their promise. David pointed out that after the first set of activities was conducted, "the agreement disappeared." The local partner was unable to fund and maintain the prescribed efforts, as they did not have the financial nor technical capacities to do so. The local partner overpromised, aware of their inability to upkeep the project. This created a problem for Davit in aligning the donor's original expectations with the on-the-ground reality. To navigate this situation, he reframed the project's deliverables. He decided not to push the local counterpart, understanding that their initial promises were part of their strategy to make the donor to commit funding. Aligning this reality with planned outcomes in official reports would indicate project failure. Feeling the need to maintain project success, he decided that the best option would be to redefine targets. He noted that while he does not have the agency to change the overall project objective, he has the agency to adapt specific expectations. Hence, he abandoned the original institutionalization priority to reframe success as the donor rehabilitating wastewater treatment plants in municipalities with limited resources.

Anne's actions slightly divert from other practitioners' strategies but can still be categorized as a practice of creative compliance. As a senior expert and project manager at a policy-oriented NGO in Georgia, she faced a situation of misaligned agendas when consulting for a transboundary project between Azerbaijan and Georgia. The project's objective was to reach the signing of a framework agreement on water use between the two neighboring countries. The respective ministries of environment were the first points of contact, with senior-level representatives participating in dialogue. After official discussions, the ministries with the help of the donor were able to reach an understanding. Anne noted,

however, that transboundary policy work requires the blessing of more than these stakeholders. Differences in agendas began to emerge when the ministry of agriculture and energy from both countries were onboarded. They were not content with the agreement's emphasis on conservation and the limitations on water flows through which water scarcity for their respective administrative functions could potentially emerge. The ministries of agriculture were concerned that potentially diminished water flows would affect irrigation. Their energy counterparts were worried about weakened energy production. Amid these misalignments, the project stalled. When asked what she did, Anne replied "nothing." Although seemingly anti-climactic, her action of deliberate inaction aligns with her broader strategy of pro-active conflict avoidance. She highlighted that she usually does not pursue ideas that she thinks will lead to disharmony. Anne exclaimed: "You come with ideas that work. I see risks, I see obstacles. I don't propose ideas that will not be accepted." To anticipate and thus avoid potential friction, she leverages her extensive network and informality thereof to vet her ideas before officially proposing them. This is her variant of the practice of creative compliance, aligning potentially conflicting agendas before they reach the stage of formal discussions.

4.1.2. Norms: Donors' Unspoken Understanding

Practitioners' actions are driven by their perception of norms, which, most importantly, encourage their adaptive strategies over passive compliance to prescribed activities. Their stories reveal the existence of an unspoked agreement between themselves and the donor, giving them the agency to (re)shape project attributes to ensure continuity and success. Leon noted, for instance, the inevitability of misaligned agendas to persist, as donors are not truly reflective of the region's specific contexts during project planning. He used his current predicament to illustrate that his "boss" wants to focus on transboundary water management and bring Armenia and Azerbaijan together. He pointed out, however, that these countries do not want to engage in dialogue and, at the same time, transboundary water management is not a priority for Georgia and Armenia, while it is for Azerbaijan. Leon signals that the donor is aware of this dynamic and implies an unspoked understanding that guides his actions. The practice of creative compliance emerges, where Leon feels the expectation to align both agendas on paper, strategically maneuvering and meeting the expectations of both parties in the process.

Davit shared Leon's perception, noting that practitioners and donors share an understanding that "some things on the ground are implemented in another manner." In most cases, "there are no capacities" to implement "big ideas." He pointed out that his supervisor acknowledged the impossibility of maintaining rigid expectations that are not always in line with what is feasible, allowing for freedom to seek best possible outcomes. After the interview, Davit and I briefly switched to Russian. During our conversation he outlined that that it is not donor internal factors that limit project implementation. It is the time, human and budget constraints of national and local institutions that present the biggest challenges. He acknowledged that these are often not considered by the donor, and it is up to practitioners like him to evaluate and adjust the ongoing project. Similar to Leon, Davit and his supervisor share an unspoked agreement to adjust project deliverables to ensure project success.

In contrast, Adam pointed to the government's rigidness in departing from their assumptions and intentions as the driver for his strategy of selective disclosure. He noted that they show "stubbornness in how things should be." "Sometimes, even if something is logical, it cannot be pursued because of vested interests." At the same time, he understood the donor's willingness to adapt, giving him the agency to make necessary adjustments to ensure the progress of the project. He acknowledged that he has a lot of agency to innovate

and strategize, "if it's within the vision of the project." He even continued with "it's highly encouraged," hinting at the existence of the unspoken agreement mentioned above. Adam hence understands the "political difficult[ies]" that permeate the water management landscape and his task to think and act politically within.

4.1.3. Knowledge: Learned Expertise and Gatekeepers

A practitioner's embedded knowledge is influential in shaping their actions. They are not solely holders of technical expertise but are also acutely aware of local sensitivities, actor expectations and capacities. This guiding knowledge is inherently political and was acquired through deliberately curated networks, as well as general professional experience. For instance, Leon's over two-decade long tenure with the same donor shaped his understanding of internal processes and know-how on how to frame project deliverables. He is also aware that "the national government never compromises," which pushes him to focus on donor lobbying, knowing that they are more willing to adapt to changes. He elaborated by explaining that "ministry people are paid very little" and often have an additional income source on the side; "they go for ministry positions because it looks good on the resume." He acknowledged that governmental partners are thus more risk averse and inert to accept solutions that call for their compromise.

Adam and Anne's practices are dependent on knowledge from and informality of their networks, demonstrating how practitioners rely on specific information to harmonize misaligned agendas ex-ante. Anne, drew attention to the necessity of interpersonal connections in shaping her pre-emptive practices, hinting that a successful mediation effort in her transboundary example demanded this level of connection, which she ultimately lacked. She was aware of the space in which the situation unfolded, of the actors within and the subsequent limits to her actions. Her knowledge is inherently political and is crucial for her strategy of refraining from pursuing ideas that will lead to disharmony. Similarly, Adam highlighted that informal connections are used to "drive [the] agenda" and to see what "direction" a project can take once it "comes." This knowledge helps him understand where the project deadlock could emerge and whether a proposed compromise would be accepted. Particularly, it is insider knowledge from the government that proves to be most useful. He talked about "how difficult it is to justify a project decision to the government." Before proposing project activities, he thus uses his informal connections to gauge the official "attitude of the government."

