



## Justice et injustices spatiales, Nanterre 2008

### *Shifting Access and Rights to Water in Context of Growing Scarcity:*

#### *The Case of the Krishna Basin, South India*

*Le Changement de l'Accès et des Droits sur l'Eau dans un contexte de pénurie croissante:*

*le Cas du Cours d'eau Krishna, Inde du Sud*

**Venot Jean-Philippe**, Doctorant, International Water Management Institute (IWMI-Hyderabad); IWMI c/o ICRISAT; 502 324 - Patancheru Andhra-Pradesh, India; Laboratoire Gecko, Paris X-Nanterre

This paper investigates the relationships between irrigation expansion, sustainable development and spatial justice in the Krishna basin. The Krishna basin is closing: available water resources are entirely committed to human consumptive uses and the discharge to the ocean is almost zero. As in many other places in the world, irrigation and rural development has always constituted a *social contract* between decision makers and the populace. Public policies have long been characterized by a strong interventionism where the people were, and still are, treated as recipients more than actors. Based on proclaimed universal principles of justice to ensure fair and equitable access to water for all in the river basin, this contract provided a social justification for the current over-commitment of water resources. Environmentally sustainable development of local communities is now under threat. If the principles of justice and equity have been held high at the policy level, their implementation has generally been unimpressive: rural development policies have accentuated regional ecological inequalities shaped by political and, institutional and geographical forces. Mobilizing the *comparative advantage* theory for the sake of global development, the green revolution and the globalization discourses have further reinforced regional differences in access and rights to water. Balancing this evolution in favour of the less well endowed communities of the dry areas of the Krishna basin seems now to be the motto and is partly made possible through an uncontrolled access to groundwater which raises sustainability and equity issues. As the Krishna basin is closing, expanding water use in one region impinges on existing uses and amounts to a social and spatial re-appropriation of water: the two main theories regulating access and rights to water i.e. *prior appropriation* and *riparian rights* become incompatible and in contention. This paper shows that different conceptions of justice and equity do compete one with each other and are pragmatically called upon to justify policies that might pursue highly diverse objectives. The paper stresses that the strong territorialisation of irrigation development policies has driven over-building of water infrastructure. Finally, it stresses that defining the fairness of a public policy depends on the focal point considered: irrigators, dry-land farmers, engineers, or politicians will not have the same ideas of what is *just* or *unjust*. In this context, this paper recommends the implementation of a flexible and responsive regulation of water use based on water allocation procedures that meet the needs of the poorest sections of the society to ensure social justice and an environmentally sustainable development. It underlines the challenge to be faced when implementing rural development policies aimed at both rebalancing inequalities and ensuring spatial equity.