

## Introduction

# Social Participation in Water Governance and Management

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There is no longer room for doubt – social participation in water management and governance is a reality today. Many envision an era of enhanced citizenship and dream of putting participation into practice to facilitate this. Enthusiasm for social participation extends beyond speeches as solutions are being crafted to water scarcity, bankruptcy of municipal operations, inequality, health and new distributions among sectors in ways that explicitly engage citizens, water users or anyone who may cause or prevent water problems. At the same time, questions have begun to emerge about whether this planetary dream might actually be a nightmare in which democracy, social justice or the environment suffers because of the conditions of governance involved.

A World Bank publication defined participation as ‘a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them’ (Bhatnagar et al, 1996, pxvi). Yet, this is rather incomplete as the ramifications of social participation in many instances extend beyond the interests of those directly involved and beyond the sphere of development issues. Characterized by the direct involvement of an array of people in decision-making and implementation of water policy or management, at a minimum, social participation involves individuals and/or collectives having an opportunity to express their voices and articulate their arguments in public forums (Arnstein, 1969). As such, the notion of social participation is captured in varying degrees in the rubric of community participation, decentralized management and participatory development.

Social participation occurs at a variety of scales from grassroots through international levels. Participation may arise from the bottom-up (rather than the top-down) as people struggle to be heard or increase the visibility of a particular issue to make it public. At such times people involved in water matters may take social participation farther, demanding to be involved in final decisions or implementation. Approaches that focus on these participatory mechanisms tend to emphasize issues of empowerment, stress the needs of the

marginalized, suggest a distrust of the state and celebrate local knowledge (Henkel and Stirrat, 2001). Yet, social participation encompasses more than activism; it cannot be restricted to referendums or social movements although it may be associated with both. In many instances, extensive involvement in informal associations or official committees is required of participants. Within the complex realm of water governance this is particularly true because of longstanding dominance of professionals (scientists, engineers, economists, attorneys and politicians) in water decision-making as well as the need for sustained work on water management.

While the potential virtues of social participation may be numerous, there has been a dramatic disjunct between some of the magnified hopes and initial outcomes of increased participation. Moreover, little has emerged in the way of analysis that critically evaluates social participation in water governance or attempts to theorize the conditions and objectives necessary for it to be realized (D'Aquino, 2007). While there have been many advocates for increasing social participation and involving individuals and communities directly in water management, few over-arching research projects on the specifics in water management have yet emerged and little has been offered in the way of the critical approaches to understanding participation in the context of water management around the world. Many research questions remain to be addressed for water management and governance, such as:

- how to effectively balance administrative control and reforms with social participation;
- why some parties are involved and others are excluded;
- what sorts of historical cycles and geographic patterns are associated with social participation;
- how power differentials affect participation;
- how rhetorical appeal meshes with actual experiences;
- how to encourage effective, open public decision-making.

These issues underscore that social participation is inherently political as well as economic, embedded with stresses that arise among competing values, rights and interests. Tensions between consensus-seeking and co-optation are frequently at play and inevitably balances must be struck between participation and authority, as the knowledge of lay citizens intersects with technical and managerial expertise (López Cerezo and Garcia, 1996). Issues of representation also arise as individuals, groups or coalitions seek to speak on behalf of others or frame their position as representing the public's interests. Moreover, in engaging the public and water users in participation, political changes, such as the need for administrative reform of the state, are often coupled with economic matters, such as altering the capacity of the private sector.

Given that the dimensions in which power, social equity and democracy-building are engaged within social participation have not been well vetted for water matters, this book aims to satisfy two expectations: to reveal the extent and challenges of social participation within water management and govern-

ance and to take stock of this initial period. This collective work opens up debate about social participation, presenting a variety of water cases from around the world and analysing these cases conceptually. Many different water management topics are addressed including:

- water rights definition;
- hydropower dam construction;
- urban river renewal;
- irrigation organizations;
- water supply development;
- river basin management;
- water policy implementation;
- judicial decision-making in water conflicts.

Some authors in this volume are more optimistic than others, yet these assessments do not unquestioningly embrace the virtues of social participation, because it is not clear that the conditions needed for effective participation are being achieved in many situations. The wide diversity of approaches and interpretations also reflects the plural nature of the object of study, variations between disciplines and the absence of common frameworks.

In organizing this book, we have framed understandings about participation around social dimensions that influence the complexity of water management today. Accordingly, the book is structured into five sections with chapters written by authors with expertise in different parts of the world. These sections address different issues within contemporary water management that influence and, in turn, are influenced by social participation, including:

- indigenous water governance;
- dynamics of gender in water management;
- river basin governance;
- implementation of water management;
- the politics of water governance.

## Part I

This section probes dimensions of social participation and indigenous water governance. Contemporary struggles for indigenous self-determination are often explicitly connected with water matters because the spiritual value, social meaning, customary access and political significance of water still resonates (Berry, 1998; Nakashima and Chiba, 2006). While carving out space for meaningful native participation remains challenging, knowledge about the specificities of indigenous identity and demands for native governance of water has the potential to enrich understanding of social participation (Corpuz, 2006). For example, indigenous demands for participation on their own terms may reveal how social identity and mobilization can be significant in redefining participatory processes. The two chapters in Part I assess how participation in water decision-making resulted from structures of indigenous governance.