4.1.4. Positionality: Embeddedness and Dependence

Positionality influences a practitioner's perception of roles, responsibilities and the extent to which they can enact their practices of creative compliance. Leon's managerial and representative roles as a program director translate into feelings of responsibility and pressure to drive successful project implementation amid misaligned agendas, thus "mak[ing] both [sides] happy." With the donor focused on driving a "model [of development that] they are trying to sell," and the national government rarely willing to compromise, he is prompted to find "creative" ways to align conflicting demands. Similarly, Adam and Davit's embeddedness with the donor organization as experienced local consultants equip them with the agency to reframe project narratives to meet donor demands while maintaining an alignment with local priorities.

Considering, practitioners who were more closely embedded with the donor organization showed more agency in reframing project deliverables. Those less aligned, on the other hand, exercised more caution due greater perceptions of vulnerability. Anne, for instance, did not share Leon, Davit and Adam's interpretation of the norm that encouraged

greater agency in (re)framing project deliverables. While introducing herself, the NGO and the positive changes in the water management arena, she shifted her narrative to Georgia's recent foreign agent law, which she fears will lead to a decline in donor support for most NGOs on the scene. Considering her own dependence on donor funding, this signals a potential threat to her stability and livelihood. The underlying anxiety was reflected throughout the interview. When asked about the importance of networks, for instance, she outlined that she relies on her "interpersonal connections" at the ministry to "identify risks on time." Anne admittedly understands and is cautious of the underlying "political process" of water management projects. She proclaimed that to make projects work, particularly for donors, understanding and adapting to "local contexts" is "most important."

4.2. Practices of Adaptive Mediation

In contrast to creative compliance, practitioners who employ practices of adaptive mediation act as active intermediaries between the project's contending parties, harmonizing misaligned agendas through informal, behind-the-scenes negotiations. Their actions signal a need for close and proactive engagement with the project's stakeholders by either leveraging interpersonal connections or using unconventional shuttle diplomacy tactics. The interviews revealed that practitioners, in addition to their principal roles as experts, are appointed diplomats, captaining the project through the sectors political waters.

4.2.1. Actions of Adaptive Mediation

Practitioners deliberately build and nurture their networks, which they strategically use to drive project success, making them highly valuable assets to donor-funded projects. They leverage the informality of their connections to negotiate outside of official channels, allowing them to harmonize misaligned agendas and maintain an image of project success. Aren, an Armenian program component manager for a donor-funded project based in Yerevan, embracing his role as a diplomat, mentioned that the long-term agendas of the donor and the government are usually well aligned. Instead of misalignments, he reframed by pointing to the existence of "misunderstandings." A misunderstanding arose, for instance, during a project that aimed to rehabilitate and upgrade a wastewater treatment site at Lake Sevan. Armenia's ministry of environment and the ministry of territorial administration and infrastructure were the primary government stakeholders involved. The former was interested in improving water quality and raising the water levels of Lake Sevan (protection). In contrast, the latter was concerned that the initiative would lead to reduced water availability for irrigation and general use, which could affect income generation from imposed water tariffs. Aren noted that any potential fluctuations in tariffs, if at all, would be minimal. To proceed with the planned project objective, however, a blessing from both parties was needed. To handle the situation, Aren engaged the representatives of both ministries in informal, behind-the-scenes discussions. His main goal was to get the ministry of territorial administration and infrastructure to compromise by explaining the benefits of the rehabilitation efforts and the absence of negative impacts for tariff incomes. His strategy was ultimately effective. An informal, "handshake" agreement was reached, leading to the signing of the official MoU to go ahead with project.

Even if a practitioner lacks a close interpersonal connection, they may still mediate informally when official discussions remain unsuccessful. For instance, Sal, a Georgian water engineer with over 20 years of experience, employed a strategy of shuttle diplomacy to harmonize conflicting demands of an EU investment bank and a state-owned water supply company, where he worked on as a deputy. The Georgian counterpart commissioned and

purchased the designs for the rehabilitation of water supply systems. The EU institution co-financed the endeavor but demanded alignment with EU standards to go ahead with the project, as the plans prescribed an outdated Soviet-era 1m foundation depth for water pipes. The ministry, "wanted to do things quickly" and resisted adapting their approach, citing higher costs. Sal, however, understood the need to "do things right," especially if Georgia was to approximate its water legislation to EU's frameworks in the long-term and saw himself as the "middleman" between the two parties, albeit his state-side engagement. Official discussions in Brussels did not lead to a resolution but at an informal dinner afterwards, he saw an opportunity to mediate. Striking up a conversation with a representative of the EU investment bank in the bathroom, he argued that an agreement was feasible if they would be willing to increase their investment to partially fund the required modifications. This gesture would translate to a lower burden for the ministry and incentivize an adaptation. Subsequently, he was pushing for a compromise from the ministry, framing it as a winning outcome. Ultimately, a consensus was reached in favor of alignment with EU standards.

4.2.2. Norms: Informality and Expectations of Performativity

The operational environment of the region's water management sector is characterized by high levels of informality, which is the driving force behind political interaction and decision-making. Practitioners' networks and their behind-the-scenes negotiations serve as the foundation for externally observable formal agreements. Aren confirmed that in a small country like Armenia, networks are characterized by close and informal relationships and present a "possibility to understand the main interests of [the] partner [ministry]." He noted that high level ministry actors are harder to reach and practitioners who enable such access are a valuable "network asset" for the donor, which is part of his perceived responsibility as a "lender" of expertise. Similarly, Sal characterized himself as "someone who is "bringing [the right people] together" and highlighted that he has connections in "high positions" in the government. Practitioners rely on this norm, as it allows them to act as skillful diplomats, harmonizing misaligned agendas and ensuring project success.

This expectation of performativity is a deeply embedded norm, which is uniformly understood and embraced by project practitioners. Their practice stories reveal the perceived demand to assume a wide range of roles and perform beyond their principal duties. Sal, for instance, in an example of a time-crunch project he worked on earlier, described that he was "responsible for everything", from design to digitization, and ultimately had to "coordinate everything," even if it was beyond the demands of his technical position. In essence, it highlights the relayed responsibility to ensure project success, prompting him to depart from formal negotiation channels for shuttle diplomacy tactics.

