

30 ans de démocratie locale de l'eau, enjeux et actualités face au changement climatique ; le cas du bassin versant de la Drôme

30 Years of Local Water Democracy, Issues and Current Context in the Face of Climate Change: The Case of the Drôme River Basin

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RÉSUMÉ

La Commission Locale de l'Eau du bassin versant de la Drôme, première en France, a trente ans, ce qui donne un certain recul sur la mise en œuvre, dans les territoires, de la politique de gestion participative et intégrée de l'eau. Comment cette instance de démocratie locale, en charge de planification stratégique, résiste où se recompose face aux défis renouvelés du changement climatique et ses effets sur les sociétés? Le contexte est notamment marqué par les incertitudes scientifiques, les inerties institutionnelles, et une demande croissante d'implication citoyenne dans l'élaboration et la prise de décision publique. A partir de ce cas d'étude, suivi sur le temps long par le biais de plusieurs projets de recherche, nous dressons un bilan des avancées, limites et enjeux de la Commission Locale de l'Eau du point de vue démocratique. Puis nous explorons deux expériences d'amplification de la participation locale, au-delà des habituels représentants désignés, avant de discuter plus spécifiquement des défis procéduraux de démocratisation de la gestion territoriale de l'eau.

ABSTRACT

The Local Water Commission of the Drôme River Basin, the first in France, is now thirty years old, which provides some perspective on the implementation of participatory and integrated water management policies in territories. How does this local democracy institution, responsible for strategic planning, resist or recompose itself in the face of renewed challenges from climate change and its effects on societies? The context is notably marked by scientific uncertainties, institutional inertias, and a growing demand for citizen involvement in public decision-making and elaboration. Based on this case study, followed over the long term through several research projects, we assess the advances, limits, and issues of the Local Water Commission from a democratic perspective. Then we explore two experiences of amplifying local participation, beyond the usual designated representatives, before specifically discussing the procedural challenges of democratizing territorial water management.

KEYWORDS

Citizen participation, Climate Change, Democracy, Drôme River, Territorial governance

Changement climatique, Démocratie, Participation citoyenne, Gouvernance territoriale, Rivière Drôme

The first Local Water Commission—established for the Drôme watershed—celebrates its 30th anniversary, offering valuable perspective on the implementation of participatory and integrated watershed management policies, a pioneering approach in France. How does this institution of local democracy withstand or adapt to the evolving challenges of climate change and its societal impacts?

1 MATERIAL & METHOD: RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE DRÔME WATERSHED

Situated in southeastern France, at the foothills of the Vercors massif, the Drôme watershed spans 82 municipalities and covers 1,600 km². Its water resources and aquatic environments are vital to the region's agricultural, tourism, and residential activities, all of which are intrinsically tied to the Drôme River and its tributaries. This watershed was the first in France to adopt a Water Management and Development Scheme (known as "SAGE"), a tool for coordinated local planning. The scheme is developed and implemented by a Local Water Commission ("CLE"), a kind of local "water parliament" that brings together diverse stakeholder interests. Created in 1994, the Drôme Local Water Commission is currently revising its SAGE for the third time, following a forward-looking study on climate change adaptation. This work is based on long-term monitoring of territorial water governance, within successive research and research-action work and a close partnership with local authorities since 2005. It is nourished by archival document analysis, regular participant observation, and semi-directive interviews with a variety of local actors involved at different scales and on different subjects. It also relies on social experimentation in citizen participation.

