

Integrated and Participative River Basin Management: A Social Sciences Perspective

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In this contribution, we would like to explain why a perfect hydrological model for a river basin is of no help for water management, until the stakeholders are able to share a common vision of the river as a policy issue. Conversely to a rather dogmatic presentation of water as ‘blue gold’, or ‘global public good, in most legal systems in the world since antiquity, water is considered as a thing for reasonable and equitable use at a regional or basin level, not as a thing to be owned privately or by States. Symmetrically, institutional economists consider water resources as an impure public good: rivalry between users should lead to the development of users’ boards, because enforcement of exclusion by governments’ police is quasi-impossible, and thus water resources cannot become market goods. There is indeed a serious difference with water services which are in-between club goods and full public goods.

Once stakeholders’ involvement is accepted as a necessity for efficient water management, scientists have to accept that traditional pure natural modelling was unconsciously providing tools for top down planning, with no public participation. Both innovation sociologists and political scientists then propose to mix both knowledge building and democratic decision making processes, which were separated until the rise of the Nation-State and its involvement in the economy. Today, in developed countries, citizens refuse to be imposed decisions based on abstract knowledge they don’t understand and trust. Today, before anything, the first task of those who want rivers to become a policy object is to build a double representation system: what is at stake in a given aquatic environment, and who are the stakeholders. It is within that construction that scientific analyses should be provided. We shall give a few examples and conclude on the potential advantages of developing a place like a “house of the river”, where scientists, laypersons, professional fishermen and environmental NGOs can bring and share their visions and knowledge.