

Participation or “Exploitation”: How Can Concepts of Community and Privatisation Coalesce around Water Efficiency Approaches?

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ABSTRACT

The Water Framework Directive has as one of its central objectives stakeholder participation at the catchment scale. Accounts of water governance encourage water users outside of formal stakeholder relationships to become involved in resource stewardship, both inside and outside the home. In particular water conservation and increased water efficiency is presented as a community ‘issue’ which relies upon voluntary contributions of time and labour to support the stewardship of urban and rural water environments. This community participation is evidenced through fundraising to build community rain gardens, rain water harvesting within communal and municipal buildings and NGO, regulator and water company campaigns to promote lifestyle changes which augment household water efficiency through technology and personal use habits. Whilst there are good reasons to involve the community in water management, we need to ask some critical questions about the way in which this community participation is valued within a quasi-privatised water resource management regime. Does the drive to maximise water efficiency encourage participation or is it an “exploitation” of goodwill? Who derives the maximum utility from this approach; water stakeholders or water company shareholders? Exploring concepts of household revenue streams, monopoly, human economy and the Transition Town movement, this paper advocates an approach that repositions water governance at the catchment scale in such a way that ensures that community participation efforts are sufficiently rewarded.

KEYWORDS: Community Participation; Human Economy; Water Efficiency; Water Governance.

INTRODUCTION

Water efficiency is embedded within the English water management regime. Since 1993 each water company has had a duty under section 93A of the 1991 Water Industry Act to promote water efficiency to its customers. Education campaigns supporting water efficiency have emphasised not only the importance of changing water consumption behaviours at home but also the consequences of how personal use impacts on the wider water environment, effectively transforming water users into water stakeholders. The role of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) in empowering local water stakeholders at the catchment level has been well documented (De Stefano 2010; Hammer et al 2011) and complements water efficiency initiatives. The formalisation of these working relationships between water companies, water regulators, NGOs and, increasingly, community action

groups, has created unique clusters of water stewardship along individual catchments (for example, the Internal Drainage Boards network work nationally but independently of each other). This framework of water governance can be located within the context of ‘the politics of community’. In recent years New Labour’s understanding of communitarianism and the present Coalition government’s tentative politics of the ‘big society’ can be seen as diverging ways of re-invigorating civil society involvement in the process of governance. Both had problematic relationships with the role of community participation in markets. Eschewing these policy initiatives this paper will explore an alternative approach to community participation – the ‘Human Economy’ model (Hart et al 2010). This offers participation in civic life which presents an approach which accepts the need to recognise the existence of a marketised environment. Put another way, participation comes not out of a moral coda of duty, but from a more dynamic, engaged approach of mutual self benefit which creates positive outcomes for a wider community. This difference is the central crux to the paper: mapping a new approach to water efficiency initiatives which harness a realistic model of participation and move away from the potential ‘exploitation’ of goodwill that volunteerism rests upon.

To understand these issues then, we need to go back to the structure of Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) agencies and actors, who have struggled to root water efficiency in the hearts and minds of English water users. Many studies have shown that water users have historically viewed potable water as a plentiful, cheap resource and a very different utility from that of gas or electricity (DEFRA 2009, Vugteveen et al 2010). Climate change arguments have helped to reposition the water efficiency thrust of ‘doing more with less’. It is clear that education campaigns regarding the water cycle and the process of water delivery have made consumers more aware of the pertinence of the water efficiency agenda. Whilst water remains unmetered for many consumers in England and Wales, the drive to reduce unnecessary use is to be applauded. Water efficiency plays a key role in community adaptation to increasingly water stressed environments.

Examples of water efficiency endeavours move from the personal to the social. From saving water in the home by changing personal use, toilet flushing, washing habits, to installing technologies such as rainwater butts for garden watering, the scale moves outwards. Community rain gardens are a relatively recent innovation in the UK that complement the Sustainable Urban Drainage (SUDs) approach to managing water in the urban environment. These are retrofitted shallow depressions of flowers, shrubs or trees that sit in the urban environment to absorb rainfall run off and attenuate flooding. They are often managed by partnerships between local authority and community groups, with installation often tax payer funded and maintenance through voluntary contributions. Other community water efficient activities include water recycling on community allotments, organising awareness events such as water cafes, fundraising for green roofs on community facilities such as schools and village halls, and the formation of community gardens.

