

## ***Interactive comment on “Watershed regulation and local action: analysis of the Senegal River watershed management by a regional organisation and public participation” by A. M. Sène et al.***

**Anonymous Referee #2**

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*The aim and content of the paper are straightforward. An inventory is conducted of the numerous treaties and conventions dealing with the Senegal River basin in order to look at the clauses that call for public participation. The emerging picture is that of a vast array of conventions and institutional arrangements set up since 1960 involving riparian states and more particularly the country of Senegal. The authors subsequently assess whether public participation indeed takes place or not. And - what will not be not a major surprise to readers - the major finding is that if prescriptions for public participation abound, not much takes place in that respect. With this inventory proceeding from a thorough review of francophone literature on the subject, the paper makes a*

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useful contribution. Nonetheless, it **is flawed by many problems**.

First of all, a much too literal translation often makes for a text that is hard to read and, what is more serious, sometimes leads to problems of comprehension and meaning. A few examples:

- Sentences that, put bluntly, are incomprehensible:
  - at the top of p1919:” By moving away from its source, the river is subjected to. . . ”;
  - p1935:”A new top flood (corresponding the oil change of the Manatali dam) then occurred. . . ”;
  - p1939, the top paragraph with the reference to Soubeyran (2006);
- pp1919+1920: “efficient” is likened to “effective”, two words that nevertheless refer to very different concepts;
- The reader rapidly gets lost in the maze of acronyms which, to compound the difficulty, correspond to the French designation of institutions while the text lists their English names.

*Regulating an international river basin raises the challenge of harmonizing national priorities, on the one hand, and of integrating local and regional objectives, on the other. In other words, the first is not simply the sum of the latter. And when an international agreement is signed, it frequently turns into a very rigid framework for negotiations with local stakeholders. The paper is silent on this issue, although, one can hypothesize, it must greatly constrain any public participation.*

*Also, is there a real need for public participation other than a simple procedural requirement, if, as the authors state from the onset, “ The implementation of these achievements has been accompanied by a solid regulation which ensures the rational and equitable exploitation of the resources of the river. ” (p1920)*

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*This brings about the issue of how the paper deals with public participation itself. The approach is somewhat schoolish, to say the least. The central reference is Dubosc (2001), whose definition is deemed “the most comprehensive”. This definition stems directly from Arnstein’s hackneyed ladder of public participation (1969). Such a typology has frequently been put to use by development agencies wishing to adorn their procedural approach: the editor of Dubosc (2001) is itself a water basin agency... But reality is sometimes significantly different. And as many social scientists have since pointed out, such a typology for public participation remains very formal in essence, so long as one does not delve into substantive and specific power issues. In their introduction, Sené and al. allude to this political dimension: “this power can result from a conquest” (p1924). But subsequently, one only finds the naïve acknowledgement that institutions and agencies talk about public participation but do not do anything about it, that “CPE... seems to favour big users to the detriment of small users in terms of participation in decision-making...” (p.1937). Why is it? Where is the subtle analysis of potential stakeholders in the debate? Or will the problematic situation the authors lament be settled by simple administrative adjustments, once again “top-down” arrangements? The only specific concrete problem the paper mentions is the damages caused to farmers by unpublicized level variations after the dam was implemented (p1935): is it really a problem of integrated decision making or could it not simply be solved by an effective communication process?*

*An indirect contribution of the paper – indirect because in my opinion the authors miss a golden opportunity to discuss this issue- is to suggest that the time is probably ripe for a critical assessment of the bureaucratic inflation generated by the multiple treaties, agreements and conventions often pressed upon developing countries by the Western world, but with a persistent if not ever increasing gap with underlying problems. As to the institutional and administrative labyrinth set up through the years in the Senegal River Basin and described in the paper, nowhere is the relevance of any of these conventions or institutions questioned. Is it not due to be replaced by simpler, smaller and more effective structures? But this reviewer is probably mistaken: their real use is*

*indeed to create bureaucratic jobs, only incidentally to solve problems.*

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Interactive comment on Hydrol. Earth Syst. Sci. Discuss., 4, 1917, 2007.

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