



# Collective irrigation reloaded. Re-collection and re-moralization of water management after privatization in Spain



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## ABSTRACT

In recent decades, water has been subjected to different commodification and de-collectivization processes. Increasingly, this is also affecting collective irrigation water management. Critical analysis of this privatization and de-collectivization wave in the irrigation sector has mainly focused on neoliberal institutional policies and market-oriented legislation. However, subtly and silently but equally determinant, the adoption of water-saving technologies is fostering the penetration of private enterprise and market-based governance into these hydro-social settings. This paper discusses this phenomenon through a case study of the community of Senyera in Valencia, Spain, tracking the privatization and subsequent contestation and re-takeover of water management by irrigation system users. The article shows how privatization removes users' autonomy in the name of common well-being, and increases irrigation costs in a context of little transparency. But the case also highlights users' capacity to re-value and re-signify their past collective action, remembering and 're-membering to' the collective. Senyera water users critically and reflexively analyse privatization, reconstruct societal relationships around and embedded inside the new technology, and re-collectivize and re-moralize irrigation management in a new hydro-social scenario.

## 1. Introduction. Community water control: the last bastion or a new market niche?

Since the 1980s, pressured by the emergence of neoliberalism, water has been subjected to commodification and privatization worldwide. Water pricing, market creation, and privatization of water supply or sanitation services are some components, frequently inter-related, of this de-collectivizing wave (e.g., Bakker, 2005; Castro, 2007; Harvey, 2003; Swyngedouw, 2005).

Privatizing public drinking water supply services has been the most frequent phenomenon, and undoubtedly the most strongly resisted. In fact, an increasing remunicipalisation of water in different-sized cities has responded to widespread dissatisfaction generated by private action, inseparable from increasing equity, environmental and public health concerns (Pigeon et al., 2012; Lobina et al., 2015). At the same time, many countries' neoliberal policies have grown into more covert privatization, commodification and marketization actions with subtler discourses and 'participatory' strategies, mainly in a neo-institutionalistic vein (Roth et al., 2015; Duarte-Abadía and Boelens,

2016).

Private enterprise has made up for their retreat from these cities by intensifying their action in other territories where companies discern business possibilities. This, then, is no neoliberal decline, but just a spatial variegation defining the current post-neoliberal scenario (e.g., Bakker, 2013; Yacoub et al., 2015). Aligned with this hypothesis, this paper underscores how, in recent years, private suppliers are seeking new market niches, attempting to position themselves in other sectors such as irrigation management, which have so far been difficult to penetrate.

During the closing years of the 20th century, the arrival of the private companies penetrating the *agricultural water* sector was partly curbed by the scientific and political recognition achieved by collectively managed irrigation systems (Ostrom, 1992; Wade, 1994; Roth et al., 2015). However, irrigation did not entirely elude water commodification; compared to the drinking water sector, irrigation has experienced other means of de-collectivization, in terms of policies, scenarios, protagonists, strategies and impacts. For one, many countries' irrigator communities have been affected by water rights

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privatization and market establishment (e.g., Ahlers, 2010; Boelens, 2015; Bossenbroek, 2016; Scott and Raschid-Sally, 2012). Moreover, numerous large agri-business companies or other economic sectors have been detected driving water grabbing in traditional irrigation systems, in Latin America, Asia and Africa (e.g., Birkenholtz, 2016; Mehta et al., 2012; Swyngedouw, 2005; Yacoub et al., 2015). Finally, several companies took advantage of public irrigation management transfers (IMT) to user associations to position themselves as new co-suppliers of water service or undertake operation and maintenance functions (Vermillion, 1997; Garcés-Restrepo et al., 2007).

Since the early 21st century, several regions of the world have experienced more forceful penetration by service companies into irrigation water management. Occasionally, companies merely provide operational services under maintenance and service contracts, but in many other cases they have undertaken construction of networks and subsequent water resource allocation and distribution among users (Darghout et al., 2007). This penetration is camouflaged by the neoliberal catch-phrase of *Public-Private Partnership* (PPP) to dodge the negative connotations that ‘privatization’ has acquired. Spain and other countries also use “externalization” as a euphemism for this outsourcing.

Despite their recent materialization, a number of countries have already assessed this new ‘public-privatizing’ irrigation critically. In these cases, public-private partnerships have forgotten ‘the commoners’ themselves as a rightful partner, neglecting or side-lining the interests, knowledge and context of local water user communities and families. According to the cases recently analysed in Morocco, state-market-expert nexus has caused unequal socioeconomic impact among small-holders; unfair sharing of burdens, benefits and risks between public and private partners; environmentally fragile sustainability; and severe negative impact on local users’ water management capacities (Houdret, 2012; Houdret and Bonnet, 2013).

