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FROM PASSIVE RECIPIENT TO EMPOWERED CLIENT? THE CHANGING ROLE OF WATER CONSUMERS

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Abstract

The traditional paradigm promoting government responsibility for providing water services has, in practice, translated into a strongly supply-driven approach. With the onset of neo-liberalism and increasing prominence of social movements, this supply-driven approach is argued to be outdated and in need of replacement by a more demand-driven approach. Whilst sharing a strong emphasis on individualism, these two ideological approaches have contrasting views on this notion. In the neoliberal perspective individualism is linked to the role of the consumer as purchaser of services. For the social movements it refers to the individual rights of the citizen. In both approaches, however, the role of the consumer is envisaged to change from a passive recipient to an active agent in the service provision process. In this article, we recognize the significant impact of both neo-liberalism and social movements on the provision of public services as well as question the degree to which it really does lead to a modified role for the consumer. We argue that the envisioned role of the consumer as an active agent wielding their power to influence the provision of services is based more on rhetoric than on empirical evidence.

Key words: water services, citizen, client, neo-liberalism, social movements.

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