Chapter 1 focuses on the participatory dynamics that arose during water rights negotiations between an American Indian Tribe, the Timbisha Shoshone of the western United States, and the federal US government. Waiting for the right time to achieve results, the Tribe benefited through collaboration with legal counsel, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the media, as well as by tapping into a political environment conducive to settlement negotiations. The Tribe's insistence that longstanding inequities be acknowledged and redressed also shifted the balance of power in their favour.

Chapter 2 examines the case of nine indigenous groups in the Brazilian Amazon who opposed the construction of a hydropower dam on the Xingu River. An indigenous coalition was mobilized against the proposed dam and they had assistance from allies in the media, non-indigenous professionals and international NGOs who brought public scrutiny to bear on the project. While indigenous collective action shaped the terms of social participation and resulted in successful litigation, the project proponent, a national power agency, recently co-opted participation for its own ends as it tries to push forward with water project development.

## Part II

The contributions in Part II delve into social participation and the dynamics of gender in water management. As participatory development has evolved to become a catchphrase in water management, much of the impetus has been the goal of addressing gender inequities. It is not uncommon for practitioners, policy makers and academics to assert the significance of gender in water management, drawing particular attention to the plight of poor women because, on the one hand, women develop expertise from their work on water matters but, on the other hand, are often not given the opportunity for active participation in decision-making about water matters (Bhatia 2004). In this section of the book, two chapters address the implications of participatory water management for gender matters.

In Chapter 3 the dynamics of gender in participatory water initiatives are considered for a locally based NGO in western Rajasthan. Through initiatives to enhance women's participation in water projects, NGOs assume pivotal roles in mediating traditional gender roles that are influenced by three factors:

- the NGO's relationship with governmental and international donors;
- the context of communities in which customary practices of men and women arise;
- through the NGO's own orientation and approaches.

The chapter suggests that gender norms and practices may be actively and passively restructured through participatory water initiatives as a result of these factors that influence a NGO.

Chapter 4 critically examines the conventional wisdom that women's exclusion from irrigation water user organizations is a reliable indicator of

gender inequity in water matters. This assessment of communities in Nepal and Peru concludes that while gender inequities still exist, women's invisibility within formal irrigation organizations may actually be an asset, providing greater freedom from institutional responsibility but not precluding women's inclusion in significant on-the-ground, operational decisions, such as the timing of irrigation rotations or mobilization of labour for maintenance.

### Part III

These chapters explore social participation in river basin governance. River basin organizations of all sorts began to develop in the 1980s and now they contain many of the ingredients of current water governance doctrines throughout much of the world. Not only are river basins frequently seen by many water experts as the relevant scale for governance but they also are actively used to facilitate integrated water resource management, decentralization and participation. The three chapters in this section evaluate social participation within river basin and watershed organizations.

Chapter 5 looks at stratified water governance in France with responsibilities spread across various geographic levels. Social participation has been engaged in a number of ways because there has been a great deal of leeway and few standards to follow in developing water management plans for river basins and watersheds. The conclusion is that social participation in French water management is best viewed as a tool designed to improve negotiation processes, rather than an aim in itself.

In Chapter 6 a view into Mexican river basin organizations suggests that effective democracy is a precondition for effective participation. This reverses the argument of those who identify with the standard model of participation, which idealizes participation but views much of it as a façade due to virtually unchecked federal administrative power. It is concluded that Mexican river basin organizations could make more progress if there was cross regulation, a combination of interdependence between independent actors with collective dependence and legitimacy, in which trust is built in institutions over time.

Chapter 7 focuses on recent experiences with social participation in watershed and river basin management in Quebec, Canada. In these cases a variety of stakeholder interests were represented within the local watershed management committees, whose size often became unwieldy. Some participants were not well invested in the committee's work, while others preferred to address water management issues through alternative means that had proved successful in the past. Even seemingly benign processes involved in building consensus risked alienating those who raised different issues or who wanted immediate action. Despite this, a climate of trust seemed to evolve among participants in the three organizations studied.

## Part IV

The authors in this section consider the implications of social participation in the implementation of water management plans and programmes. Social participation has gained widespread acclaim within water regulatory circles as it has become a mantra, not only for river basin governance, but for a variety of management objectives and scales. Participation has been engaged with varying measures of success in curbing illegal agricultural diversions, pricing municipal water supplies, enhancing water-based recreational activities, protecting against flood hazards and other initiatives designed to implement new or modify existing water management programmes. Yet in cities, as well as in rural areas, social participation raises challenges as such water management initiatives are being implemented. These issues and their implications are the object of four chapters in this section.

