



## Rare birds for fuzzy jobs: A new type of water professional at the watershed scale in France

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### SUMMARY

This paper documents changes in the field of water management in France, through the analyses of the activities of water professionals. Hydro-territory professionals work for local authorities in charge of water management at the watershed scale. Their functions appear to be fuzzy. Yet, this paper assumes that this fuzziness is a crucial feature as it manifests an ability to deal with “wicked” problems. Based on quantitative and qualitative inquiries, this paper discusses to what extent these new kind of professionals present themselves as, or differentiate themselves from, experts, facilitators or policy entrepreneurs. It contributes to the studies that highlight the new water professional as a transdisciplinary engineer capable of dealing with negotiation, cooperation or communication issues. Yet, the main result of our study is to show the embedded dimension of hydro-territory professionals, considering water governance as a long term issue of adjustment, assembling, fitting, in a territory and across scales.

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### 1. Introduction: water governance through the prism of professional activities

Water governance has increasingly become a source of concern, to tackle the challenge of crossing competing scales and coupling land and water management. During the past 45 years in France, water policy has switched from a sector-based and centralized form of management to a more local and integrated one. French water policy promotes tools and procedures considering hydro-territories<sup>1</sup> as the relevant areas for integrated management. The French water act of 1964 has set up 6 Water Agencies supervised by basin committees at a district level (e.g. Rhone Mediterranean-Corsica Catchment). At a local level, SAGE,<sup>2</sup> river contract<sup>3</sup> and territorial EPTB<sup>4</sup> completed the tool

set. In the past 20 years, new functions emerged within this frame and have since been dedicated to territorial water management at the local level.

Several questions and thoughts may arise from this new wave of water careers. How do these professionals contribute to tackling the challenges related to spatial scales and multiple levels of governance? How do they cope with integrated water management? How do they relate or differ from the traditional figure of the technician or the expert who prevails among water professionals? How do these professionals contribute to the politicization of the approaches to watershed management when dominant political discourses at the local scale are seldom based on water-related boundaries (Molle, 2009a)? In many places, water issues are secondary concerns, and left to water technicians. Technicians are familiar with the basin scale but they lack legitimacy to address the critical issues of integration between sectors.

This paper aims to: (i) document changes in water management in France through the analyses of the activities of professionals in charge of territorial management of water; (ii) contribute to the debates over water professionals' position and skills. We argue that more attention should be given to water management positions and professionals to address the challenges of water management, whereas most studies focus on institutions or tools.

The studies on water-professionals criticize the role and power of what they call *water bureaucracy* or *hydrocracy* (Molle et al., 2009; Watson et al., 2009) which led the processes of water resource development, their “hydraulic mission”, with the

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<sup>1</sup> Area of land based on interdependence to a waterbody (river, lake, wetlands, ground water, etc.). It can be watershed i.e. an area or region drained by a river, river system, or other body of water.

<sup>2</sup> Local sub-basin plan for water development and management « Schéma d'Aménagement et de Gestion des Eaux », water law, 1992. 170 SAGE are implemented in 2013, in areas from 300 km<sup>2</sup> to 10,000 km<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Contract between funders (e.g. a Water Agency, French State, municipalities) for coordinating investment in local public action, instituted by memorandum in 1984.

<sup>4</sup> EPTB as “Etablissement Public Territorial de Basin”: territorial body at the basin scale which associate municipalities. The law on rural territories of February 23rd, 2005 acknowledged EPTB's role for wetland protection. EPTB involvement in designing and implementing SAGE is acknowledged by French 2006's “law on water and aquatic environment” and law 2009–967 of August 3rd, 2009, Art. 29.

legitimacy of technique, science and modernity. Yet, in the last years, “water bureaucracies have been challenged internally (within the State’s bureaucracy or through political changes) and externally (by receiving critics from civil society and academia, or by reducing funding)” (Molle et al., 2009). More recent studies, carried out in different cultural and political contexts, enlight transformations in the role of water professionals and dimensions of the work that are non technical. They regard water professionals as policy entrepreneurs (Huitema and Meijerink, 2010; Brouwer and Biermann, 2011) or intermediaries (Moss et al., 2009). Moss et al. studied the role of such intermediaries from across Europe. They link service providers, consumers and regulators, working across different scales and translating technology into particular social contexts. Moss et al. insist on the role of networking, aligning and translating, that these intermediaries play. Some authors describe and value the job as boundary spanning (Warner et al., 2010; Williams, 2002; Mollinga, 2009), while others question the new skills and training needed (Karl et al., 2007; Molle, 2009b; Mollinga, 2009). Warner et al. show the pragmatic boundary spanning done by water board (Netherlands) to achieve multifunctional project definition and implementation. They focus on knowledge, uncertainty, problem framing, project crafting and the issue of exchanging information across different types of boundaries. With the same perspective, Karl et al. insists on the integration of science-based knowledge within political and socioeconomic dimensions. In dialogue with these authors, our objective is to contribute to the field of research on water professionals.