4.2.3. Knowledge: Political Actors and Their Interests

Practices of adaptive mediation are dependent on and are consequences of the practitioners' extensive political knowledge. Particularly, an in-depth understanding of the deadlock, the key stakeholders and their main concerns, allow practitioners to successfully tailor their arguments to achieve harmonized outcomes. Aren and Sal both emphasize the difference between the interests of political actors in water management and broader institutional priorities. Aren, for instance, highlighted that politicians are in pursuit of short-term gains and are hesitant to accept plans they think could lead to a personal disadvantage, even if it aligns with a long-term national interest. Similarly, Sal acknowledged that "donors invest in the right things," urging for a differentiation between the government and the "current administration." The practitioners are hence acutely aware of the human aspect of water management, directing their efforts towards managing expectations, affecting beliefs and

alleviating anxieties. Considering, Aren's diplomacy focused on managing ministry representatives' fears by thoroughly explaining the benefits of the rehabilitation efforts and doubling down on the absence of negative impacts on tariff incomes. Sal, on the other hand, framed his arguments to resonate with both parties, addressing the donor's concerns on the efficacy of their investment, and the ministry representatives' fears of holding accountability for overspending.

4.2.4. Positionality: Local Integration and Professional Identification

A practitioner's positionality defines whether they can engage in and shapes their capacity for practices of adaptive mediation. Networks, trust and inter-personal connections are prerequisites for informal negotiations, which, in turn, are deliberately shaped by locally embedded practitioners throughout their careers. Aren is an experienced professional with over 17 years of experience working in Armenia's water management sector. His networks reflect this, comprising a variety of different stakeholders, including representatives from government, technicians, experts, international contacts and civil society. Importantly, he built up trust and nurtured informal connections with relevant ministry representatives, making him a trusted mediator. This dynamic allows him to employ backroom diplomacy strategies, facilitating the project in ways that are unemployable by others. This makes him a valuable "network asset" for the donor, facilitating project activities through "political assistance," which he used to refer to his perceived role in helping design and implement projects where the priorities of both stakeholders are aligned. Ultimately, his embeddedness with the donor and ministry representatives makes him a central project figure, allowing him to strategically harmonize conflicting agendas.

Nonetheless, the role of a trusted intermediary is not always driven by considerations of informality and existence of deep interpersonal connections. A practitioner's self-assessed professional identity influences the method they may employ. Sal, for instance, completed part of his engineering training in western Europe, which influenced his perceived positionality vis-à-vis the representatives of the investment bank, encouraging the informal diplomacy method he employed. He explicitly mentioned that he views his European colleagues as "opportunities of learning," which conditioned him to frame his argument in favor of an alignment with EU standards. Proactively seeking a resolution, which was at odds with the ministry's official position, instilled a sense of trust and credibility with the donor. At the same time, his embeddedness with the state-side enterprise nurtured his know-how in navigating its every-day politics and driving his argument forward. Sal's practice story underscores the practitioners' active role in shaping project outcomes through deliberately crafted methods that are influenced by their perceived positionality.

4.3. Practice of Indirect Coercion

While most interviewees' practices fell within the scope of creative compliance or adaptive mediation, one practitioner's actions were noticeably different. The employed strategy of indirect coercion is a significantly more direct approach, less concerned with balancing political interests and more focused on driving 'best solutions'. This approach stands out in the region's water management landscape and was primarily driven by the practitioner's positionality as an independent researcher-consultant. His accounts demonstrate how the practitioner's perception of roles and experiential learning are highly influential in the type of practice that emerges.

4.3.1. Actions of Indirect Coercion

The other practitioners' stories highlighted the norm of informal negotiations in driving and aligning the agendas of competing stakeholders. Nonetheless, the outcomes of these discussions are not guaranteed to translate into official project outcomes. The practice of indirect coercion combines consensus building strategies with external pressure building tactics, bringing public attention to the project's activities. This practice was employed by Karim, a mid-career professional who has spent the last few years working in Armenia. When onboarded onto a water quality project at Lake Sevan, he realized that raising water levels to dilute pollutants was an outdated solution. Water scarcity and improper management led to a continued decline in water levels since 2012. He identified that treating wastewater before it reaches the lake was an optimal solution. To initiate constructive dialogue, he brought high level government representatives together through workshops, noting the need to "bring people together and bombard them with specific messaging." "For the first time," government representatives agreed, at least behind closed doors. Officially, however, they were not willing to publicly "communicate it." Knowing that there is a need and potentially a will, he started raising "public accountability" through publications and media appearances, "pressuring politicians." His actions have been effective in creating an opening for official deliberations but did not materialize into a concrete action plan.

4.3.2. Norms: Practice Innovation

Water management practitioners are aware of the sector's defining norms but are not always conditioned to pursue them. This divergence from and innovation of prescribed measures highlights their agency and power to define their practices. Karim's actions, for instance, are not aligned with the norm of informal and discreet negotiations that are characteristic of other practitioners' approaches. As a researcher, his perception of development is shaped by finding technical solutions to presented problems. He is thus acutely aware of the "best solution" in the specific scenario and is keen on its pursuit. Additionally, compared to other practitioners, Karim is new to the water management landscape in Armenia and did not have had the same learning experience about the everyday politics of water management work in the region.

4.3.3. Knowledge: Strategies of Pressure Building

Similar to practitioners who engaged in practices of adaptive mediation, Karim's knowledge is highly political and human-centric, rooted in his interpretation of the possibilities and hurdles of working with public officials in Armenia. He highlighted that in situations of misaligned agendas, it is important to understand where the "deadlock" is, which is often tied to the ministry's capacity constraints. He, for instance, perceives that politicians do not know how to translate available data and solutions into tangible policies; "they expect that if the data is there, it "will automatically be analyzed." In addition to this capacity constraint, he acknowledges that "politicians are on shaky grounds" and elaborate or novel solutions are misinterpreted for fear of creating a short-term disadvantage. By bringing ministry representatives together, he thus broke down "the steps […] in achieving larger goals." The indirect pressures through media presence are consequently nudges to press the decision-makers into initiating the first steps.

4.3.4. Positionality: Sense of Security

Positionality is a major driver of the practice of indirect coercion, influencing the practitioner's perception of security and consequently the extent of their direct actions. As a

researcher who is independent of the donor organization and the government, he perceives his role in analyzing and proposing solutions that would best address the problem at hand. Karim, unlike other practitioners, is thus not primarily concerned with designing solutions that would allow him to avoid conflict and smoothly navigate varying political interests. This independence also translates into a greater sense of security, as he is not dependent on donor funding to sustain the project, nor his employment. The lower sense of vulnerability allows him to employ methods that exert direct pressure, rather than the practices of adaptive mediation or creative compliance that call for more subtle approaches. This practice story reveals that perceived positionality is an important consideration for a practitioner and is highly influential in determining what practices they can employ.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

Practitioners regularly find themselves in situations of misaligned agendas, which are consequences of clashing donor-state or inter-ministry priorities. The analysis of their employed practices to navigate these situations through the framework of actions, norms, knowledge and positionality reveal hidden dynamics that are characteristic of donor-funded water management landscape in the South Caucasus. Findings highlight the sector's highly political nature, with practitioners engaging in roles beyond their technical positions. Geopolitical motives drive donor engagement in the region, who use water as an entrance point to pursue their own vested interests and are met with diverging agendas of national or municipal governments, or individual political actors, while project outcomes narrate the story of successful project policies. What happens in-between to create this image of continuity remains a black box. Mosse (2004), in his third proposition on the relationship between policy and practice, suggested the existence of this phenomenon, stating that "development projects work to maintain themselves as coherent policy ideas" (p. 654), while Bergh (2021) and Hasan et al (2022) pointed to the role of practitioners in handling that responsibility. Building on these arguments, this study looks further, investigating what they do, how they do it, and what drives their actions to navigate situations of misaligned agendas.

