

IWRM

Can we manage our water better?

Investigating prospects and processes for the establishment of stakeholder-initiated catchment management agencies

Introduction: Living with water scarcity

South Africa urgently needs to manage its water resources better and many of the people and organisations that use them or enjoy them want to play their part. However, they recognise that they cannot do the job themselves. They need government to put a management framework in place that will balance the different and sometimes conflicting interests in a way that allows all parties to work together to ensure that our scarce water is used equitably and sustainably.

That is the key finding of this study, conducted with the support of the WRC in the Upper Vaal and Olifants River catchments, two water management areas that extend from the Free State to Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces.

The challenges of managing scarce water

Water is an important resource for economic and social development in South Africa. Its limited and uncertain availability imposes serious constraints on development. In global terms, South Africa is categorised as a water-stressed country with far less water available per person than most other countries.

To date, these constraints have been overcome by building infrastructure to store and transport water, increasingly from one river catchment to another. Such infrastructure can supply more water, more reliably, but the country is now approaching a physical limit to the amount of water that is available for use.

Water users will therefore have to cooperate more closely with each other in the future if they are to maintain reliable access to what is becoming an increasingly contested resource. They can do this indirectly, by supporting and complying with the decisions and directions of government or, more directly, by working together to manage the available resources.

Water management is a difficult and complex business that needs appropriate institutional arrangements. While government can give broad guidance and support, as water resource constraints become more acute it is often unable to act effectively to address day-to-day local details. And there is evidence that national government's ability to control pollution and keep discipline over water use is slipping.

Many water resource management functions are best carried out at a local level, often within the boundaries of river catchments themselves, since this is the geographical unit within which water flows and where one user's actions affect others. At this level, it is helpful to involve water users and other stakeholders since they have detailed and up-to-date local knowledge as well as an interest in ensuring effective management to share water equitably between different users and to control pollution.

This approach is supported by South Africa's National Water Act (NWA), which provides for the establishment of Catchment Management Agencies (CMAs) to perform a range of water resource management activities within the framework of a national water resource strategy. However, since the NWA was passed in 1998, only two of the proposed nineteen CMAs have been established.

The view from the ground

According to the NWA, a catchment management agency may be established for a specific water management area (WMA), after public consultation, on the initiative of the community and stakeholders concerned. In the absence of such a proposal the Minister may establish a catchment management agency on the Minister's own initiative.

To date, this provision has not been successfully used. So the study started by asking why no water users had taken advantage of the opportunity to lead the establishment of CMAs, in the absence of action by government.

To do this, it sought to identify the concerns of a diverse group of stakeholders about the benefits and disadvantages of establishing a CMA with the wider purpose of better

understanding stakeholders' attitudes to institutions such as CMAs as interventions to improve water resource management in South Africa.

Focusing on the Upper Vaal and Olifants river catchments the knowledge and views of more than 50 water users and other stakeholders were surveyed.

Findings: action is needed but government must lead

At the outset, it was thought that reasons for stakeholders not taking the initiative might include:

- ignorance of the enabling provisions of the NWA (**knowledge**);
- lack of compelling incentives to establish a CMA (**satisfaction with status quo**);
- concern over ability to defend their interests in a CMA (**capacity and uncertainty**);
- fear that a CMA might be detrimental to their interests (**negative evaluation of the management concept**); and
- fear that a CMA would be ineffective in achieving its goals (**lack of confidence in the management model**).

However, the findings did not support these assumptions. Stakeholders were certainly not satisfied with the status quo and many were frustrated by government's weak administration of water matters and its failure to deal with serious water management issues.

Extensive evidence was presented of failures in the present management of water resources. These included administrative failures to issue licences, which were hampering economic activity; uncontrolled illegal water use, which undermined other activities; as well as widespread pollution of rivers, especially by municipalities and the mining industry, that damaged the natural environment and imposed costs on other water users.

In addition, ignorance about the provisions of the NWA was not the main reason for stakeholders not taking the initiative. Many were seeking ways in which they could become more involved in the management of water resources.

There were, however, concerns about whether a CMA would protect their interests and support their objectives or undermine them. Some stakeholders felt that the CMA model was too complex and would not solve the underlying lack of capacity and leadership that were at the root of their problems. Most respondents looked to national government to lead in establishing effective water resource management arrangements but were pessimistic about its capacity to do this.

It was also evident from the pilot areas studied that each WMA has its own local characteristics and challenges, which must be reflected in the approach taken to establishing management arrangements.

Recommendations: Structured action will gain support and yield results

On the basis of these findings, recommendations to improve water resource management include:

- Action must be taken to address water resource management problems which, if not attended to, will impact severely on economic and social life and damage the natural environment.
- The majority of water users and other stakeholders support the establishment of a more local level of water management and this support should be recognised and built upon.
- No serious impediments were identified to the implementation of the basic structure proposed for CMAs.
- Individual stakeholders can contribute best through institutions that represent their views and interests. Such institutions should be identified and organised or strengthened so that they can participate effectively in water resource management.
- While day-to-day water resource management activities should generally be supported from water resource management charges, funding will be needed to support the initial establishment of CMAs.
- New arrangements must make effective use of the limited human resources with clear delegation of functions and management systems designed to allow functions to be transferred and/or shared between CMAs and DWA regional offices.
- Where there is no immediate crisis, the development of catchment management strategies will help to identify initial priorities for CMA action and the process of producing municipal water services development plans could provide a helpful focal point for initial discussions and actions.
- Current proposals to reduce the number of CMAs and enlarging the WMAs may weaken relationships between stakeholders and could affect the performance of the CMAs.

Further reading:

To obtain the report, *Can We Manage Our Water Better? Prospects and Processes for the Establishment of Stakeholder-Initiated Catchment Management Agencies (1972/1/12)* contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340; Fax: (012) 331-2565; E-mail: orders@wrc.org.za; or Visit: www.wrc.org.za