Water efficiency issues raise a critical question. Can a developed economy rely on unpaid community participation in a sector as crucial as water? Water efficiency is a central

principle at the heart of water stewardship. Yet water supply is in the hands of private, profit-making companies. Surely if we use less water, water bills should decrease and water companies should make less profit? This is the logic of the market. Seyfang and Longhurst's work (2013) is pertinent here. They argue that the Coalition government's argument that a strong market economy underpins sustainable development is 'blind to the culturally embedded, social and psychological drivers of consumption behaviour'. Moreover, this faith in the market 'fails to see the social infrastructure and institutions which constrain choice' (2013,66). For Seyfang and Longhurst, patterns of consumption need to be addressed for sustainability to thrive. Asking consumers to reduce usage for an ethical principle only will not be enough. Moreover, decreasing volumes of water use do not necessarily reflect decreasing costs of water bills, partly due to the strictures of the regulatory system underpinning the water management regime, with 5 year planning cycles. Water efficiency has then to operate in a complex pricing system not clearly accessible to water users. How might forms of community involvement allow us to approach these issues? More importantly, how might the Human Economy approach offer a new way of encouraging community participation after the compromises and failures of New Labour communitarianism and the Big Society?

This theoretical scoping paper examines the delicate balance between 'participation' and 'exploitation' in the name of water stewardship. Previous research (Gearey & Jeffrey 2006) has explored the role of legitimacy in the relationships of water stakeholders under conditions of increasing water stress. This paper wishes to develop this line of argument further by suggesting that water efficiency initiatives could strengthen the trust between community groups and water management regimes but only through reframing the water efficiency agenda. In other words, water supply companies and regulators must galvanise support by recognising that the marketisation of water repositions community and consumer responses to saving water. There needs to be an element of profit sharing, albeit in an alternative form. The author hopes to use the ideas outlined in this paper to undertake some empirical fieldwork in the near future and would benefit from suggestions and critical feedback during the conference proceedings.

The first section of the argument outlines the relationships, and examines the present tensions, in the English water governance regime only. This is because the English IWRM model differs from those in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales as the only model that deploys private for-profit companies. The paper then turns to examine community participation and the tensions therein. The final section will offer some alternative approaches to rewarding the Human Economy of water stewardship at the catchment level, drawing on examples from the Transition Town movement.

Water Efficiency as Community Participation

Water governance in England faces a number of challenges. Private companies, reliant on making profit, need to build legitimacy with their consumers. State regulatory structures go some of the way to define the terms of supply (Water Act 2014), but a legitimacy gap still remains (Gearey & Jeffrey, 2006). In part this is to do with the local nature of water and

the hydrological cycle: some parts of the country experience scarcity, whilst others do not. There are other factors. Water companies and other stakeholders attempt to involve consumers and water users through the perspective of water efficiency and conservation. The championing of water stewardship practices and the need to preserve a special resource are undoubtedly important in the governance 'mix'. However, in a period where public trust of private companies is being tested, it may prove difficult to persuade consumers that companies place the welfare of the commodity above its monetary role in creating profit. Rising bills and evidence of water wastage by the water companies themselves also make the governance regime vulnerable to the criticism that existing policies serve to present water companies as working solely in the interests of their shareholders and investors. Indeed, the role of neoliberal structures within water management systems has come under considerable criticism (Bakker, 2010). Without serious reconsideration of how the understanding of community operates in water governance, it may be that the idea that there is valid, reciprocal participation becomes completely discredited. We need to examine these themes in detail.

Within the dominant approaches water governance has been presented as a community issue. For domestic users, water regulators encourage this approach through campaigns to promote taking shorter showers, using water butts and being more mindful when using dishwashers and washing machines. For industrial users, water efficiency is depicted as part of a green agenda, whereby water resources are part of an environmentally friendly schema. For agricultural users the drive to become water efficient is linked to a more nuanced relationship with the natural environment. For public service or municipal work the adaptation is target driven, reducing use and therefore overheads: thus saving taxpayers' money. The global result is that behavioural change and adaptation to new water efficient technologies encourage a community 'buy in' and a more careful use of a localised resource