Findings identify concrete cases of misaligned agendas, and that practitioner enjoy, as well as use their agency to proactively harmonize them. In doing so, they assume a wide range of role beyond their formal positions. This agency, however, is conditional, depending on the donor's set boundaries to actions. Additionally, the practitioners' perceived positionality greatly influences the extent of their agency and the type of practices that ultimately emerge. On a broader scale, the accounts paint a picture of a strong state that is powerful and agential in shaping donor efforts, which is counterintuitive given the donor-dependencies of both countries. Through the look at practices, hidden power dimensions of the Georgia and Armenia's water management landscape are revealed, providing valuable insights for future donor interventions.

5.1. Practitioner Agency

Different variations of creative compliance, adaptive mediation and indirect coercion were the primary practices of interviewed practitioners and are indicative of their creativity and, importantly, agency to define the activities and outcomes of donor-funded projects. Leon and Davit, for instance, not being able to fully implement prescribed project policies, deliberately reframed deliverables to meet donor-expectation and ensure the continuity of success. Similarly, Adam restructured project goals to align with the ministry's demands. Anne, Aren and Sal departed from official methods, relying on informality to negotiate harmonized agendas, or even pre-emptively prevent their emergence. These findings align with Mosse's (2004) theorization on the inverse relationship between project policies and practice, with practitioners playing a central role in producing policies through deliberately constructed actions that harmonize idealistic goals with on-the-ground realities. This indicates that perceived success of donor-funded water management efforts, to a large extent, depends on the practitioners and their ability to successfully navigate the sector's political dynamics.

5.1.1. Multitude of Professional Roles

This ability is informed by their interpretations of norms, tacit knowledge and perceived positionality, and is manifested in practitioners assuming a variety of context-dependent roles that extend beyond formal responsibilities. The subsequent categorization is inspired by Maxwell and Stone's (2005) classification of 4 different types of engagement that researchers assume, which are outlined in the table 2.

Table 2. Maxwell and Stone's (2005) Types of Researcher-Practitioners

Category	**Description**
"Story-teller"	"Researchers [need] to present research findings in such a way that they are useful to policy-makers, helping them to *frame* problems and *identify* practical solutions" (p. 7, emphasis added)
"Networker"	"Policy-making usually takes place within communities […] emphasi[zing] that researchers need to invest in networks that include policy-makers" (p. 7)
"Engineer"	"There is a significant gap between what politicians and policy-makers think they are doing what actually happens on the ground" (p. 7). Researchers work to align expectations with reality.
"Fixer"	"This model is about understanding the political dynamics and personalities within the policy process, knowing when to try and market research findings and to whom" (p. 7).

The categories are not mutually exclusive and findings suggest that practitioners assume multiple, interchangeable roles through their practices in specific situations. Leon, Adam and Davit are vivid "story-tellers," (re)framing and selectively disclosing project outcomes to ensure the appearance of continuity. At the same time, these actions make them skilled "engineers" and "fixers," informed by their tacit knowledge of how and when to enact their practices. With their subtle diplomacy tactics, Aren and Sal are primarily "fixers," acting as therapists to address the concerns of the contending party. This is enabled by their knowledge of networks and norms, and their ability to frame arguments that will be accepted. Anne is a "networker," "engineer," informed by her knowledge of who to talk to vet her ideas and pre-emptively align agendas. Karim also assumes a combination of the outlined roles but also acts as a teacher, breaking down and instilling solutions before nudging policy-makers to engage with them.

The range of presented actions point to the variety of ways that practitioners act to harmonize misaligned agendas. The assumption of different roles underscores their agency and the highly deliberate nature of their practices to ensure project success. However, it also

shows that there is no single practitioner prototype that is optimal for working in the South Caucasus' donor-funded water management domain and a combination of approaches is needed. Practices are informed, fluid, context and practitioner dependent, and are thus adapted to fit the specificities of a given situation.

5.1.2. Donor Detachment and Conditional Agency

While practitioners are not just technical experts or mere implementors of project policies but are powerful and creative actors that shape donor-funded water management interventions, the extent of their agency is limited and prescribed by the donors' inherent detachment from local realities. Several practitioners claim that many planned activities are driven by (geo)political motives. Leon, for instance, highlights the inability to bring Armenia and Azerbaijan to cooperate on water management issues, which is the donor's central objective; his knowledge informs him that donors are focused on driving a "model [of development that] they are trying to sell." Similarly, Adam underscores that the agenda to align Armenian water legislation to EU frameworks, which emphasize water quality, are a non-priority for the national counterparts. The unspoken shared agreement between the donor and the practitioners, which enables the agency to strategically reframe project attributes, is a signal of their awareness of this dynamic but unwillingness to depart from it. Many of the prescribed policies are evidently at odds with what is feasible, demanded, or needed, relaying the responsibility to ensure project continuity solely to the practitioners. This imposes boundaries, restricting their agency to act solely within the scope of harmonization. Practitioners are thus tasked with maintaining an image of project success, leaving little freedom to redefine broader project goals to achieve true alignment, which has the potential to result in more sustainable water management projects. They ultimately have the agency to innovate around the limitations of donor policies but not to use their knowledge and expertise to tailor the development effort to better address local needs.

While rooted in Mosse's (2004) wider considerations, the implications of practitioners' conditional agency divert from one of his ideas on the relationship between policy and practice, highlighting the unique nature of donor work in the South Caucasus. In his primary proposition, the author suggests that project "policy […] primarily functions to mobilize and maintain political support, that is to legitimize rather than to orient practice" (p. 648). This was not evident from the practitioners' accounts. While the unspoken agreement legitimizes practitioner agency and their pursued practices, formal policy policies were not designed to achieve widespread political support. On the contrary, their detached nature created the need for and tasked practitioners with acquiring political blessings. Ultimately, their practices are driven by the structural constraints of donor priorities but are improvised through their own agency, knowledge and perceived positionality.

