

# Distribution or Participation?

## Gender Issues in Water Services Management

**Abstract:** Conflicts in the organisation of the water services infrastructure in the Elbe-Mulde region near Dessau, Saxony-Anhalt in Germany are the core issues of the work package „Environmental Spaces“. It is part of the integrated research project “Blocked Transition? Spaces of Thinking and Action in Sustainable Development”.

*Keywords: water management, gender, regional development, participation, daily life arrangement services*



Flood plain of the Mulde river near Dessau

The general thesis is that dichotomic, hierarchical patterns of reception, thinking and action of societal actors block the process of sustainable development in spatial relationships. Gender as analytical category helps to identify these dichotomic patterns on theoretical, methodological and empirical level. It gives the background to examine the options for an

integration of situated daily-life knowledge into professional planning and management.

The project assumes private households to have a central role in the “spacing-process” of river basin management initiated by the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD).

### The analytical category „gender“ in water services management

„Situating knowledge“ is seen to be an important factor in transition processes. Therefore, the integration of the gender perspective into the research design follows three general assumptions:

- Infrastructure systems are not gender neutral but a specific socio-technical form shaped by status and gender relationships.
- Subjects and objects are results of discursive constructions within a semi-otic material practice on different societal levels.
  - A gender analysis of this practice reveal the diversity of information, its metaphorical content and societal contextuation.

### Fields of conflicts in regional organisation of the water infrastructure

A basic dichotomy is, that the water sector is separated into a sphere of water supply – the productive, attractive side – and waste water removal – the reproductive and hidden side of the service. Under a spatial

point of view this dichotomy is accompanied by a strict central – decentral paradigma.

A first evaluation of blockades in water services management had been made on the basis of a secondary data analysis and initial expert interviews in 2003 und 2004. They reveal the following main regional fields of conflicts:

- the specific role of the hydrological conditions of the rivers Elbe and Mulde for infrastructure planning and construction
- the anatonistic characters of regional decline of population density and infrastructure planning concepts from the 1990s,
- different time-scales of planning and regional transition processes,
- ambivalences of individual participation in water management within the tension

### Private households as empirical category

Qualitative interviews had been conducted with female and male members of private households in 2004 under the light of their potential as active stakeholders in the management of river basins. A first evaluation of the material reveals the following:

- All interviewees show a high awareness of the value of the resource, the importance of the service and its positive changes in efficiency, quality and reliability in general.
- In their awareness, due to the specific character of the Elbe and Mulde basins, water services are closely linked with environmental issues.
- There is a differentiated comprehension and proactive handling of water issues due to the various regional fields of conflicts.
- Some interview partners signalled their interest to have more options for participation in the performance of water services infrastructure.
- Several partners wish to have the organisation of water services in the hand of the municipality.

### Daily-life arrangement services

The interviewees show concern and interest to participate in the performance of the services in different ways. A basis for new strategies to coordinate both dimensions of economy – household and professional – can have the character of “daily life arrangement services“. This concept places institutional transitions between domestic and market economy based upon the idea, that processes of care and responsibility initiate and stabilise democracy. It means, that the autonomy of the individual as consumer, inhabitant or political actor is something that is achieved by personal knowledge and individual life experience.



Picture 2: Transdisciplinary workshop in Kornhaus Dessau, June 2004, Foto: B. Knothe