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WATER REGIMES QUESTIONED FROM THE 'GLOBAL SOUTH'

AGENTS, PRACTICES AND KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT - COMPARING HYDROCRACIES IN MOROCCO AND SOUTH AFRICA: WATER REFORM AND BUREAUCRATIC RESTRUCTURING IN A NEO-LIBERAL CONTEXT

By Magalie Bourblanc & Pierre-Louis Mayaux

In both Morocco and South Africa, since at least the mid-20th century, water has been entrusted to powerful state bureaucracies embracing a 'hydraulic mission', what some authors have dubbed 'hydrocracies' (Molle, Mollinga and Worster, 2009). In Morocco, the emergence of a powerful hydrocracy can be traced back to the French Protectorate in the 1920s, under the Resident General Steeg (Pritchard, 2012). Since the late 19th Century, South Africa has started building a strong water administration and soon developed a world recognized expertise especially in massive inter-basin transfers (Blanchon, 2012). Its civil engineers have managed to export their know-how on the African continent (and even to the rest of the world) and take an active part in the water epistemic community at the international level, especially through the ICOLD (International Commission on Large Dams). However, both countries also went through a neoliberal State restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s, a process that was susceptible to challenge this bureaucratic dominance. This paper seeks to explore the ways by which these hydrocracies have reacted and adapted to these challenges.

Based on semi-structured interviews, this paper argues that powerful hydrocracies still exist in Morocco and South Africa, but that they have been considerably reshaped over the last two to three decades. In Morocco, the Public Work administration reacted to these challenges by pre-emptively seizing the IWRM discourse and taking the initiative to draft a new water law in 1995. The law was conspicuously inspired by the new global norm but was in fact carefully and ambiguously worded. Subsequent regulations were drafted in close cooperation with the Agriculture administration, and put less and less emphasis on demand management, and more and more on renewed supply-side solutions. It is therefore unsurprising that the number of dams increased from 110 in 2004 to 139 in 2015, the national strategy for water now intending to push this number to 170 by 2030.

At the same time, the palace significantly increased pay and working conditions for top public engineers (Vermeren, 2003) while middle-tier public water engineers faced less favorable changes. Within the public works administration, and private consultancy firms now carry out more and more studies. As for agriculture, the *Offices régionaux de mise en valeur agricole* have seen their number of staff curtailed and a number of services of technical assistance have been privatized or outsourced. Under the neoliberal agenda (privatization of expertise, transfer of irrigation management to users, individualization of farmers' water strategy), the Moroccan hydrocracy has therefore been dualized: top civil servants managed to reassert their authority, while middle-tier public water engineers have faced more precarious conditions and have been increasingly forced to negotiate with a number of newly-empowered actors.

In South Africa, new political elites from the ANC have held a key role in reforming the water sector in the mid-1990s. They drafted a new National Water Act (NWA, 1998) whose objective was to bring about more equity and ensure proper access to water for the Black population especially. While busy revising their water policy, policymakers were also very much influenced by international concept such as IWRM and its emphasis on water demand management for instance. The democratic transition in 1994 also triggered a new policy of "transformation", i.e. a restructuring of the State apparatus in a bid to reflect more the South African society's racial composition. As a result of this combined transformation process, the institutional identity of DWA changed, especially as the new recruits had seldom had any civil engineering educational background. Yet, up until recently, DWA former white elite has managed to maintain a supply-driven approach of water resources management for the country, in particular thanks to its long-lasting relationship with private engineering consulting firms. In that respect, both case studies show an increased reliance on the private sector and question the capacity of top-tier bureaucrats to coordinate the sector. In South Africa specifically, over the past 5 years, the hydro-bureaucracy seems to be experiencing the most change, with a competing global network of water experts coming to the fore and promoting alternative water resources management approaches and policy solutions around green technologies (waste water reuse, desalination, leakage reduction from distribution networks, increasing water use efficiency in agriculture, etc.).