5.2. Positionality, Power and Agency

While practitioners are equipped with the conditional agency to act within the donor's prescribed boundaries, employed practices reveal how their perceived positionality defines the extent to which they can engage in certain actions. Particularly, it is the awareness of their position vis-à-vis key actors in situations of misaligned agendas and the degree of organizational alignment that determine the scope of their agency. Placing positionality perceptions face to face with employed practices illustrates the everyday power constellations that practitioners navigate in pursuit of harmonization and highlights that the region's water management domain is characterized by the existence of specific relational dynamics. This brings into focus Mosse's (2004) further proposition in that "development interventions are

driven not by policy but by the exigencies of organizations and the need to maintain relationships" (p. 651).

Positionality is perceived differently by practitioners, which translates into varying degrees of agency, security and vulnerability. Adam, Davit and Leon, for instance, were all embedded in donor structures as project employees and enacted different variations of the practice of creative compliance, reframing project deliverables and selectively disclosing information to gain political support. These strategies were enables by their shared understanding with the donor, who, concerned with ensuring the project's continuity, closed their eyes to these subtle adjustments. The practitioners' embeddedness informed their responsibility to maintain the appearance of project success but also nurtured their understanding of the donor's acceptance of the nature of their practices. Similarly, positionality in the sense of alignment with central figures also influenced the type of practice that practitioners engaged in. Aren's highly informal engagement, for instance, was enabled by his close, interpersonal relationships he has nurtured with relevant high-level ministry representatives. This attribute made him a trusted mediator between the donor and the ministry, who felt comfortable engaging in backroom negotiations. These insights highlight that embeddedness, whether with the organization or with key stakeholders extends a practitioner's agency and empowers them to engage in higher-risk practices.

In contrast, practitioners less embedded with the donor organization or key political figures are more cautious and risk averse, limiting the scope of their agency. Anne, for instance, as a third-party to the donor-government policy dialogue, experiences higher levels of vulnerability, prompting her pre-emptive approach to avoid any potential disagreements. This concern with risk is driven by her dependency on donor funding in Georgia's volatile political environment, as Karim, also a third-party consultant in Armenia, employed the most direct practice of indirect coercion. As an employee of an independent research institute, he is not dependent on donor funding and has a greater sense of agency in employing his practices. Nonetheless, while themes of security vs vulnerability are tied to livelihood, future research may also assume a gendered perspective to explore how practitioner practices are tied by perceptions of roles in the region's patriarchal societies.

5.3. Picture of the Strong State

The dissection of practitioner practices in situations of misaligned agendas provide insights into the nature of donor-state relationships. Practices of creative compliance, adaptive mediation and indirect coercion illustrate a picture of a strong state. Particularly, practitioner actions are directed to harmonize misaligned agendas to mainly fit the priorities of the authorities. Adam, for instance, highlighted the state's unwillingness to depart from its water quantity mandate. Similarly, in Leon and Sal's examples, the government actors insisted on maintaining their original mandates. All practitioners ultimately share an understanding of the norm that the state is rigid in departing from their demands. It is in the driver's seat, and it is up to the donor to do the necessary concessions or adaptations, highlighting the power relationship in donor-funded water management projects in the South Caucasus. The government, both at central and municipal levels, holds extensive influence over project activities.

This is counter-intuitive, given the donor-dependence in driving development of national water management landscapes. Literature points to the financial and capacity constraints of the government and the practitioners' accounts underscore this phenomenon. Davit and Karim, for instance, highlight the know-how and financial limitations of local counterparts. In line with that, Stepanyan (2010) notes that until 2010, "a total of about $115 million of technical and external assistance has been provided by the World Bank, German

development cooperation through KfW, USAID and UNDP" (p. 33), while "within the framework of projects implemented […] the government of Armenia made a contribution of about $22,73 million or about $6,38 million [solely] in the water supply sector of the country" (p. 41). Across the border in Georgia, in water and environmental matters, "a defining characteristic […] has been the support provided by international donor organizations and NGOs" (Martus, 2024, p. 11). Both countries are evidently reliant on external support but hold the power and agency to guide donor efforts.

The donors' acceptance of this dynamic highlights that water is understood as a highly political element by both parties. The former is not driven by enacting development but is more concerned with soft power influence, fueling their laissez-faire attitude to local resistance. Hence, while water is not a main priority for Georgia or Armenia, they leverage their position to establish rules to donor engagement. Donors, who saw water as a low politics entrance point, may have underestimated this dynamic, which poses a challenge in pursuing their larger goals through water management initiatives, whether it is peace, energy considerations, privatization, decentralization, among others. Practitioners may be a powerful element in countering this dynamic. Extending their agency beyond the scope of harmonization can allow them to reduce their roles as reactionaries to being active drivers of the donor's agendas. Their expertise, knowledge and networks are tools valuable tools that should be leveraged during project design, allowing the donor to incorporate its priorities into practicable policies ex-ante.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the practices of practitioners in situations of misaligned agendas, which are prevalent in the South Caucasus' donor-funded water management context. Practitioners act as bridges between the project's contending parties, tasked with harmonizing divergent interests into observable project activities. Particularly, given that the donor's project policies do not necessarily reflect what is feasible, needed or demanded on the ground, practitioners are tasked with the responsibility to ensure the continuity of project success. How they work to achieve that remains a black box. This research, building on Mosse's (2004) argument on the symbolic nature of project policies and Freeman et al.'s (2019) analytical framework, employed a practice-based approach to identify and analyze the employed practices as actions, norms, knowledge and expanding it with the dimension of positionality.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews with practitioners in Georgia and Armenia were conducted to inquire into how practitioners working in donor-funded water management projects in the South Caucasus exercise their agency to deal with situations of misaligned agendas. The following sub questions emerged: (1) what strategies and practices do different practitioners develop to harmonize agendas of primary project stakeholders; (2) what roles beyond formal responsibilities do practitioners assume; (3) how does their perceived positionality shape their practices?

