Community ‘Participation’, Resistance and the Water Wars

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Water is essential to human life, health and development. Prepaid water metres are a popular yet controversial approach to extending water services to the poor. They operate on an upfront payment system which automatically disconnects water if households do not have enough money to replenish supplies. While prepaid water metres have been criticised on a number of levels, this article focuses on the equally problematic discourses used to promote them amongst the poor. By drawing on a case study of a poor South African community’s struggle against prepaid water metres, this article highlights how prepaid metres were promoted using psycho-education campaigns under the guise of ‘participation’. It also documents community resistance to the campaigns ending in a court battle that ruled in favour of communities’ right to sufficient water.

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