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*River Basins and Spatial Justice:
Distributing benefits, costs and risk
Cours d'eau et Justice spatiale:
la Distribution des avantages, des coûts et du risque*

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Unlike other resources like minerals, oil or land, water resources are always in a flux, often hidden underground, sometimes changing in quality, always varying in quantity and timing. Because of the nature of the hydrological cycle and of human capacity to store, dike, divert, drain or pump water, this whimsical resource connects the people who depend on it, for better or for worse. This interconnectedness increasingly manifests itself as pressure over resources grows and shortages recur. Societies, or particular individuals and interest groups, constantly reshape river basin waterscapes in a way that reflects not only the technology available but also their conception of nature, the labour or the capital they can mobilize, and the distribution of power and agency which defines who can make decisions on how to control, use and share water. Conversely, environmental change brought about by water-related human activities and shaped by particular ecological and physical conditions will impact back onto societies, often in a negative way, affecting particular areas or social groups, as defined by gender, ethnicity, caste or class.

Because most of the interactions through the water cycle occur at the river basin level, basins provide, at least initially, a handy spatial unit for looking at interaction between waterscapes and societies. Conventional water management approaches see river basins as rational units where technical ingenuity strives to ensure that supply is in line with societal demand. Hydrology and hydraulics form the basic knowledge of engineers bent on controlling the unpredictable and changing hydrological regime that human will 'harness' for particular uses and benefits. A political ecology approach, on the other hand, views river basins as arenas where power circulates and defines the pattern of access to water and the way externalities - water shortages, floods, pollution - are created and travel across scales, space and time to affect particular groups.

The interaction between the landscape and its hydrologic regime (with its temporal and spatial variability), and spatially situated actors with varied levels of financial and political power will greatly determine how resources will be used and what the implications in terms of both environmental and socio-economic change will be. Benefits, costs and risk are constantly generated and shifted spatially across the basin, and socially across groups of stakeholders. The paper examines how spatial justice within a river basin management approach is linked to particular patterns of river basin development and modes of governance.