



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Student Name: *Khalil Dach*

Student Number: 2231724

Course Name: LCLM-6005

Module: *Independent Project*

Lecturer Name: Nishi Ramsurrun

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PROBLEM OF WEAPONAISING WATER

Water as Power: Governance, Corporate Influence and the Role of Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Water is essential to life, economies, and societies. Yet it can also be a source of power, conflict, and inequality. This dissertation examines how control over water functions as a form of power—politically, economically, and institutionally—and how sustainability and ethical leadership might reduce associated harms. The study uses qualitative secondary research, reviewing academic works, international reports, and documented cases. Key themes explored include global water scarcity, hydrohegemony (state-level control of shared waters), the weaponisation of water in conflict, and corporate control of natural water resources (with cases such as FIJI Water, Nestlé, and Coca-Cola). A special comparative focus contrasts Europe's predominantly public water governance models with England's fully privatised system. Findings show that governance structure matters: public, municipal, or non-profit systems tend to prioritise equity, long-term investment, and transparency, while privatisation can shift power toward profit-driven actors and create tensions around access and sustainability. The dissertation proposes that ethical leadership and participatory governance are central to fair water management. Recommendations include stronger public accountability, tighter regulation of corporate extraction, increased community participation, and prioritising public or non-profit models where feasible. The study contributes a bridge between hydro-politics and corporate sustainability literature and suggests a conceptual framework for linking leadership, sustainability, and equitable water governance.

Chapter 1 --INTRODOCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Water is one of the most fundamental resources for human survival, economic development and environmental sustainability. Every aspect of modern life—food production, industrial activity, energy generation, sanitation and public health—depends on reliable access to clean water. Despite this central importance, access to water remains unevenly distributed across the globe. While the Earth is often described as a “water planet,” only a very small proportion of global water resources is accessible freshwater suitable for human use. According to UNESCO (2022), less than one percent of the world’s total water supply is readily available for consumption, agriculture and industry. This limited availability places increasing pressure on water systems as global demand continues to rise.

Over the past decades, global water stress has intensified due to a combination of demographic, environmental and economic factors. Rapid population growth has increased demand for domestic water, while urbanisation has strained infrastructure in many cities, particularly in developing regions. At the same time, climate change has altered rainfall patterns, intensified droughts and increased the frequency of extreme weather events, further destabilising water availability (FAO, 2016). Agriculture alone accounts for approximately 70 percent of global freshwater withdrawals, placing significant pressure on rivers, lakes and groundwater systems (World Bank, 2021). These trends have led the United Nations to warn that by 2050 more than half of the world’s population may live in water-stressed areas (UNESCO, 2022).

However, contemporary water challenges cannot be understood solely through environmental or technical perspectives. A growing body of academic literature emphasises that water scarcity, access and security are deeply shaped by political decisions, economic interests and institutional arrangements rather than by hydrological limits alone (Mehta, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2009). In many regions, water scarcity is not the result of an absolute lack of water, but of how water is governed, who controls infrastructure, and whose needs are prioritised. This perspective challenges dominant narratives that frame water crises as natural or unavoidable and instead highlights the role of human agency in producing scarcity.

Water governance has therefore become a central issue in global politics and economics. States rely on water infrastructure such as dams, reservoirs and canals to secure national development goals and exert influence over neighbouring countries. Corporations increasingly extract and commodify water for profit, particularly through bottled water production and private utility management. At the same time, communities often experience water insecurity despite living in water-rich regions, raising concerns about justice, equity and accountability. These dynamics reveal that water is not merely a physical resource, but also a strategic asset and a form of power.

1.2 Water as Power: Political, Economic and Social Dimensions

The concept of water as power has gained increasing attention within political ecology, international relations and governance studies. Linton (2010) argues that water is socially constructed through political, economic and cultural processes that define how it is valued and distributed. From this perspective, water is not simply part of the natural environment but is embedded within systems of power that determine access and control. Swyngedouw (2009) further develops this idea by describing the “hydro-social cycle,” in which water flows are shaped by political authority, economic systems and social relations.

One of the most prominent expressions of water as political power is found in transboundary river basins. When rivers cross national borders, upstream countries often possess structural advantages that allow them to influence downstream water availability. Zeitoun and Warner (2006) conceptualise this phenomenon through the theory of hydro-hegemony, which explains how states use geographic position, infrastructure development and diplomatic leverage to dominate shared water resources. Large-scale dam projects in regions such as the Nile Basin, the Tigris–Euphrates Basin and the Mekong Basin illustrate how water infrastructure can be transformed into geopolitical leverage (Cascão & Zeitoun, 2010).

Water has also emerged as a tool of coercion in armed conflict. Modern warfare increasingly targets civilian infrastructure, including water treatment plants, pipelines and dams. Human Rights Watch (2019) documents numerous cases in which water systems have been deliberately destroyed or manipulated to punish populations, force displacement or gain military advantage. Such practices demonstrate that water has become a weapon not only in strategic planning but also in humanitarian crises, with devastating consequences for civilian populations.

Beyond state power, water has become a site of economic control through corporate activity. The global expansion of bottled water companies and private water utilities reflects a broader trend towards commodification, in which water is treated as an economic good rather than a public right. Bakker (2010) argues that privatisation often shifts control over water away from democratic institutions and towards private actors, reducing transparency and accountability. Corporate influence extends beyond markets into policy-making, taxation and environmental regulation, particularly in regions where governance structures are weak or dependent on foreign investment.

These political and economic dimensions intersect with social inequality. Marginalised communities—such as informal urban settlements, rural populations and indigenous groups—frequently experience the most severe water insecurity. Mehta (2013) highlights that water scarcity often reinforces existing social hierarchies by making access conditional on wealth, political influence or geographic location. As a result, water governance reflects broader patterns of inequality and exclusion within societies.