The literature on this privatization and de-collectivization of irrigation has focused fundamentally on institutional policies and market-oriented legislation, paying little attention to transformation of technological systems and water devices (e.g., drip irrigation) as a *factor driving* privatization. Further, although there is abundant literature examining protests and mobilizations against neoliberalization or privatization in agriculture, there is a remarkable absence of studies addressing the construction of re-collectivizing alternatives in response.

This paper is a pioneering assessment of such conversion experiences – from community to private management and then back to the ‘community reloaded’ in traditional Spanish systems. This is happening in a national context in which management privatization initiatives have been tightly linked to modernizing irrigation, mainly introducing water saving technologies. We have chosen the case of Senyera (Valencia Region) to analyse this process, because this community had a first phase of management privatization – tied to the technology changeover to ‘drip’ irrigation – and then regained community irrigation system control by farmers.

Information was collected through interviews conducted in January and June 2014, June and December 2015, and June 2016 with former and current members of the irrigator community governing board; former and current users’ association technicians, and the private company (Tecvasa); former and current majors of Senyera; farmers from Senyera and farmers from the neighbouring water users’ associations. The authors held winter interviews especially focusing on obtaining an account of the irrigation system and technological facts including all the empirical and economic data. Summer interviews were held by the authors together with three groups of 4–5 students co-tutored by the authors. These findings were expressed in three respective reports (de Beer et al., 2014; Führen et al., 2015; Borghuis et al., 2016). Some of the key actors were interviewed several times each year, and focus group meetings and collective interviews were held with some of these actors.

The next section first examines the cultural and moral dimensions

underpinning collective irrigation management, which are quite different from the aims and thinking of private management. Next, we introduce how implementing drip irrigation systems has become the vector carrying privatization into community irrigation. Then we reflect on ‘(re)moralization’ of water management and infrastructure as a response to this privatizing technology changeover, expressed analytically and socio-politically by the water user community’s ‘recollective efforts and struggles’. The third section will examine the illustrative case of Senyera, detailing the processes of privatization and ‘re-collecting’. The final section presents our conclusions.

## 2. Drip irrigation as a Trojan horse: subtle re-moralization of management and infrastructure

*“Tools are intrinsic to social relationships. Each person relates to society through actions and the tools effectively mastered to carry out those actions. To the degree that one actively masters one’s tools, their shape determines his/her self-image”.*

(Ivan Illich, 1984:90)

### 2.1. Collective irrigation institutions, technology and morality

User self-managed irrigation systems often express prolonged interaction between water user families and their environment, shaping socio-ecological systems in diverse contexts. Their collective management institutions have often lasted over time, clearly demonstrating their robustness and resilience (e.g., Glick, 1970; Maass and Anderson, 1978; Mabry, 1996; Roth, 2014). These systems are based on normative frameworks and collective water rights featuring social, cultural and moral values that are different from modern techno-economicist management frames and practices. Their multi-dimensional, contextual nature makes them inaccessible or unappealing to private enterprise and official government agencies, because they transcend conventional econometric, functionalist and bureaucratic parameters (Cleaver, 2000; Hoogesteger, 2012; Roa-García, 2014; Romano, 2017).

Collectives self-managing their water use systems are usually socially diverse entities whose members – differentiated by ownership rights, gender, status or ethnic group – are united by mutual dependence to develop, use and manage their water resources, by a sense of collective water identity (Boelens, 2011, 2014). Each member’s rights and obligations are derived from common rights and duties, and in the event of conflict there is great collective interest in resolving it quickly, to restore effective cooperation (Garrido, 2011). This collective contractual reciprocity (Boelens, 2011, 2015), historically rooted, is totally different from market-based contractual arrangements (Reimer et al., 2008); it builds on trust, community morality, the history of shared water defence, the creation and re-creation of common water property, and long-term social cohesion. This is the backbone of community systems.

The moral nature of collective irrigation has been discussed by various authors, among others as a spin-off from the moral economics theory developed by Thompson (1971) or Scott (1976) or the theory of legal pluralism (e.g., Benda-Beckmann et al., 1998; Roth et al., 2015). For example, Ferri (1997) and González Alcantud (1998) have deciphered the normative or moral principles that traditionally governed irrigation ditch management in Valencia and Andalucía; Gelles (2000), Trawick (2001), and Boelens (2014, 2015) have critically explored such moral visions in the Andes; Arellano (2014) in New Mexico; Cleaver (2000, 2008) and Eldidi and Corbera (2017) in various African contexts; among many others. This moral involves the existence of a (collectively built but contested and continually adapted) *ethos* that imbues community norms, guides operational procedures, water access and allocation rules, and decision-making privileges, and which is a reference for farmers’ behaviour (see Boelens, 2015; Roth et al., 2015). These collective moral frameworks for water coexists with situations of

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