Before we can properly address what is at stake in community involvement with water governance, we need to clarify some key points. It is pertinent to restate the impact of the vagaries of the hydrologic cycle. Water efficiency initiatives, and community responses, are impacted by the perception, and the experience, of scarcity. The English and Welsh water management regime has to respond to disproportionate rainfall levels, where the North West, especially the Lake District, receives around 3200mm per annum compared to Eastern England which has on average 500mm per annum and the more densely populated part of the country, in particular London receives 514mm per annum as opposed to Cardiff at 1151mm per annum (MetOffice 2010). Changing water conditions indicate that more erratic rainfall events are likely to become more episodic (DEFRA 2010, Christensen et al 2007). The current water management regime has a tight national regulatory structure, super-imposed on regional areas with significant rainfall and population disparity. This creates a both in terms of water security and water supply, with regulatory bodies responsible for the former and privatised companies for the latter. Water efficiency straddles the two, pulled in two directions by the need to create social equity in relation to equal access to the resource although economic equity lies outside of the jurisdiction of any one institutional body. The submission of Water Resource Management (WRM) plans of

the water companies is a recent process lead by the Environment Agency. The WRMs enable long term planning for predictable supply and demand forecasts. The process of collecting all WRM plans is due for completion by the end of 2014. Innovative approaches such as reverse water auctions and water trading licences recommended in the 2009 Cave review of competition in the water industry have been incorporated into the new Water Act passed in May 2014. This has adjusted the landscape to the extent that increased options to widen competitiveness will drive efficiency in costs and resource deployment. The Water Act's most direct impact in terms of community water efficiency is its clarification that the building and maintenance of SUDS can be a function of sewerage undertaking. It effectively propels water efficient urban landscaping into the mainstream.

Yet the Act does not seem to have had the remit to address community participation in resource management endeavours. How can water efficiency hope to be more responsive to local environments and local consumers? We need to untangle some further themes. Water efficiency is not coterminous with water conservation, though the two have significant overlap, and both fit within the remit of water governance or 'stewardship'. The focus of water efficiency lies within behavioural change. It is a two step process that seeks to reduce the volume of the resource used and to do more with that water. Technological innovations which support water efficiency only work if the people and communities utilising them are prepared to adapt their behaviour. Water conservation can also include this type of behavioural and technological adaptivity, but its focus is shifted towards protection of the resource rather than a volumetric reduction of use. Water efficiency requires a step-change in water use which is both attitudinal and behavioural, and promotes active, mindful participation, which starts at the personal level to scale up to seek effects community wide. Taken from this perspective, water efficiency is the ultimate act of community participation, making personal acts communally significant.

Against the backdrop of water efficiency endeavours is a need to restate an obvious, though curious question – can we go beyond saving water to become more water efficient? If we use less water, we take less out of the environment. It appears a rational, logical causal link. Yet for critical geographers, such as Noel Castree (2009), and David Harvey (2005), there are far more large scale changes we could enact: Reducing our population size, changing our economy from industrial to knowledge based, reducing our carbon imprint, changing our diets. In short, and in line with Seyfang (2009), consuming less. Put differently, modern capitalist, neoliberal systems create the need for water usage on a vast scale. Through this lens community participation by necessity means addressing the political- the values that we hold and the way we choose to live our lives.

There is also a more prosaic concern. For householders and business users, a central water efficiency incentive is that using less water will save money. Both through less volumetric use of the resource, potable water, but also because water use is tied to energy use. The Energy Savings Trust state that 55% of water used in the home is heated water. Hence, less water means less gas or electricity use (Energy Saving Trust, 2013). Water efficiency initiatives have championed water meterage as a fundamental tool in reducing water use; enabling users to clearly see their volumetric consumption. Before 2004 approximately

20% of homes were metered. Since 2004 around 40% of homes, and 95% of businesses are now metered; a growth of 200% (Environment Agency, 2008). So have water users seen a reduction in their bills since they are more aware of their volumetric use? This question is pertinent since the Water Industry Act 1999 enables water companies to ‘universally meter households if the water company’s area has been determined to be in an area of serious water stress’ (South East Water, 2010). The issue is that increased metering has not witnessed a corresponding fall in water bills. The 2009 Cave review noted that in real terms domestic water bills rose by 42% in the 20 years since privatisation. The National Audit Office recorded domestic water bills as rising between 2002-2011 (NAO, 2013).