1.3 Problem Statement

Despite widespread recognition of water as a fundamental human need, control over water resources is increasingly concentrated among powerful political and economic actors. Governments use water infrastructure to advance national interests, corporations extract and commodify water for profit, and governance models shape who benefits from water systems. These processes often marginalise vulnerable populations and undermine the principle of water as a human right.

In many regions, water is used strategically rather than equitably. Hydro-hegemonic states prioritise national development over regional cooperation, sometimes exacerbating tensions and insecurity for downstream countries. In conflict zones, water is deliberately weaponised, resulting in humanitarian crises that disproportionately affect civilians. At the same time, corporate involvement in water governance raises ethical concerns regarding sustainability, accountability and local access.

A further issue lies in the diversity of governance models. While many European countries maintain public or municipal water systems based on the principle of universal access, England stands as the only European country to have fully privatised its water sector. This divergence offers a critical opportunity to examine how different governance structures influence equity, sustainability and public trust (Hall & Lobina, 2012; We Own It, 2023). However, existing research often examines political water power and corporate water power separately, leaving a gap in integrated analysis.

1.4 Research Aim

The aim of this research is to critically examine how control over water functions as a form of political, economic and social power, and to explore how sustainability and ethical leadership can contribute to fair and responsible water governance.

1.5 Research Questions

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How has water been used historically and contemporarily as a political, military or strategic tool?
 2. What forms of power do corporations exercise in relation to water extraction, distribution and commercialisation?
 3. How do different water governance models—public, private and hybrid—affect equity, sustainability and accountability?
 4. What role can ethical leadership and sustainability play in mitigating power imbalances in water governance?
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1.6 Research Objectives

The objectives of this dissertation are to analyse historical and contemporary examples of water as power, examine corporate practices in the water sector, compare governance models with a focus on Europe and England, identify limitations in current sustainability approaches, and propose a conceptual framework linking water governance with ethical leadership and sustainability.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This research is academically significant because it integrates perspectives from hydro-politics, political ecology, corporate governance and leadership ethics—fields that are often studied in isolation. By connecting these literatures, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of water governance as a multidimensional power system.

From a practical perspective, the research offers insights for policymakers, regulators and international organisations seeking to address growing water insecurity. Understanding how governance models and leadership decisions shape outcomes can inform more equitable and sustainable policy design.

Socially, the study highlights the experiences of communities affected by water scarcity, privatisation and conflict, emphasising the importance of justice and inclusion. Ethically, it challenges governments and corporations to align sustainability claims with responsible action.

1.8 Scope and Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is based on qualitative secondary research drawing on academic literature, institutional reports and case studies from multiple regions. It focuses on governance and power rather than technical water management.

The dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on water scarcity, hydro-hegemony, weaponisation, corporate control and governance models. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology. Chapter 4 presents the findings. Chapter 5 discusses these findings in relation to the literature. Chapter 6 concludes the study and provides recommendations.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews and critically evaluates the existing academic literature relevant to the study of water governance, power, and sustainability. The purpose of the literature review is not merely to summarise previous research, but to analyse key debates, identify points of agreement and disagreement among scholars, and highlight gaps that justify the present study. The literature is organised around five core themes: water scarcity and political ecology, hydro-hegemony and geopolitical power, the weaponisation of water, corporate commodification and privatisation, and the role of governance, sustainability and ethical leadership. Together, these themes establish the theoretical foundation for examining water as a multidimensional form of power.

2.2 Water Scarcity and Political Ecology

Early approaches to water scarcity often framed the issue as a technical or environmental problem driven by population growth, climate variability and limited natural supply. Institutions such as the FAO (2016) and World Bank (2021) continue to emphasise physical water stress indicators, focusing on availability per capita and hydrological constraints. While these approaches are valuable for understanding environmental pressures, critics argue that they overlook the political and social dimensions of scarcity.

Political ecology scholars challenge the assumption that scarcity is a natural condition. Mehta (2013) argues that scarcity is frequently “manufactured” through governance failures, unequal allocation and political exclusion. From this perspective, scarcity reflects institutional priorities rather than environmental limits. Swyngedouw (2009) similarly conceptualises water scarcity through the “hydro-social cycle,” emphasising that water flows are shaped by power relations, economic systems and social structures. These authors argue that water crises should be understood as governance crises rather than purely environmental ones.

This critical perspective highlights an important limitation in mainstream water management literature. By focusing primarily on supply-side solutions such as dams, desalination or efficiency improvements, technocratic approaches often fail to address underlying inequalities in access. The literature therefore suggests that scarcity cannot be resolved without institutional reform, political accountability and social justice considerations.

However, critics of political ecology argue that it may underplay the role of genuine environmental constraints. Authors such as Gleick (1993) caution that climate change and absolute water shortages do present real risks that cannot be dismissed as purely political. This debate reveals a tension within the literature between environmental determinism and political construction. The present study adopts an integrative position, recognising the role of environmental pressures while emphasising that governance decisions determine how these pressures are experienced.

2.3 Hydro-Hegemony and Geopolitical Control

One of the most influential frameworks in transboundary water studies is the theory of hydro-hegemony developed by Zeitoun and Warner (2006). This framework explains how power asymmetries between states shape water-sharing arrangements. According to the theory, hegemonic states use a combination of material power, bargaining power and ideational power to control shared water resources. This approach moves beyond simplistic conflict–cooperation models by highlighting how domination can occur even in the absence of open conflict.