Findings indicate that practitioners are strategic, deliberate and creative agents, enacting various practices that can be categorized into creative compliance, adaptive mediation and indirect coercion. These informed, context-dependent efforts demonstrate that practitioners possess the power and agency to (re)frame project deliverables, selectively disclose information and engage in informal diplomacy to harmonize conflicting agendas. Their agency, however, is constrained by the donor's prescribed boundaries consequential to their detachment from local realities. They develop project policies that are motivated by their own agendas for the South Caucasus do not necessarily reflect what is feasible, demanded or needed on the ground. Practitioners are thus tasked with thinking and acting politically, assuming a wide range of roles beyond their formal responsibilities to make projects work. Positionality in the sense of alignment with key actors and organizational embeddedness emerged as a major driver of the type of practice that was ultimately enacted. Those more closely aligned showed a greater extent to agency, while a practitioner in a more vulnerable position opted for more risk-averse strategies. Additionally, by looking at practices, this research identified some of the often-overlooked dynamics that characterize the region's water management landscape. Particularly, the theme of strong states emerged, which despite their donor-dependence, are most influential in defining donor projects. In identifying practitioners as knowledgeable mediators between donor-expectations and on-the-ground priorities, this study emphasizes the need to align the project closer to its implementing agents to leverage their knowledge and expertise for more sustainable interventions.

In doing so, this study contributes to the broader theories of practice by highlighting how development efforts of the water management domain of the South Caucasus are shaped by the practices of individual practitioners and by demonstrating how positionality can be used as an analytical dimension through which those practices can be examined.

6.1. Recommendations for Future Research

Several recommendations for future research emerge. Firstly, this study focused on the narratives of project practitioners. Future research can expand on their insights by including the perspectives of other actors in situations of misaligned agendas. Here, looking at government actors, such as ministry representatives for instance, can provide a useful further perspective. Additionally, looking at practitioners in different donor organizations can be useful in highlighting concrete differences in donor approaches, and how those affect practitioner practices.

This study looked at positionality in terms of organizational embeddedness and alignment with key stakeholders as factors that drive practitioner practices. However, as the most risk-averse strategy was implemented by a female practitioner, future research can take up a gendered perspective, to explore how the region's patriarchal norms affect individual practices.

Also, this research was practitioner-focused, looking at practices through their recollections of past events. Future research may assume a project-based lens, looking at practices in real-time, observing how they unfold, and isolating timely factors that influence practitioners' decision-making. In addition, the dimension of knowledge posits that practices are learned and can be observed over time. This will allow to see how practices evolve with the practitioners and what factor contribute to such phenomenon.

Appendices

Appendix A – ISS Ethics Review Form

ISS Research Ethics Review Form
for RP research carried out by MA students[1]

Aim:
This Form aims to help you identify research ethics issues which may come up in the design and delivery of your Research Paper (RP). It builds on the session on Research Ethics session in course 3105 and subsequent discussions with your peers and RP supervisor/reader. We hope the form encourages you to reflect on the ethics issues which may arise.

The process:
The Ethics Review process consists of answering questions in the following two checklists: B1-Low-sensitivity and B2-High-sensitivity. Depending on the answer to these questions you might need to fill section **C-Statement of Research Ethics** too.

The background document "ISS Research Ethics Guidelines for MA Students" provides advice and detailed information on how to complete this form.

Step 1 - Fill checklists B1 and B2
Step 2 - After answering checklists B1 and B2, the process proceeds as follows:

- **If you answer 'yes' to one or more low-sensitivity questions (checklist B1):** please discuss the issues raised with your supervisor and include an overview of the risks, and actions you can take to mitigate them, in the final design of your RP. You can refer to the ISS Research Ethics Guidelines for MA Students for help with this.

- **If you answer 'yes' to one or more high-sensitivity questions (checklist B2)**, please complete section 'C' of the form below describing the risks you have identified and how you plan to mitigate against them. Discuss the material with your supervisor, in most cases the supervisor will provide approval for you to go ahead with your research and attach this form to the RP design when you upload it in canvas. If, after consultation with your supervisor, it is felt that additional reflection is needed, please submit this form (sections B1, B2, and C) to the Research Ethics Committee (REC) for review as follows:

  When submitting your form to the REC, please send the following to researchethics@iss.nl:
  1) the completed checklists B1 and B2 (or equivalent if dealing with an external ethics requirement)
  2) the completed form C 'Statement of Research Ethics'
  3) a copy of the RP design
  4) any accompanying documentation, for example, consent forms, Data Management Plans (DMP), ethics clearances from other institutions.

  Your application will be reviewed by a reviewer who is not part of your supervisory team. The REC aims to respond to ethics approval requests within a period of 15 working days.

Step 3 - Integrating the Ethics Review process into the RP:

- This Ethics Review Form needs to be added as an annex in your final RP Design document to be uploaded in the Canvas page for course 3105.

[1] This checklist and statement is adapted from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Research Ethics Committee and informed by the checklists of two Ethics Review Boards at EUR (ESHCC and ERIM) and the EU H2020 Guidance – How to complete your ethics self-assessment.

Project details, Checklists, and Approval Status

A) Project/Proposal details

1. Project/Proposal Title	Practitioner Practices in donor-funded water management projects
2. Name of MA student (applicant)	Adilet Akmatbaev
3. Email address of MA student	702712aa@eur.nl
4. Name of Supervisor	Farhad Mukhtarov
5. Email address of Supervisor	mukhtarov@iss.nl
6. Country/countries where research will take place	Georgia, Armenia
7. Short description of the proposed research and the context in which it is carried out: Interviews with practitioners working in donor-funded projects in Georgia and Armenia.	

B) Research checklist

The following checklist acts as a guide to help you think through what areas of research ethics you may need to address. For explanations and guidance please refer to the background document 'ISS Research Ethics Guidelines for MA students'. Please complete both sections (B1 and B2)

Please tick the appropriate box	YES	NO
B1: LOW-SENSITIVITY		
1. Does the research involve the collection and or processing of (primary or secondary) personal data (including personal data in the public domain)?	☑	☐
2. Does the research involve participants from whom voluntary informed consent needs to be sought?	☑	☐
3. Will financial or material incentives (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?	☐	☑
4. Will the research require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for access to the groups, communities or individuals to be recruited (e.g., administrator for a private Facebook group, manager of an institutions, government official)?	☐	☑
5. Does the research include benefit-sharing measures for research which takes place with people who could be considered vulnerable? – please revise the background document (Guidelines) for more information.	☐	☑

If you have ticked 'yes' to any of the above boxes (1-5), please discuss with your supervisor and include more information in your RP design describing the issue raised and how you propose to deal with it during your research.