Firstly, we present the emergence of positions dedicated to territorial management of water in France and make an attempt to define their specific tasks. Secondly, we discuss the references used by these hydro-territory professionals to designate themselves as either (1) *Experts*; (2) *Facilitators*; (3) *Taking care of the hydro-territory*; (4) *Promoting good water management*. In conclusion, we discuss ideal-types of water professionals and question conditions and skills needed. This paper relies on inquiries carried out over water professionals dedicated to territorial management of water in France. It is based on quantitative and qualitative inquiries (Richard-Ferroujji, 2008a,b). Interviews and a questionnaire (45 respondents) were carried out in 2005. The observation of participants and several interviews have been conducted in the south of France since 2000 (case 1), 2002 (case 2 and 3) and 2008 (case 4, where we supported the professional in charge of the SAGE in implementing a few stages of the procedure). We managed to observe effective work and difficulties encountered, with an ethnographic stance. Moreover, we participated in trainings and conferences intended for these professionals, which allowed to have informal interactions with a large number of them and to gather their point of view in the analyses produced.

## 2. Professionals dedicated to territorial management of water

### 2.1. Toward the territorial management of water in France: Emergence and consolidation of positions

In the past 20 years in France, new functions dedicated to territorial management of water have emerged. Organizations in charge of water management at the local scale have been created and have offered jobs to water professionals. These new functions are labelled as “animateur of SAGE”, “animateur of river contract”, director of watershed institutions or “chargé de mission-coordination-animation” for the global management of the aquatic environment. Hydro-territory professionals initiate and monitor studies or technical development plans related to water management, while also carrying out administrative and financial tasks for projects dealing with water at basin or sub-basin level. Moreover, they take charge

of participatory processes, stakeholders’ involvement, and communication endeavors (see sample of job offer below).

Sample of job offer, “Animateur de SAGE”, 2007, <http://www.emploi-environnement.com/fr/>, translated by the author

#### “Job description

- Facilitation of a SAGE
- Facilitation of the structure (an association of municipalities) that carries out the SAGE
- Help and advice for setting up the environmental policy
- Linking all the stakeholders (Government services, users, Water Agency, etc)
- Raising awareness and providing information to different actors
- Design, promotion and monitoring of study programs, intervention, and maintenance work
- Training and coordination of operational structures

#### Skills

- Master 1 or 2 with knowledge asserted in:
  - Aquatic ecology and hydro-biology;
  - Water chemistry;
  - Hydrology, hydrogeology, physical geography;
  - Sanitation;
  - Land and environmental planning;
- Knowledge of Environmental Law and computer would be appreciated;
- Excellent ability to summarize and draft;
- Strong interpersonal skills, desire and ability for negotiation, persuasion, moderation...
- Ability to manage a team (technicians, secretaries...);
- Power of conviction and persuasion.”

The presence of this kind of professional position within water institutions has increased significantly since the 90’s. In the 1990s, French water authorities hired technicians on short term contracts to coordinate river contracts or SAGE, to organize inter-sector meetings, and to write memos and reports. Since then, a change of status has been observed for such positions, going from tinkering to consolidation. In January 2006, the French website Gest’eau, dedicated to local water management, registered contact details for 200 “animateurs” of SAGE or river contracts, and 300 in January 2010. In the single Rhône-Alpes region, in 2011, 137 officers were identified within structures for management of aquatic environment (ARRA, 2012). In 2012, we still observed varying situations in terms of contract, employer’s status, salary and titles. There could be only one professional on a territory, or several constituting a team, but seldom would it count more than 10 persons. The employer could be a municipality, an *intercommunal body*,<sup>5</sup> an EPTB, a regional authority or an association. At the same time, these positions have been consolidated. Among them, the number of civil servants has increased since the 1990s. Today, roughly half of them are civil servants and the other half work under a short term contract (ARRA, 2012; Richard-Ferroujji, 2008b). Water professionals have been integrated within the territorial corps of engineers whereas water was traditionally managed by elitist State corps of engineers

<sup>5</sup> Structure associating several municipalities.

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