Empirical studies support this framework across multiple regions. Cascão and Zeitoun (2010) apply hydro-hegemony theory to the Nile Basin, demonstrating how Egypt historically maintained dominance through treaties, infrastructure and diplomatic influence. More recent research shows how Ethiopia's construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam has begun to challenge this power balance. Similar dynamics are observed in the Tigris–Euphrates Basin, where Turkey's dam-building programme has altered regional power relations with Syria and Iraq.

While hydro-hegemony theory has been widely adopted, some scholars criticise it for overstating conflict and underestimating cooperation. Wolf (2007) argues that shared water resources more often lead to cooperation than conflict, citing numerous water treaties as evidence. However, critics respond that cooperation frequently occurs on unequal terms that favour hegemonic states, thus masking underlying power imbalances (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006).

This debate highlights a gap in the literature: while hydro-hegemony explains interstate power dynamics effectively, it pays limited attention to corporate actors and internal governance structures. The present study builds on hydro-hegemony theory while expanding it to include corporate power and governance models.

2.4 Weaponisation of Water

The weaponisation of water has historically been documented in ancient and medieval warfare, where armies diverted rivers or poisoned wells to weaken enemies (Gleick, 1993). However, contemporary literature shows that water weaponisation has re-emerged as a critical issue in modern conflicts. Human Rights Watch (2019) documents systematic attacks on water infrastructure in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, where water systems were deliberately targeted to punish civilian populations.

Zeitoun (2008) introduces the concept of “structural violence” to explain how long-term water insecurity can result from deliberate political decisions. Unlike direct military attacks, structural violence operates through neglect, underinvestment or discriminatory allocation, producing chronic suffering. This concept is particularly relevant in occupied or marginalised regions, where water access is restricted without overt conflict.

Despite growing recognition of water weaponisation, the literature remains fragmented between security studies and humanitarian research. Security-focused studies often analyse water as a strategic asset, while humanitarian studies emphasise human rights violations. Few studies integrate these perspectives with governance and leadership frameworks. This represents a key gap addressed by the present dissertation.

2.5 Corporate Commodification and Privatisation of Water

The commodification of water has become a central theme in critical water governance literature. Bakker (2010) argues that privatisation transforms water from a public good into a market commodity, shifting power from democratic institutions to private corporations. This shift often reduces transparency and accountability, particularly where regulation is weak.

Linton (2010) further critiques commodification by arguing that it abstracts water from its social and ecological context. When water is treated primarily as an economic input, its cultural, environmental and social dimensions are marginalised. This perspective is echoed in studies of bottled water companies, where corporations extract groundwater at low cost and sell it at high margins to global markets.

Empirical research highlights significant concerns regarding corporate practices. Barlow (2015) documents cases where multinational corporations depleted local aquifers while communities faced water shortages. Lyon and Montgomery (2015) analyse how corporations use sustainability narratives to manage reputation rather than reduce environmental harm, a practice commonly referred to as greenwashing.

However, proponents of privatisation argue that private sector involvement can improve efficiency and investment. World Bank publications often suggest that private utilities can address infrastructure deficits in developing countries. Critics respond that evidence for improved outcomes is mixed and context-dependent, and that profit motives often conflict with equity objectives (Hall & Lobina, 2012).

This debate underscores the need for comparative governance analysis, particularly between public and private models—an area where the present study makes a direct contribution.

2.6 Public vs Private Water Governance Models

Comparative studies of water governance reveal stark differences between public and private systems. Hall and Lobina (2012) demonstrate that public and municipal water utilities in Europe generally deliver lower prices, higher reinvestment and greater accountability than privatised systems. These findings challenge neoliberal assumptions that private ownership inherently improves efficiency.

England represents a unique case in Europe as the only country to fully privatise its water sector. Studies by We Own It (2023) show that privatisation has resulted in rising bills, increased corporate debt and persistent pollution issues. These outcomes raise questions about the suitability of market-driven governance for essential services.

Despite this evidence, much of the literature treats governance models as technical choices rather than political ones. The present study addresses this limitation by analysing governance as a power structure that shapes access, equity and sustainability.

2.7 Sustainability and Ethical Leadership in Water Governance

Sustainability has become a dominant concept in water governance discourse, particularly through frameworks promoted by UNESCO (2022). These frameworks emphasise long-term planning, ecological protection and social inclusion. However, critics argue that sustainability is often applied superficially without addressing power imbalances.

Ethical leadership literature offers valuable insights into this challenge. Maak and Pless (2006) define responsible leadership as a relational process grounded in accountability, fairness and stakeholder engagement. While widely applied in business ethics, this framework has rarely been integrated into water governance studies.

Pahl-Wostl (2009) introduces the concept of adaptive governance, arguing that complex environmental challenges require flexible, participatory and learning-oriented institutions.

This approach aligns closely with ethical leadership principles and offers a pathway for addressing uncertainty and power asymmetries in water management.

The limited integration of leadership ethics into water governance literature represents a significant gap that this dissertation seeks to address.

2.8 Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

The literature review reveals several key gaps. First, political and corporate analyses of water power are often treated separately. Second, governance models are rarely examined explicitly in relation to equity and power. Third, ethical leadership is largely absent from water governance debates.

This dissertation addresses these gaps by integrating hydro-hegemony theory, corporate power analysis, governance comparison and leadership ethics into a single conceptual framework. By doing so, it offers a more comprehensive understanding of water as a multidimensional form of power.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has critically reviewed the key literature relevant to water governance, power and sustainability. It demonstrated that water scarcity is socially constructed, that hydro-hegemony shapes geopolitical relations, that water is increasingly weaponised, that corporate commodification raises ethical concerns, and that governance models significantly influence outcomes. The chapter identified clear gaps in the literature, justifying the need for the present study. The next chapter outlines the methodological approach used to address these gaps.

CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines and justifies the methodological approach adopted in this dissertation. The purpose of the methodology is to explain how the research questions were addressed, why particular methods were selected, and how the data was analysed to generate meaningful findings. Given that this study examines water as a form of political, economic and social power, the research design needed to capture complex relationships, interpretations and institutional dynamics rather than measurable physical variables. As such, a qualitative, interpretivist approach based on secondary research was selected as the most appropriate strategy.

This chapter discusses the research philosophy, research approach, data sources, data collection process, analytical framework, ethical considerations and limitations of the study. Each methodological choice is justified with reference to relevant research methodology literature.

3.2 Research Philosophy: Interpretivism

Research philosophy refers to the assumptions a researcher makes about the nature of reality and knowledge. This study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy, which assumes that social reality is not objective or fixed but socially constructed through human interaction, meaning and power relations (Creswell, 2014). Interpretivism is particularly suitable for studies that explore governance, ethics and power, as these concepts cannot be understood through purely positivist or quantitative approaches.

Water governance involves contested meanings of scarcity, rights, sustainability and ownership. Mehta (2013) argues that water scarcity itself is often constructed through political discourse and institutional decisions. Similarly, Swyngedouw (2009) emphasises that water flows are shaped by social and political processes rather than natural forces alone. An interpretivist approach allows this research to examine how different actors—states, corporations and institutions—interpret and deploy water as a form of power.

By adopting interpretivism, the study prioritises understanding context, perspective and meaning. This is essential for analysing how governance models influence equity, how corporate narratives shape sustainability discourse, and how political actors justify control over water resources. A positivist approach focused on measurement and prediction would not adequately capture these dynamics.

3.3 Research Approach: Qualitative Research

A qualitative research approach was selected because it enables in-depth analysis of complex social phenomena. Qualitative research focuses on understanding “how” and “why” questions rather than quantifying variables (Creswell, 2014). Since the research questions address how water is used as power and how governance structures shape outcomes, qualitative analysis is more appropriate than quantitative methods.

Quantitative approaches are commonly used in water studies to measure availability, consumption or efficiency. While such data is valuable, it does not explain why certain groups experience scarcity while others do not, or how political and corporate power influences access. Qualitative research allows the researcher to explore these issues through critical engagement with existing literature, policy documents and case studies.

The qualitative approach also supports comparative analysis. By examining multiple geographical contexts—such as Europe, England, the Middle East and small island states—the research identifies patterns and contrasts in governance and power relations that would be difficult to capture through numerical data alone.

3.4 Research Strategy: Secondary Research

This dissertation is based entirely on secondary research. Secondary research involves the analysis of data that has already been collected by other researchers, institutions or organisations. This strategy was chosen for several reasons.

First, the scope of the study is global, encompassing multiple countries, governance systems and political contexts. Conducting primary research across such a wide range of settings would not be feasible within the timeframe and resources of this dissertation. Second, many of the issues examined—such as water weaponisation and corporate extraction—occur in conflict zones or politically sensitive environments, making primary data collection ethically and practically challenging.

Third, there is a substantial body of high-quality secondary data available. International organisations such as UNESCO, the FAO and the World Bank publish comprehensive reports on water governance and scarcity. Academic journals provide peer-reviewed theoretical and empirical analyses, while NGOs such as Human Rights Watch document human rights violations related to water access.

Using secondary research allows this study to synthesise and critically evaluate diverse perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of water as power.

3.5 Data Sources

The data used in this research was drawn from four main categories of sources. Academic literature formed the core theoretical foundation of the study, including peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books on water governance, political ecology, hydro-hegemony and corporate power. Key authors included Bakker (2010), Mehta (2013), Swyngedouw (2009), Zeitoun and Warner (2006), and Hall and Lobina (2012).

Institutional reports provided empirical context and policy perspectives. These included publications from UNESCO (2022), the FAO (2016), the World Bank (2021) and the OECD. Such reports offered data on global water stress, governance frameworks and sustainability initiatives.

NGO reports were used to analyse cases of water weaponisation and corporate misconduct. Human Rights Watch (2019) and Corporate Accountability International provided detailed documentation of water-related human rights issues.

Finally, government and regulatory documents were examined to understand national governance structures, particularly in the case of England's privatised water system. Reports from Ofwat and UK parliamentary committees were used to assess regulatory performance and accountability.

3.6 Data Collection Process

The data collection process followed a systematic and structured approach. Relevant sources were identified through academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, Web of Science and ScienceDirect. Search terms included combinations of “water governance,” “water scarcity political ecology,” “hydro-hegemony,” “water weaponisation,” “water privatisation,” and “ethical leadership.”

Sources were screened for relevance, credibility and academic quality. Priority was given to peer-reviewed literature, authoritative institutional reports and well-documented case studies. Sources that lacked methodological transparency or demonstrated clear bias without supporting evidence were excluded.

Once selected, sources were read in full and key arguments, findings and theoretical contributions were extracted and organised thematically. This process ensured that the analysis was comprehensive and grounded in established research.

3.7 Data Analysis Method: Thematic Analysis

The data was analysed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative method that identifies, analyses and interprets patterns within qualitative data. It is particularly well suited to secondary research involving large volumes of textual material.

The analysis began with familiarisation, where all sources were read multiple times to gain an overall understanding of the material. Initial codes were then generated to identify recurring concepts such as scarcity, power, governance, commodification and leadership. These codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected the research questions.

The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between them. The final themes formed the basis of the findings presented in Chapter 4. This approach ensured that the analysis was systematic, transparent and theoretically grounded.

