

## **A Hydrocracy under Reform. The Department of Water Affairs and Reform of Water Management in South Africa**

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For a long time, the *Department of Water Affairs (DWA)* represented a typical « *hydrocracy* » (Molle, 2009), i.e. a hydraulic bureaucracy resting on a highly qualified corps of engineers building dams, invested by a “hydraulic mission” so crucial in the society imaginary and instrumental in the construction of the South African state. It is easy enough to understand the difficulty of such a powerful administration to convert to the new principles of the 1998 National Water Act largely inspired by international standards (Dublin Conference, 1992): indeed for such a centralized and expert-driven administration, it is difficult to adapt to principles of stakeholders’ participation, decentralization at the river basin level, and environmental sustainability. However it is even more challenging in the context of an affirmative action policy such as the one applied in all departments of the South African state. In order to redeem past inequalities and partly redress the racial politics of the former Apartheid regime, the ruling party of the ANC (African National Congress) has been promoting the appointment of a black elite in administration especially (but not only) to occupy high-ranked positions even when new appointees did not have the qualification required beforehand. This prompted the departure of most of the former white high officials from the DWA, who left the department to create their own consultancy firm while still working closely with the DWA. Although this consultancy phenomenon is not completely new, it has skyrocketed in the post-Apartheid era to the extent that sometimes the DWA seems to have duplicated itself with all these consultants commissioned by the DWA, performing the same tasks than before. Therefore, experiencing different sets of reform, the DWA is now the subject of two important outgrowth phenomena: it does not only compete with decentralized institutions to which the DWA is supposed to delegate most of its functions, it is also over-ridden by consultants. Applying the public policy analysis’ perspective in order to study the “concrete” state’s practices and routine (Padioleau, 1982), a refined sociology of actors helps showing how the DWA negotiate with the decentralized organizations its maintained role in water management and which logics presides the out-sourcing of a major part of its activity to the private consultancy sector.