Chapter 8 focuses on participation amongst rural irrigators in Yunnan Province, China after a shift from an exclusively centralized system to a bureaucracy framed around participatory water management. Even when they were not elected, local representatives and leaders interacted with government administrators as they attempted to strike a balance in water governance between actors' decisions, rules of the state and customary social practices. Consequently, information circulated, timely irrigation was secured and certain abuses were stopped. This enabled participation within the formal structure to co-exist alongside relatively benign civil resistance of irrigators refusing to pay their water fees.

Chapter 9 takes stock of the difficulties and examines misunderstandings between expected effects of participation and social reality as water management was implemented in South Africa during the post-apartheid period. Genuine participation and representation seemed to be scarce, but even with these in place, equitable and sustainable outcomes are not guaranteed. Differentials in power, traditional social practices and the characteristics of conflicts may hamper fair and inclusive participatory processes. Facilitation and capacity building are needed, particularly with regard to the flow of information and the co-production of knowledge.

Chapter 10 reveals a local NGO dedicated to participatory approaches in developing rural water supply and wastewater management in Sri Lankan villages. Working under the auspices of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, this Sri Lankan NGO established an approach structured on community mobilization and village participation. Characterized by both their cultural and technical expertise, a new professional class of facilitators within the NGO have become brokers for development to stimulate local interest in water and wastewater management.

The theme of Chapter 11 is participation within the Yarqon River Basin Authority of Israel. Despite early cycles of environmental degradation along the Yarqon River, the state-designated Authority was able to leverage participation to work on water quality improvement, which in turn made it

possible to extend discussions to more stakeholders and to increase the sophistication of information collected and disseminated. The successes in improving water quality and environmental conditions along the Yarqon River are seen as being the result of active social participation within the framework of adaptive management practices.

## Part V

This final section examines the social participation and the politics of water governance. While the preceding sections address political alongside other factors in social participation, this section focuses on the political realities that structure speech and practice surrounding participation. Spanning all manner of partisan politics in many countries, parties from right, centre and left support participation and have employed it in their own ways. Understanding the role of social participation may reveal democratic bases in societies by exposing sources of power, hidden processes in previously opaque negotiations and the relative significance of law and formal structures. Three chapters in this section bring to light different governance processes, assess social processes and identify varied powers that influence decisions separate from more formal institutions and legal procedures.

In Chapter 12 the rationality behind norms and local forms of irrigation management for peasants and indigenous rural communities in the central Ecuadorian Andes is explored. Battles over material control of water systems were simultaneously struggles over the right to culturally define, politically organize and discursively shape the existence of people in these rural communities. It is argued that attempts by the state to rein in and control social participation cannot simply be viewed as management decentralization nor as benign inclusion of local beneficiaries in national water development programmes. The initiatives of indigenous and peasant communities to reshape participation have the potential to define terms that will sustain their livelihoods through controlling water usage.

Chapter 13 introduces the Latin American Water Tribunal, recently formed by a group of Latin American NGOs as an alternate means to achieve justice over water conflicts. Similar in many respects to a court, the Tribunal presides over water conflicts brought to them by small groups (often minority or impoverished) against government agencies or multinational corporations. While the Tribunal has been able to provide moral resolution and may facilitate conflict resolution, it has been unable to effect legal resolution for lack of a mandate and has not attracted many of the defendants to engage in this alternate litigation process. Nevertheless, the appeal is clear as the Tribunal incorporates a mix of governance and resistance, serving as a means to integrate justice as a conceptual goal while regaining control over the mechanisms of participation.

Chapter 14 addresses another way by which social participation has been configured through a review of the opposition to two proposed dam projects

in Turkey. Recourse to the courts and engagement of independent media facilitated the success of the intellectuals who fought this proposed development. These intellectual elites gave voice to the concerned populations, leveraging their legitimacy, knowledge and motivation to explain objections to the projects in terms the government and courts understood. They argued about appropriate international protocols and deployed their own research studies to examine the potential for loss of historical and environmental resources. Instead of collective mobilization, actual participation in these water conflicts was rather limited. Somewhat ironically, the media found the participatory dimensions of the project's opposition to be compelling in contrast to the government's approach to decision-making which was seen as undemocratic.

The book's conclusions draw attention to the political and critical implications of social participation, relating some of the challenges and looking into some solutions to balance powers. Calls for inclusion and participation have not disappeared and are unlikely to, particularly for those engaged with democratization. Social participation continues to be connected with the goals of rectifying social inequities, responding appropriately to environmental disturbances and transforming structures of power. Attempts to level the terrain of social equity through participatory water governance remain appealing largely because *genuine* participation of the disenfranchised in water management may build bases of power and change networks of social equity (Kurnia et al, 2000). Yet the constraints to genuine broad-based social participation are undeniable (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hickey and Mohan, 2004). As translating social demands and coping with public interests within water management have become a reality in many parts of the globe during recent decades, many challenges have cropped up. It is our hope that the discussions in this book will build bridges between water experts in various disciplines studying participation, point to ways that study methods could be standardized, contribute to interpreting generalizable patterns and suggest avenues to advance social participation beyond the constraints that have evolved.

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