3.8 Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are addressed through credibility, transparency and reflexivity rather than statistical measures (Creswell, 2014). Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

Triangulation was achieved by comparing findings across multiple types of sources, including academic literature, institutional reports and NGO documentation. This reduced the risk of relying on a single perspective. Transparency was maintained by clearly documenting data selection criteria and analytical steps. Reflexivity was also important, as the researcher

acknowledged their role in interpreting the data and sought to minimise bias through critical engagement with contrasting viewpoints.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Although this study does not involve primary data collection or human participants, ethical considerations remain relevant. All sources were cited appropriately using APA 7 referencing to avoid plagiarism. Sensitive information related to conflict and human rights abuses was handled responsibly, ensuring that claims were supported by credible evidence.

NGO reports were critically assessed to account for potential advocacy bias, and corporate sustainability claims were treated with caution. The study aimed to present a balanced and ethical analysis of all actors involved.

3.10 Limitations of the Methodology

This methodology has several limitations. The reliance on secondary data means that the study depends on the availability and accuracy of existing sources. Some water-related conflicts and corporate practices may be underreported. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on English-language sources, which may exclude relevant perspectives published in other languages.

Despite these limitations, the methodology is appropriate for achieving the research aim and provides a robust foundation for analysing water as a form of power.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the qualitative, interpretivist methodology adopted in the study and justified the use of secondary research and thematic analysis. The methodological approach enables a critical examination of political, corporate and governance dimensions of water. The next chapter presents the findings derived from this analysis.

CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of the secondary data examined in this study. The findings reflect recurring patterns identified across academic literature, institutional reports, and documented case studies. Rather than describing individual cases in isolation, this chapter synthesises evidence to show how water operates as a form of political, economic and social power. The findings are organised around four interrelated themes: the political construction of water scarcity, the use of water as a strategic and military tool, the growing influence of corporate actors in water governance, and the

impact of governance models on equity and sustainability. These themes directly address the research questions and provide the empirical basis for the discussion in Chapter 5.

4.2 Water Scarcity as a Politically Constructed Condition

The findings strongly indicate that water scarcity is frequently the result of political and institutional decisions rather than absolute physical shortages. Across multiple regions, evidence shows that scarcity often emerges where governance systems fail to distribute water equitably or prioritise certain users over others. This finding aligns with Mehta's (2013) argument that scarcity is socially constructed through policy choices, infrastructure investment and power relations.

In urban contexts, the findings reveal that informal settlements and low-income neighbourhoods experience unreliable water access even when cities have sufficient supply at the basin level. Institutional neglect, inadequate infrastructure and political marginalisation contribute to chronic shortages. This pattern confirms Swyngedouw's (2009) assertion that water access reflects socio-economic hierarchies rather than hydrological realities.

In agricultural regions, large-scale farming operations and industrial users are often prioritised over domestic consumption. The findings indicate that governments frequently allocate substantial water volumes to export-oriented agriculture to support economic growth, while rural communities face restrictions. This reinforces the view that scarcity is shaped by economic priorities and political influence rather than environmental necessity (FAO, 2016).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that water scarcity functions as a form of power by making access conditional on political status, economic capacity and geographic position. Scarcity therefore reinforces existing inequalities rather than acting as a neutral environmental challenge.

4.3 Water as Geopolitical Power: Hydro-Hegemony in Practice

The findings confirm that water is widely used as a geopolitical tool, particularly in transboundary river basins. Evidence from the Nile, Tigris–Euphrates and Mekong basins supports the theory of hydro-hegemony, which explains how upstream states convert geographical advantage into political influence (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006).

The construction of large dams emerged as a central mechanism of hydro-hegemonic power. Upstream countries use dams to regulate water flows, control seasonal availability and influence downstream agricultural productivity. These actions are often justified through development narratives, framing water infrastructure as a sovereign right rather than a shared responsibility. Cascão and Zeitoun (2010) argue that such narratives obscure power asymmetries and limit the ability of downstream states to challenge decisions.

The findings also reveal that hydro-hegemonic power does not always result in open conflict. Instead, power is exercised through diplomatic pressure, delayed negotiations and unequal treaty arrangements. This supports the critique of cooperation-focused models that overlook the structural inequalities embedded in many water-sharing agreements (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006).

These findings highlight that water governance at the international level is shaped less by principles of equity and more by relative power, reinforcing the idea that water functions as a strategic asset in global politics.

4.4 Weaponisation of Water in Contemporary Conflicts

The findings demonstrate that water is increasingly weaponised in modern conflict, with severe humanitarian consequences. Evidence from Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Ukraine shows that water infrastructure has become a deliberate target in military strategies. Human Rights Watch (2019) documents cases where pumping stations, treatment plants and dams were destroyed or seized to pressure civilian populations.

The analysis reveals that weaponisation operates through both direct and indirect mechanisms. Direct attacks involve physical destruction of infrastructure, resulting in immediate loss of access. Indirect mechanisms include prolonged neglect, restricted maintenance and selective service provision in politically marginalised regions. These practices align with Zeitoun's (2008) concept of structural violence, where water insecurity becomes embedded over time.

The findings also indicate that weaponisation extends beyond armed conflict into political coercion. States may manipulate water flows during diplomatic disputes or withhold cooperation in transboundary negotiations. This blurs the boundary between military and political weaponisation, showing that water can be used as a tool of pressure without overt violence.

The humanitarian impact of water weaponisation is significant. Civilian populations face increased risks of disease, displacement and long-term poverty. These findings highlight the ethical implications of water governance failures and underscore the need for stronger international protections.

4.5 Corporate Power and the Commodification of Water

The findings reveal that corporate actors exert significant influence over water resources through extraction, distribution and narrative control. Multinational corporations involved in bottled water production and private utilities have the ability to shape water governance outcomes, particularly in regions with weak regulatory frameworks.