B2: HIGH SENSITIVITY	YES	NO
6. Does the research involve the collection or processing of ***sensitive*** (primary or secondary) personal data? (e.g. regarding racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, biometric data, data related to health or a person's sex life or sexual orientation)	☐	☑
7. Does the research involve participants for whom voluntary and informed consent may require special attention or who can be considered 'vulnerable'? (e.g., children (under 18), people with learning disabilities, undocumented migrants, patients, prisoners)?	☐	☑
8. Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the research without their knowledge and consent (covert observation of people in non-public places)?	☐	☑
9. Will the research be conducted in healthcare institutions, in healthcare settings, or will it involve the recruitment or study of patients or healthcare personnel?	☐	☑
10. Could the research induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences for research participants, researchers, or persons and institutions connected to them?	☐	☑
11. Could the situation in one or several of the countries where research is carried out put the researcher, individuals taking part in the research, or individuals connected to the researcher, at risk? Presence of an infectious disease such as COVID-19 is considered a risk – please provide information as outlined in the background document (Guidelines).	☐	☑
12. Does the research require ethical approval or research permission from a local institution or body?	☐	☑

If you have ticked 'Yes' to one of the above (5-11), please complete section 'C' below describing how you propose to mitigate the risks you have identified. After discussion with your supervisor, please submit the form to the Research Ethics Committee. In addition, if you have ticked 'Yes' to a question on any kind of personal data, please also complete the privacy questionnaire.

YOU ONLY NEED TO COMPLETE THIS SECTION IF YOU HAVE ANSWERED YES TO ONE OF THE QUESTIONS IN SECTION B2 ABOVE (Questions 5-11)

C) Statement of Research Ethics

Using the background document 'ISS Research Ethics Guidelines for MA students', please address how you are going to deal with the ethics concern identified, including prevention measure to avoid them from manifesting, mitigation strategies to reduce their impact, and preparedness and contingency planning if the risks manifest.

Please number each point to correspond with the relevant checklist question above. Expand this section as needed and add any additional documentation which might not be included in your RP design, such as consent forms.

[TO BE COMPLETED BY MA STUDENT AND DISCUSSED WITH THE SUPERVISOR. IF THE SUPERVISOR FINDS IT NECESSARY TO SEEK FURTHER REVIEW, THE STUDENT MUST SUBMIT THE FORM TO THE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE]

D) Approval from Research Ethics Committee

*To be completed by the Research Ethics Committee only if

Approved by Research Ethics Committee: ..... **Date:** .....

Additional comments for consideration from Research Ethics Committee:

If the REC needs more information before approving, the REC secretary will be in touch with the MA student. If after requesting more information the REC still has concerns, the REC secretary will ask the supervisor to discuss these with the student. In the unlikely event that there is still no resolution, the REC will refer the application to the Institute Board.

Appendix B – Guiding Questions for Semi-Structured Qualitative Interviews

Note: This research is not an evaluation of a project. It is an exploration of the practices of individuals working in the water management field in the South Caucasus. Specifically, I want to focus on how they translate objectives (policy goals) into practical actions, how practitioners solve dilemmas (that may arise from conflicting interests), how and where they learn, and whether the learning process affects their decision-making. The goal is to grasp a deeper understanding of what it means to be a practitioner working for donor-funded projects in the regions, and understand the strategies and practices they develop, given the contextual factors that shape their work. The answers provided during the interview will be anonymized.

General Information:

1. Name, current position.
2. How long have you been engaged in donor-funded water management projects prior to your current position?
3. Can you describe the current and past projects that you are/have been engaged with?
    - How would you characterize your role there?

Networks:

A network is a web of relationships between the practitioner, local communities, experts, the donor organization and national government, among others. Connections are formed based on professional and personal interests, values and identities, which makes them different from traditional bureaucracies and knowledge markets. Project practitioners may be characterized as *brokers*, bridging the donor organization with the government, local communities, civil society, etc.

4. Have you ever thought about the role of networks in your work?
    - Are you part of any networks?
    - What is the nature of those networks? I.e., are they formal, informal, or both?
    - Who do you think are the key actors in your networks? [You can answer the question in a manner that does not reveal any names. You can simply state their position. I.e., are they in government, independent expert, civil society, etc…]
    - Are the networks (relationships) that you are currently part of new, or have they been formed prior to your current position?
    - As a practitioner who works for a donor funded project (i.e., between donor project and national government), how would you describe your role in those networks?
5. In what ways do networks help achieve project objectives?

- Can you provide an example where a network was highly important in pursuing an objective?
- Can you recall an instance where a network hindered a project goal?
    - What did you do?

Practices and Dilemmas: Practitioners work *face-to-face* with many different stakeholders, including local communities, politicians and colleagues. The different actors in their networks may sometimes have different, maybe even clashing interests that can affect the implemented project. In such scenarios, practitioners can be faced with dilemmas, where they have to make choices with contradictory options. A key skill of a practitioner is harmonizing different interests.

6. Did you ever experience situations where you were faced with dilemmas (conflicting interests)? To give you an idea, here are some examples. A dilemma may arise…
    a. When two ministries have different demands from a donor project (i.e., agriculture vs drinking water).
    b. When donor objectives are different from national priorities (i.e., donor-driven methods vs national preferences for solutions).
    c. Due to political sensitivities in transboundary projects.
    - What did you do?
7. In your experience, how well do the priorities of donors in the region align with the demands on the ground (i.e., local communities, national priorities)?
    - Can you share an example where you felt the priorities were well aligned?
    - Conversely, can you share an instance where you felt the priorities were not aligned?
        - How did you handle the situation? Can you describe steps that you took and any adjustments you had to make along the way?
        - What factors influenced your actions?
        - What did you learn from this experience?

Learning:

New knowledge shapes the practices of practitioners. This may happen implicitly, without the practitioner consciously noticing it. The work of the practitioner is often guided by tacit/implicit knowledge. Networks can also be a source of new information.

1. Can you provide an example of a time where you learned something new that was particularly relevant for your work (i.e., an insight or a realization)?
    - Where do you primarily source information and knowledge relevant to your work?
2. Can you remember an instance where something you learned made you reconsider the way you look at a problem or a solution?
    - Did this change lead to an adaptation of your strategy and practices?
        - If not, why?

3. Have you had moments where new information led to a change in opinion/belief in how best to pursue an action that was different from the way your colleagues or supervisor saw it?
    - What action was taken and why?

References

Acevedo, S.M. et al. (2015) "Positionality as Knowledge: From Pedagogy to Praxis," *Integral Review,* 11(1), pp. 28-46.