2 RESULTS: 30 YEARS OF LOCAL WATER DEMOCRACY

2.1 Success, limitations, and challenges of the Drôme Water Commission (CLE)

2.1.1 *The representative principle in crisis*

The CLE is a participatory democracy institution that convenes representatives from local elected officials, administrative bodies, and water users, each representing distinct interests. Operating on a representative principle with a deliberative function, CLE members engage in informed debates, exchange viewpoints and arguments, reflect collectively on the general interest at a territorial level, and formulate shared opinions (Allain, 2012; Le Bourhis & Lascoumes, 1998). The creation of CLEs for water governance has facilitated significant democratic advancements, including: Establishing a durable framework for consultation and fostering shared visions; Reducing the dominance of local political elites and certain economic actors in sectoral decisions; Addressing issues transversally across sectors; Enhancing mutual understanding and fostering solidarity at the watershed scale. In the Drôme, the CLE's implementation of the first SAGE and two river contracts exemplified a synergistic approach, aligning economic development with water resource preservation. This laid the groundwork for the Biovallée territorial project, a pioneering initiative in socio-ecological territorial transition (Girard, 2014).

However, CLEs face challenges stemming from structural limitations (Barbier & Fernandez, 2024) and broader crises in the representative model within Western democracies. These include: Insufficient representation of the population; Overrepresentation or influence of economic interest groups; A perceived disconnect between representatives and citizens; Difficulty addressing long-term ecological concerns (Bourg, 2010). These challenges translate into two primary issues: (1) The need for social legitimacy—beyond institutional endorsement—and for public trust in the quality of the CLE's work and decisions; (2) The challenge of enhancing public participation in decision-making processes.

2.1.2 *Intensified challenges with climate change and democratic pressures*

The Drôme watershed, like other Mediterranean mountain regions, is particularly vulnerable to climate change. Projections indicate a 35% decrease in low-flow rates for rivers, compounding a structural water deficit recognized since the CLE's inception. These conditions exacerbate the region's socio-democratic and political challenges, notably: (1) The need for arbitration or trade-offs between competing water uses and environmental preservation ; (2) An increase in crisis management scenarios, with prefectural derogation measures becoming more frequent ; (3) Questioning of the modernist paradigm, particularly in opposition to exploitative practices ; (4) Heightened societal demand for transparency and public participation, manifesting in diverse ways—from counterproposals to outright opposition.

2.2 The SPARE project: involving "ordinary" citizens

The SPARE project, a social experimentation research-action initiative led by INRAE between 2015 and 2018, sought to involve citizens in the design of the Drôme watershed's SAGE through an innovative participatory methodology called "Cooplaage" (Hassenforder and Ferrand, 2024). This approach aimed to engage citizens at multiple stages of public policy development, enriching the process with perspectives from diverse community members. The Drôme River Syndicate (SMRD) pursued two key objectives: Integrating local user expertise on water usage to refine problem identification and intervention strategies; Reaching underrepresented user groups—such as drinking water consumers or recreational river users—whose behaviors were crucial to the policy's success. The project specifically targeted "ordinary" citizens—individuals without pre-established positions or affiliations, neither experts nor activists, but motivated by concerns for the river and its future. With open participation, the project drew 350 individuals, producing 190 action proposals that the CLE committed to using as foundational inputs for SAGE development.

The SPARE project generated several long-term impacts: (1) On participants: Enhanced cooperation and trust between participants and the River Syndicate, along with social learning outcomes ; (2) On decision-making processes: Initiatives such as citizen observation of CLE plenary meetings became institutionalized ; (3) On organizers: Improved communication strategies, participatory facilitation skills, and internal adoption of collective intelligence and horizontal decision-making methods. However, despite the resources deployed, the participatory process reached a limited number of citizens in the watershed. Moreover, from the perspective of public decision-making, the proposals remained sporadic and relatively unambitious.

2.3 SAGE 2050 prospective study: involving "targeted" citizens

The SAGE 2050 prospective study aimed to evaluate the impacts of climate change and define adaptation strategies to inform local water management planning. Building on the lessons from SPARE, the River Syndicate adopted a different participatory strategy to address new challenges. This time, the goal was to complement the CLE's perspectives by establishing additional working groups that: (1) Amplified absent or minority voices, including perspectives not well-represented within the CLE ; (2) Integrated innovative solutions, especially from actors in the associative and economic sectors. Given the need for rapid results, the Syndicate opted for a smaller, closed working group. Participants—territorial actors such as entrepreneurs, association members, and selected citizens—were chosen for their unique viewpoints and willingness to engage in collective discussion and problem-solving.