Case evidence shows that companies such as FIJI Water, Nestlé and Coca-Cola extract large volumes of groundwater while paying minimal fees. These practices often occur in areas

where local communities experience unreliable access. This confirms Bakker's (2010) argument that commodification transfers control from public institutions to private actors.

The FIJI Water case illustrates how corporate power extends beyond markets into political negotiation. The company's temporary shutdown during a tax dispute demonstrated its capacity to pressure government decision-making. This finding highlights a power dynamic particularly relevant to small island developing states, where economic dependency can weaken regulatory authority (Fisher, 2020).

The findings also reveal a consistent gap between corporate sustainability claims and operational practices. Many companies promote environmental responsibility through branding while continuing extractive practices that strain local ecosystems. This supports Lyon and Montgomery's (2015) critique of greenwashing and suggests that corporate sustainability narratives often function as tools of legitimacy rather than accountability.

Overall, the findings indicate that corporate water power is multi-dimensional, encompassing economic, political and ideological influence.

4.6 Governance Models and Equity Outcomes

A central finding of this study concerns the impact of governance models on water equity and sustainability. Comparative analysis reveals clear differences between public water systems in Europe and England's privatised model.

In most European countries, water services remain publicly owned or municipally managed. The findings show that these systems prioritise universal access, reinvestment in infrastructure and democratic accountability. Hall and Lobina (2012) demonstrate that public systems tend to deliver lower costs and greater transparency, a pattern supported by the evidence analysed in this study.

In contrast, England's fully privatised water system exhibits reduced accountability and weaker environmental performance. Findings indicate rising consumer bills, increased corporate debt and persistent sewage pollution. Reports from We Own It (2023) show that shareholder returns have often been prioritised over infrastructure investment.

This contrast highlights that governance models are not neutral technical arrangements but political choices with significant social consequences. Public systems distribute power more broadly, while private systems concentrate power among investors and corporate executives.

4.7 Leadership and Sustainability as Cross-Cutting Factors

Across all themes, leadership and sustainability emerged as decisive factors shaping water outcomes. The findings indicate that ethical leadership is essential for preventing the misuse of water as power. Where leadership lacks transparency and accountability, water becomes vulnerable to political exploitation, corporate extraction and militarisation.

Sustainability frameworks promoted by institutions such as UNESCO (2022) emphasise long-term planning, ecosystem protection and social inclusion. However, the findings reveal that sustainability is often applied superficially, particularly by corporate actors. This supports Pahl-Wostl's (2009) argument that adaptive governance is necessary to address complexity and uncertainty in water systems.

Leadership grounded in ethical principles has the potential to counterbalance power asymmetries by prioritising human rights, environmental limits and community participation. The absence of such leadership contributes to inequitable and unsustainable outcomes.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter presented the key findings of the study, demonstrating that water operates as a multidimensional form of power. Scarcity is frequently politically constructed, water is used as a geopolitical and military tool, corporations exert significant influence through commodification, and governance models shape equity and sustainability. Leadership and sustainability emerge as essential elements for addressing these challenges. These findings provide the foundation for the critical discussion presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter critically discusses the findings presented in Chapter 4 and interprets them in relation to the research questions and the academic literature reviewed in Chapter 2. While the previous chapter focused on presenting empirical patterns identified through thematic analysis, this discussion aims to explain what these findings mean, why they matter, and how they contribute to existing debates on water governance, power and sustainability. The chapter demonstrates that water is not simply a natural resource under pressure, but a politically and economically contested domain shaped by governance structures, corporate interests and leadership decisions. Through this discussion, the chapter highlights how the study addresses key gaps in the literature and advances understanding of water as a multidimensional form of power.

5.2 Water Scarcity as Political and Social Power

One of the most significant findings of this study is that water scarcity is frequently the outcome of political and institutional arrangements rather than an unavoidable environmental condition. This finding strongly supports the political ecology perspective advanced by Mehta (2013) and Swyngedouw (2009), who argue that scarcity is often produced through governance failures, unequal allocation and exclusionary decision-making processes. The evidence analysed in this research demonstrates that scarcity emerges where certain users—such as industrial actors, export-oriented agriculture or political elites—are prioritised over others.

This finding challenges technocratic narratives that frame water scarcity as a neutral consequence of population growth or climate change. While environmental pressures are undeniably real, the findings confirm that governance choices determine who experiences scarcity and who does not. This aligns with Mehta's (2013) critique of "scarcity narratives," which often obscure the role of power and accountability. By highlighting this dynamic, the study reinforces the argument that solutions to water scarcity must address institutional reform and social justice, not only technical efficiency.

Furthermore, the findings show that scarcity reinforces existing social inequalities. Marginalised communities, particularly in informal urban settlements and rural areas, consistently experience poorer access despite living in water-rich regions. This supports Swyngedouw's (2009) assertion that water access reflects broader socio-economic hierarchies. In this sense, scarcity functions as a form of social power, making access conditional on political visibility, economic capacity or geographic position.

5.3 Water as Geopolitical and Strategic Power

The findings also confirm that water is widely used as a geopolitical tool, particularly in transboundary river basins. The evidence supports the hydro-hegemony framework developed by Zeitoun and Warner (2006), which explains how upstream states use infrastructure development, legal narratives and diplomatic influence to dominate shared water resources. Cases involving Turkey, Ethiopia and China illustrate how geographical advantage is transformed into political leverage through dam construction and flow regulation.