Altingoz, M. et al. (2018) *Promoting Development in Shared River Basins, Promoting Development in Shared River Basins*. Washington, DC, World Bank Group. doi: 10.1596/29449

Alvesson, M. and Willmot, H. (2002) "Identity Regulation as Organizational Control: Producing the Appropriate Individual," *Journal of Management Studies,* 39(5), pp. 619-644. doi: 10.1111/1467-6486.00305

Bayeck, R. Y. (2022) "Positionality: The Interplay of Space, Context and Identity," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, pp. 1-9. doi: 10.1177/16094069221114745

Bergh, S. (2021) "Thinking and Working Politically? The Role of External Actors in Decentralization Reforms in Morocco and Tunisia," in Demmelhuber, T. and Sturm, R. (eds), *Decentralization in the Middle East and North Africa: Informal Politics, Subnational Governance, and the Periphery*. 1 edn, vol. 5, Nomos, Baden-Baden, Nahoststudien. Middle Eastern Studies, pp. 151. doi: 10.5771/9783748920731-151

Bilgen, A., Nasir, A. and Schöneberg, J. (2021) "Why positionalities matter: reflections on power, hierarchy, and knowledges in 'development' research," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 42(4), pp. 519–536. doi: 10.1080/02255189.2021.1871593.

Bourdieau, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Brinkmann, S. (2014) "Doing Without Data," *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(6), pp. 720-725. doi: 10.1177/1077800414530254

Brinkmann, S. (2021) "A Moral Perspective: Identity as Self-Interpretation," in M. Bamberg, C. Demuth, and M. Watzlawik (eds.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Identity*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 101–119.

Buckingham, D. (2008) "Introducing Identity," in Buckingham D. (ed) *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*. Cambridge, MIT Press, pp. 1–24.

Calder-Dawe, O. and Martinussen, M. (2021) "Researching Identities as Affective Discursive Practices," in M. Bamberg, C. Demuth, and M. Watzlawik (eds.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Identity*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 120–143.

Campana, M. E., Vener, B. B. and Lee, B. S. (2012) "Hydrostrategy, Hydropolitics, and Security in the Kura-Araks Basin of the South Caucasus," *Journal of Contemporary Water Research & Education*, 149(1), pp. 22–32. doi: 10.1111/j.1936-704x.2012.03124.x

Caza B.B., Vough H. and Puranik H. (2015) "Identity work in organizations and occupations: Definitions, theories, and pathways forward," *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 39, pp. 889–910. doi: 10.1002/job.2318

Dall'Agnola, J. and Sharshenova, A. (2024) "The Central Asian Research Setting: An Introduction," in Dall'Agnola, J. and Sharshenova, A. (eds) *Researching Central Asia*. Cham, Springer, pp. 1-8. doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-39024-1_1

Dean, J., Furness, P., Verrier, D., Lennon, H., Bennett, C., and Spencer, S. (2018) "Desert island data: an investigation into researcher positionality," *Qualitative Research*, 18(3), pp. 273-289. doi:10.1177/1468794117714612

Ergun, A. and Sayfutdinova, L. (2021) "Informal Practices in the Making of Professionals: The Case of Engineers in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan," *Work, Employment and Society,* 35(5), pp. 931-947. doi: 10.1177/095001702094758

Forester, J (1999) *The Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes.* Cambridge, MA. MIT Press.

Forester, J. (2012) "Learning to Improve Practice: Lessons from Practice Stories and Practitioners' Own Discourse Analyses (or Why Only the Loons Show Up)," *Planning Theory & Practice*, 13(1), pp. 11-26. doi: 10.1080/14649357.2012.649905

Freeman R., Griggs, S. and Boaz, A. (2011) "The Practice of Policy Making," *Evidence & Policy,* 7(2), pp. 127-136. doi: 10.1332/174426411X579180

Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration.* Berkeley, University of California Press.

Hasan, S., Evers, J. and Zwarteveen, M. (2022) "The work that goes into policy transfer: Making the Dutch delta approach travel," *Water Alternatives,* 15(1), pp. 56-72. Available at: https://www.water-alternatives.org/index.php/alldoc/articles/vol15/v15issue1/653-a15-1-4/file

Martus, E. (2024) "The environmental state in a political context: explaining institutional change in Georgia and Armenia," *Environmental Politics*, pp. 1–24. doi: 10.1080/09644016.2024.2371767

Massoud, M.F. (2024) "Introduction: The Power of Positionality," in L.J. Chua and M.F. Massoud (eds.) *Out of Place: Fieldwork and Positionality in Law and Society*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–35.

Maxwell, S. and Stone, D. (2005) "Global Knowledge Networks and International Development: Bridges Across Boundaries," in Maxwell, S. and Stone, D. (eds) *Global Knowledge Networks and International Development.* Abington, Routledge, pp. 1-17.

Mitchell, J. M. (2018) *At the Confluence: Participatory Development, State-Society Relations, and Transboundary Water Management in the Kura River Basin.* PhD Thesis. University of Washington. Available at: https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/items/11101bd8-419a-4075-9727-49f5b05c2426/full

Mosse, D. (2004) "Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice," *Development & Change,* 35(4), pp. 639-671. doi: 10.1111/j.0012-155X.2004.00374.x

Nicolini, D. (2012) *Practice Theory, Work, and Organization.* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Pouliot, V. and Cornut, J. (2015) "Practice theory and the study of diplomacy: A research agenda," *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50(3), pp. 297-315. doi: 10.1177/0010836715574913

Rawluk, A., Beilin, R., Bender, H. and Ford, R. (2020) "Adaptive Doing: Reimagining Social Ecological Practice," in Rawluk, A., Beilin, R., Bender, H. and Ford, R. (eds) *Practices in Social Ecological Research*. Cham, Palgrave Pivot, pp. 61-85.

Rogers, L.O. and Syed, M. (2021) "Conceptualizing the Multiple Levels of Identity and Intersectionality," in M. Bamberg, C. Demuth, and M. Watzlawik (eds.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Identity*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 604–626.

Schatzki, T. R. (2001) "Introduction: Practice Theory," in Schatzki, T. R., Cetina, K. K. and von Savigny, E. (eds) *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. London, Routledge, pp. 10-23.

Stepanyan, S. (2010) *Investments in Water and Irrigation Sectors Through International Financial Institutions: Impact on the Armenian Economy*. American University of Armenia. Available at: https://dspace.aua.am/xmlui/handle/123456789/491?show=full

Taylor, C. (2015) "Modern Social Imaginaries," *Public Culture,* 14(1), pp. 91-124.

Tonayan, V. (2019) Overview of the Armenia-Georgian Water Cooperation. EU Water Initiative for Eastern Partnership. Yerevan. Available at: https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/documents/2019/WAT/10Oct_14_Bilateral_Armenia_Georgia_Khrami-Debed/Overview_Armenian-Georgian_water_cooperation.pdf

Vener, B. (2007) *The Kura-Araks Basin: Obstacles and Common Objectives for an Intergrated Water Resources Management Model among Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.* University of New Mexico. Available at:

https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/wr_sp/61?utm_source=digitalrepository.unm.edu%2Fwr_sp%2F61&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.