Approximately 300 individuals, including 50 CLE members, contributed together through collective workshops to define a strategic framework, then validated by the CLE. The strategy included four prioritized axes: Promoting user sobriety to reduce water demand, strengthening territorial resilience through nature-based solutions, revising water-sharing modalities to adapt to increasing scarcity, conditionally developing water storage infrastructure, based on the success of other strategies. Axis 2, focusing on nature-based solutions, benefited significantly from the contributions of pioneering territorial actors engaged in alternative practices, such as soil water retention practices. While the study succeeded in defining actionable strategies, the operationalization phase faced new challenges. The next step is to translate this strategy into a local regulatory document and an operational and financial plan, accompanied by a more streamlined consultation process. However, this decision to limit participation for efficiency purposes has already sparked frustration among some territorial actors, highlighting ongoing tensions between inclusivity and expediency in participatory governance.

3 DISCUSSION: PROCEDURAL CHALLENGES OF THE LOCAL WATER COMMITTEE FOR DEMOCRATIZATION OF TERRITORIAL WATER MANAGEMENT

3.1 Political commitment

The commitment of water authorities to integrate public input into the decision-making process emerges as a key driver of transformative outcomes. However, this commitment can be constrained by both national and local political contexts, where decision-makers may exhibit varying degrees of openness to public participation (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2018). When participatory processes expand and begin to threaten their decision-making authority, some decision-makers withdraw support. In such cases, researchers, process managers, or facilitators often serve as intermediaries. This dynamic directly affects participant engagement and social learning, as individuals are less inclined to participate when they perceive their contributions as inconsequential.

3.2 Internal functioning of the CLE

Democratic cultural change first occurs within organizations, particularly within the CLE and associated structures like the River Syndicate. Significant efforts are still required to enhance the deliberative quality of these spaces by pluralizing information, promoting inclusivity, fostering mutual listening, and mitigating power imbalances and dominance effects.

3.3 Decision-making power and capacity to act: betting on complementarity

Democratic progress can be achieved through increased citizen participation at various stages of decision-making. The extent of real decision-making power granted to citizens depends on the role and significance attributed to public participation within institutional frameworks. Key factors include: (1) clarity regarding participants' roles, (2) participants' belief that their contributions will influence outcomes, (3) transparency about the initiative's goals and status, and (4) institutional willingness (or reluctance) to adapt governance structures (Mostert, 2007). Beyond formal institutional decision-making, democratic advancement also hinges on enhancing citizens' capacity to act independently (Girard & Muller, 2023). This involves fostering grassroots initiatives to improve water use and preserve environments without necessarily relying on institutional support. The CLE's role includes creating spaces for experimentation, identifying existing initiatives, connecting them with institutional actors, and providing support.

3.4 Articulating mini-publics and the wider population

Effective deliberation and practical experimentation often necessitate small, focused groups. However, the challenge lies in bridging these mini-publics with the broader population (Lafont, 2020) to prevent opinion disparities, frustration, and mistrust. The CLE plays a critical role in stimulating public debate and fostering initiative-taking, leveraging partnerships with associations, media and other actors. The ultimate aim is to cultivate an informed public opinion on a wide scale. This involves engaging the population in defining problems and exploring solutions, fostering constructive internal debate within the mini-publics (e.g., the CLE or consultative bodies), providing high-quality information, and regularly reporting on decision-making processes and outcomes.

3.5 Creating reflexive follow-up mechanisms

Given the relatively nascent state of participatory practices and the experimental nature of many activities, it is essential to create reflexive, multi-stakeholder follow-up mechanisms. These mechanisms should ideally involve some stakeholders and possibly external observers to enable real-time adjustments and facilitate the sharing of lessons learned.

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