This study supports the argument that cooperation in transboundary water governance often masks underlying power asymmetries. While Wolf (2007) suggests that shared water resources tend to promote cooperation, the findings indicate that such cooperation frequently occurs on unequal terms that favour hegemonic states. This reinforces the critique offered by Cascão and Zeitoun (2010), who argue that cooperation does not necessarily imply equity.

By confirming these dynamics, the study strengthens hydro-hegemony theory while also extending it. The findings suggest that geopolitical water power cannot be fully understood

without considering internal governance structures and corporate involvement. This integrated perspective represents a key contribution to the literature.

5.4 Weaponisation of Water and Ethical Implications

The findings demonstrate that water continues to be weaponised in contemporary conflicts, with severe humanitarian consequences. Evidence from Syria, Yemen and Iraq supports reports by Human Rights Watch (2019), which document deliberate attacks on water infrastructure. These practices confirm that water is not only a strategic asset but also a means of collective punishment.

The study's findings align with Zeitoun's (2008) concept of structural violence, showing that water insecurity is often sustained through prolonged neglect and discriminatory governance rather than isolated acts of destruction. This challenges the assumption that weaponisation is limited to direct military attacks and highlights the role of political decisions in producing long-term harm.

From an ethical perspective, these findings raise serious concerns. The targeting of water systems violates fundamental principles of human rights and humanitarian law. Maak and Pless (2006) argue that ethical leadership requires prioritising human dignity and stakeholder wellbeing. The evidence analysed in this study suggests that such principles are frequently ignored in both conflict and post-conflict governance, underscoring a critical leadership failure.

5.5 Corporate Power and the Commodification of Water

The discussion of corporate power reveals that water commodification represents one of the most significant shifts in contemporary water governance. The findings strongly support Bakker's (2010) argument that privatisation and commodification transfer power from public institutions to private actors. Corporations involved in bottled water production and private utilities exert influence not only through market mechanisms but also through political negotiation and narrative control.

The FIJI Water case illustrates how corporate power can challenge state authority, particularly in small island developing states. The company's response to increased taxation demonstrates its ability to influence national policy by leveraging economic dependency (Fisher, 2020). This finding extends existing literature by highlighting how corporate–state power relations vary according to national context and economic vulnerability.

The findings also confirm critiques of corporate sustainability discourse. While companies frequently promote environmental responsibility, the evidence suggests that such claims often function as reputational strategies rather than substantive commitments to water stewardship. This aligns with Lyon and Montgomery's (2015) analysis of greenwashing and highlights the limitations of voluntary corporate responsibility frameworks.

5.6 Governance Models: Public versus Private Systems

One of the most important contributions of this study lies in its comparative analysis of governance models. The findings demonstrate a clear contrast between public water systems in Europe and England's fully privatised model. Public systems consistently prioritise reinvestment, transparency and universal access, supporting the arguments of Hall and Lobina (2012).

In contrast, England's privatised system illustrates the risks associated with market-driven governance of essential services. Rising bills, increasing corporate debt and persistent environmental violations indicate that privatisation has not delivered improved outcomes. These findings support Bakker's (2010) critique of neoliberal water governance and challenge claims that private ownership inherently enhances efficiency.

This comparison highlights that governance models shape not only operational outcomes but also power distribution. Public systems distribute authority more broadly, while privatised systems concentrate decision-making power among corporate actors and investors.

5.7 Ethical Leadership and Sustainability

Across all themes, ethical leadership and sustainability emerge as critical determinants of water governance outcomes. The findings suggest that sustainability frameworks are most effective when embedded within accountable institutions and guided by ethical leadership. UNESCO (2022) emphasises the importance of integrated water management, yet the findings show that sustainability is often applied rhetorically rather than operationally.

Maak and Pless's (2006) model of responsible leadership provides a useful lens for interpreting these findings. Where leadership prioritises transparency, inclusivity and long-term responsibility, water governance is more likely to support equity and resilience. Conversely, the absence of ethical leadership enables water to be exploited as a political, corporate or military tool.

5.8 Contribution to Research Questions

The discussion demonstrates that the research questions have been fully addressed. Water has been shown to function as a political, military and economic instrument. Corporate actors exercise significant influence over water governance. Governance models strongly affect equity and sustainability outcomes. Ethical leadership and sustainability emerge as essential frameworks for mitigating power imbalances.

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that water governance is fundamentally a question of power and ethics rather than purely technical management. The findings confirm key theoretical arguments while extending existing literature by integrating political, corporate and governance perspectives. The next chapter concludes the dissertation and presents recommendations for policy and future research.

CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the dissertation by synthesising the key arguments, findings and theoretical contributions developed throughout the study. The research set out to examine water not merely as a natural or technical resource, but as a form of political, economic and social power shaped by governance structures, corporate influence and leadership choices. By integrating insights from political ecology, hydro-politics, corporate governance and ethical leadership, the study has demonstrated that water governance reflects broader societal values and power relations.

This concluding chapter revisits the research aim and questions, summarises the main findings, highlights the contribution of the study to existing knowledge, and proposes practical recommendations for policymakers, institutions and future research. In doing so, it reinforces the central argument of the dissertation: that equitable and sustainable water governance cannot be achieved without ethical leadership, public accountability and a critical understanding of power.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

The research findings reveal several interconnected conclusions regarding the role of water in contemporary governance systems. First, water scarcity is rarely a purely environmental phenomenon. Instead, scarcity is frequently produced through political and institutional decisions that prioritise certain users and interests over others. This supports the arguments of Mehta (2013) and Swyngedouw (2009), who emphasise that water scarcity must be understood as a socio-political construct shaped by governance arrangements.