Water efficiency initiatives are all actively promoted by the water companies, but water bills do not see a corresponding fall in price. These initiatives seem ineffectual when we see that the leakage rates of the water companies remain at 25.6% for Thames, 16% for Southern and 26.7% for Severn Trent (OFWAT, 2010). For Thames, in a water stressed area, that is the equivalent of 665 million litres of water every day. These may be renamed as ‘returns to the system’ by the water companies, but as this is treated potable water, the Thames figure alone is the equivalent of 44 million toilets being unnecessarily flushed every day in the Thames water region.

More pertinent perhaps is the question of benefits to the consumer. If customers are being asked to change their behaviour around potable water then that drop in use should be reflected in a distinct savings in their water bills. Instead bills continue to rise; as do the profits of the water companies. As Pryke states (2013:426): ‘the operational side of the water business, indeed the actual cost of water itself and the amount used do not themselves seem to figure as part of the financial equation’. The actual volumes of water used by consumers seem almost an irrelevance. Indeed scaling up to include the involvement of the regulators, Helm and Tindall (2009) go on to argue that the volumes of water involved do not figure in the landscape of the five year planning cycle for water pricing. Allen and Pryke note: ‘Ofwat determines household water bills on the basis of how much the water companies invest, whether that is raised through equity or debt’ (2013:426). Ofwat state in their 2009 Price Review: ‘Promoting water efficiency will not affect company revenues. The revenue correction mechanism, which we will introduce from 2010-2011 will make sure that companies are not penalised if consumers use less water than we assume when we set price limits at PR09’ (Ofwat, 2009:31). Delinking water use from the make up of water bills resites water efficiency initiatives as a further exploitation of community participation in water stewardship.

It could be argued that there needs to be a directly corresponding initiative on behalf of the water companies and regulators to reinvest these ‘savings’ directly into long term investment projects to secure water resources for the future, outside of regulated investment funds. In other words, the companies need to make it clear that less water use may result in enhanced water resources even if it is not possible to demonstrate a corresponding drop in water bills that users receive. Instead, rising water profits appear to drive ‘the lifting out of investment opportunities’ (Allen & Pryke, 2013:423) out of the country. In other words, rising profits from the water sector fuel investment opportunities in other sectors, other

countries. There is a problem in squaring water efficiency, which, by its very definition, is locked into a distinct geographical scale, with the realities of shareholder capital ready to move with the next investment opportunity. Water may be utilised more efficiently in the home, in the catchment or in a region, yet the shareholders who help finance the water companies reside elsewhere geographically and are primarily interested in future revenue, not in protecting the original resource and its environment.

These problems are exacerbated because of the monopoly structure of the water market. The monopoly structure, based along water catchments, works in parallel with national regulatory bodies, such as the Environment Agency. Aside from large volumetric users at an industrial scale, water users cannot opt out from their service providers: for instance, customers in London can only buy their water from Thames water. As Thames water now use household revenue streams as a locked in, assured form of income, they use this as a guarantee against their wider corporate debt restructuring (Allen and Pryke, 2013). In other words, water customers finance the long term investment of their providers' other investment strategies. Macquarie Bank, which own Thames Water , use London water users' money to finance investments in other capital markets because that money is a predictable, guaranteed revenue stream income and so can be treated almost as an asset of the business. Guaranteed water use shores up the wider company investments.

Participation or “Exploitation”: A Dynamic Approach to Water Stewardship

New Labour's main point of reference was to the 'third sector' (Etzioni, 1973). Critics of New Labour have stressed that the rhetoric of communitarianism was often far from the practice – and that the more radical of the stakeholding ideas were abandoned during Blair's second period in government. David Cameron's Big Society can be seen as a conservative communitarian approach- a response to the failures of New Labour. Outlined in the work of political philosopher Phillip Blond, the big society stresses the importance of community interventionism for a moral market economy. The idea has not fared well. Critics have shown that Blond's approach may downplay, if not entirely ignore, the savings that freely provided labour and expertise would otherwise cost central government (Davies & Pill, 2012; Harrow & Jung, 2011).

