



## **The logic of participation: critical perspectives on the ‘participatory turn’ in river and catchment management**

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Both academic research and catchment management practice have now placed considerable emphasis upon the ways in which participation might be used with the objective of improving water management. It is often predicated upon the observation that, historically, water management decisions have been dominated by those who hold certain kinds of expertise, to the detriment of the expertise of others. Participation, then, is a means of opening up decision-making to capture a greater range of those implicated in water management. Scholars of Science Technology Studies have traditionally advocated participation as involving a diversified set of ideals and approaches, ones that are sensitive to the context within which they are practiced and the logics that surround them. But, STS scholars have also argued that as soon as participation, notably participation in a particular form, becomes proscribed, it loses its very *raison d’être*, that is as a space within which slightly different understandings of a problem may form, grow and take on meaning outside of the institutional systems of decision-making that all too often dominate our lives. Here I argue that this implies a need to think through what can be called a ‘logic of participation’ in water management, that is why certain individuals or institutions advocate it, and under what conditions, for whom and with what end. In short, we need a political science analysis of who participation in water management might serve. This paper is motivated by one element of such an analysis linked to the observation that many models of how participation in water management might be done have developed without sufficient attention to the sometimes sophisticated and advanced levels of participation that already exist in many water management systems. Interventions to improve participation in such cases may be as much about displacing and replacing existing participatory systems, whether: intentional, because of concerns held by authorities regarding those who currently participate; necessary, because of changes in the water management system that make an existing system inherently less participative; or ignorant, because authorities do not realise that there are already effective systems of participation in water management that are invisible, or only partly visible, and so too readily overlooked.

To explore this issue, I focus upon a proposed restructuring of the Inland Drainage Boards (IDBs) of England and Wales over the last decade. The IDBs have developed, in some cases over many centuries, as organisations responsible for the management of water levels in areas of special drainage need, providing a range of water supply, flood risk management and ecosystem services. They cover 9.7% and 1.4% of the land area of England and Wales respectively and there are currently 121 in total. They provide an interesting case example because up until the restructuring process began, they were organized around relatively small-in-size drainage districts and governed by members elected from the payers of agricultural drainage rates (owners, occupiers or tenants) or appointed from elected local authority members, in proportion to the payments the local authorities were making to the IDB. They were, in effect, highly participatory forms of hydrological governance as many of those who paid and who were elected were genuinely those who lived within their own water management system. What I show in this paper is that this proved highly unsatisfactory to legislators and other organisations involved in river management. Under the pre-text that river management should respect catchment boundaries, the IDBs were progressively encouraged to create larger spatial units with smaller numbers of elected representatives, initially as amalgamation to share services and functions, eventually into large stand-alone boards. The latter was preferred so as to provide efficiency savings and to be more readily seen as accountable to legislation. But, at the same time, it was argued that the IDBs had to become more transparent and more accountable and had to formalize processes of public engagement with their activities. It is the participatory turn implied in the latter that needs careful scrutiny. It is the progressive amalgamation and changing representation of the IDBs, in the logic of making them more responsive to government policy, that necessitates a participatory turn and not the IDBs themselves because it was quite clear that they were already based upon a set of clear principle of quite distributed participation. The logic of the participatory turn being demanded of IDBs, then, is shown to be partly intentional as a means of changing who is involved, partly necessary because of the process of IDB amalgamation which diminishes the amount of local participation and partly ignorant of the extent to which IDBs were actively involving local communities in

water management before the proposed restructuring.