Second, water functions as a strategic resource in both international politics and armed conflict. The study confirmed that states use water infrastructure, such as dams and reservoirs, to exert geopolitical influence over neighbouring countries, consistent with the theory of hydro-hegemony (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006). In conflict settings, water systems are increasingly targeted or manipulated, resulting in severe humanitarian consequences (Human

Rights Watch, 2019). These findings demonstrate that water has become an instrument of coercion as well as cooperation.

Third, the research highlights the growing power of corporate actors in water governance. Corporations involved in bottled water production and private utility management exercise influence not only through markets but also through policy negotiation, regulatory capture and narrative control. The FIJI Water case illustrates how corporate leverage can shape national decision-making, particularly in economically vulnerable contexts (Fisher, 2020). Corporate sustainability narratives, while prominent, often fail to address local environmental and social impacts, reinforcing critiques of greenwashing (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Fourth, governance models play a decisive role in determining water equity and sustainability. Comparative analysis revealed that public water systems in Europe generally promote accountability, reinvestment and universal access, while England's fully privatised model has been associated with rising costs, environmental degradation and weakened public oversight (Hall & Lobina, 2012; We Own It, 2023). These findings confirm that governance structures are not neutral but actively shape power distribution and social outcomes.

Finally, ethical leadership and sustainability emerged as cross-cutting factors influencing all dimensions of water governance. Where leadership prioritises transparency, inclusivity and long-term responsibility, water systems are more likely to serve public welfare. Conversely, the absence of ethical leadership enables the exploitation of water for political, corporate or military advantage (Maak & Pless, 2006).

6.3 Readdressing the Research Aim and Questions

The central aim of this dissertation was to explore how control over water functions as a form of political, economic and social power, and how sustainability and ethical leadership can contribute to fair and responsible water governance. This aim has been achieved through a qualitative, interpretivist analysis of secondary data.

Each research question has been addressed in turn. The study demonstrated how water has historically and contemporarily been used as a strategic and military tool, confirming the relevance of hydro-hegemony theory and expanding it to include humanitarian and ethical dimensions. It identified multiple forms of corporate power over water, showing that commodification extends beyond economic exchange into governance and legitimacy. It compared public and private governance models, illustrating how institutional arrangements shape equity and sustainability. Finally, it highlighted the role of ethical leadership as a necessary condition for addressing power imbalances in water governance.

Together, these findings provide a comprehensive response to the research questions and reinforce the central argument that water governance is fundamentally a question of power and ethics rather than purely technical management.

6.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This dissertation makes several contributions to the existing literature on water governance. First, it integrates political, corporate and governance perspectives that are often examined separately. While hydro-political studies tend to focus on interstate dynamics and political ecology emphasises social inequality, this research demonstrates that corporate actors and governance models are equally central to understanding water as power.

Second, the study contributes to the limited literature on corporate water power in small and economically dependent states. The FIJI Water case illustrates how corporate influence can shape national policy in ways that are not adequately captured by existing governance frameworks. This highlights the need for greater attention to context-specific power relations in water governance research.

Third, the comparative analysis of European public water systems and England's privatised model offers empirical support for critiques of neoliberal water governance. By explicitly linking governance structures to outcomes such as equity, accountability and environmental performance, the study strengthens arguments for public and community-based water management.

Finally, the dissertation introduces ethical leadership as a critical but underexplored dimension of water governance. By applying leadership ethics to water management, the study extends the relevance of responsible leadership theory (Maak & Pless, 2006) into environmental and governance contexts, offering a novel interdisciplinary contribution.

6.5 Practical Recommendations

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed.

First, governments should strengthen public governance and democratic oversight of water systems. Evidence from Europe suggests that public ownership supports reinvestment, transparency and universal access. Where privatisation has failed to deliver these outcomes, policymakers should consider remunicipalisation or stronger regulatory frameworks.

Second, corporate extraction and commodification of water require stricter regulation. Governments should introduce binding environmental limits, transparent licensing processes and fair taxation to ensure that water extraction reflects ecological capacity and social responsibility. Voluntary corporate sustainability initiatives should be supplemented by enforceable legal standards.

Third, international institutions should enhance protections for water infrastructure during conflict. Water systems should be explicitly prioritised in humanitarian law enforcement, and violations should carry meaningful consequences. Protecting water is essential to protecting civilian populations and post-conflict recovery.

Fourth, ethical leadership should be embedded within water governance institutions. Leadership training programmes should emphasise accountability, stakeholder engagement and long-term thinking. Participatory governance mechanisms can help ensure that community voices are included in decision-making processes.

Finally, sustainability frameworks must move beyond rhetoric. Integrated water resource management should be implemented in practice, with clear performance indicators, long-term planning and climate adaptation strategies. Sustainability must be operationalised rather than used as a branding or political tool.

6.6 Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of water as power, several avenues for future research remain. Primary research involving interviews with policymakers, regulators and community leaders could provide deeper insights into governance dynamics. Comparative studies across additional regions could further test the findings presented here. Quantitative analysis of governance outcomes could complement qualitative insights and strengthen policy recommendations.

Future research could also explore indigenous and local knowledge systems in water governance, which are often marginalised in mainstream policy frameworks. Additionally, further investigation into corporate accountability mechanisms and international regulation could support more effective governance reforms.

6.7 Final Conclusion

This dissertation has demonstrated that water is far more than a physical resource subject to natural scarcity. It is a strategic asset, an economic commodity and a site of political and ethical contestation. The way water is governed reflects broader societal choices about power, equity and responsibility.

As global water stress intensifies, the stakes of water governance will continue to rise. Addressing water challenges requires not only technical solutions but also a fundamental rethinking of governance structures, leadership practices and ethical commitments. By recognising water as a shared and protected resource rather than a tool of domination or profit, societies can move towards more equitable and sustainable futures.

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