The Human Economy approach suggests an important way forward. Drawing on the work of Karl Polanyi and other economic anthropologists, human economy begins from the perspective that the commodification of water may be the source of the problem. However, it is important to stress that Human Economy of thought does not reject the market. Rather, it argues that for the market to work it needs to be embedded in social relationships. In short, markets need to work for people. Unlike the big society, Human Economy does not abandon the state. The power of the state is necessary to socially embed a market. Unlike New Labour communitarianism, Human Economy is much more concerned with decentring power in radical and participatory ways. Moreover, ideas of embedded economy are distinct from the present emphasis on formal regulatory regimes. New forms of social cooperation are necessary (Hulgard, 2010) to supplement such structures. We can elaborate these ideas with reference to the recent Waterwise response to a government white paper

(2010). Waterwise argue that the current regulatory framework has a supply sided bias: assurity of supply currently takes precedence over water efficiency. They also note that the regulatory system is muscle bound: unable to respond flexibly to changing scenarios both in terms of economic change but also environmental. The numerous planning cycles of various aspects of water provision and planning (CAMS, drought plans, flood risk management, pricing cycles, Town Planning Acts) reduce innovation and suffocates adaptation. From this meta-planning perspective, how can the privatised elements of water provision coalesce with the concept of community that the WFD is so keen to promote? The term that is reiterated by NGOs, local councils and water companies is 'partnership'. Using water efficiency as a focal point for partnership efforts, it may be possible to rebalance dialogue and action in favour of those community participants at the catchment level.

Human Economy thinking would further this approach. Garnering local catchment based support from a diverse range of community members, it may be possible for smaller stakeholders to reassert their expertise in crucial areas, to demonstrate that new partnership approaches may add in the missing flexibility and plug the gap between municipal, private and grassroots adaptation. Water efficiency may become a much more nuanced discourse, making use of local expertise and local knowledge outside of formal and privatised frameworks.

There is a second important theme. Human Economy approaches seek to recognise the value of unpaid work to the wider economy. The Human Economy perspective accords with Seyfang and Longhurst's work on community currencies. To move the debate on from 'exploitation' to 'participation', unrecognised work needs to be fully valued – and remunerated, even outside of standard market parameters. Their systematic review of community currencies identified those which generated momentum in 'green' communities (local exchange trading schemes) and those which appeared to demonstrate variety across different economic sectors (time banks) and those which offer sustainable consumption (Nu Spaarpas). Refocusing the agenda to recognise that the Human Economy is a resource, and therefore, like any resource, needs inputs and strategies to develop it, could provide one mechanism towards moving from exploitation to participation. What format might this take? One proposed method would be to utilise strategies that support both the local environment and the local economy. Numerous examples show that it is possible to engage communities in projects where an ethical long term outcome, using less water, can match with short term benefits.

The global 'Transition Town' movement can help concretise these ideas. The movement supports local entrepreneurs, consumers and businesses in mutually supportive networks that work at local levels. One of the practical manifestations of this approach is the idea of local currency – which is used in local businesses and exchanged for services, labour or products. This idea could be applied to water management. In return for water efficient endeavours the regulator, or the water company, depending on the input made and the water savings delivered, could reward local participants, whether shareholders or partners, with this local currency. The Bristol Pound and the Lewes Pound are two existing examples.

This currency drives local businesses, both chains and independents, and helps foster a sense of reward in return for participation. Other alternative forms of currency include time-banking and co-production; both new forms of rewarding participation. Local water stakeholders collaborating together may feel more empowered to demand a return for their endeavours, given the monetised environment that the quasi-privatised water sector embodies. Examples include vouchers for local shops, direct funding for community projects or apprenticeship schemes to promote youth employment. The nub is that participants gain something tangible as they give something very personal – their time, their expertise, their labour - but that something is idiosyncratic and rooted in the local community. This approach might go some way to highlight that a resource as geographically localised as water cannot be comfortably integrated into international capital markets. Human Economy moves the debate, and associated action, on from its current position.

CONCLUSION

This scoping paper has aimed to go some way in addressing a very real issue in redressing the imbalance between asking water users to use less water whilst seeing no clear, corresponding drop in their water bills. Adaptation and innovation needs to assert itself from outside of the current IWRM regime. The large financial gains made by the water companies on international capital markets through the financialisation of household revenue streams, relationships of trusts between water companies and water users may be at risk of breaking down. Drawing on Human Economy thinking, this paper has argued that discourses on community involvement in water governance need to be re-thought. Human Economy thinking stresses the importance of decentred and local forms of stewardship and community involvement. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the Human Economy approach argues that any community work around resource stewardship should be recompensed in a way which supports the local economy at the catchment scale. Whilst much more work is necessary to articulate in detail how Human Economy thinking could reposition water governance, the Transition Town movement and the resources offered by local currencies, has the potential to move community partnership from “exploitation” to genuine forms of participation at the catchment level between regulator, water company and water user.

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