

# Time to rethink water management

June 22 2015, by Mike Muller

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Southern African countries must recognise that joint management of their shared rivers will not drive regional economic integration. This will be difficult, since this approach has shaped the way the region's water policies have been developed over the past 20 years.

But the [evidence](#) suggests it is the wrong way to go about managing a resource as precious as [water](#). What's needed instead is co-operation on a more targeted basis.

For the past two decades, the approach to water [management](#) has been informed by the quest for regional [integration and development](#). This is seen as both a political and economic priority for countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

It is time to break the link. Decisions about how water is managed in the region need to be driven by a different set of priorities. Management of the region's water needs a targeted approach with a focus on pragmatic co-operation.

## **Why the power of water is limited**

History and experience from Egypt, China, Mesopotamia and more recently California, inform the belief that water and its management can contribute to social and [economic development](#).

Since so many of Africa's rivers are shared, it seems logical that co-operative management of their water could promote economic integration. But development achievements driven by water in the past cannot be replicated in the 21st century.

Water no longer holds the political power it had 100 years ago. There are now many, often cheaper, alternatives to water as a source of power and means of transportation such as coal fired power and road and rail transport. This has reduced water's importance. Its local availability no longer provides a unique stimulus for economic development.

Much of southern Africa's fresh water flows in rivers that are shared between a number of [countries](#). But this does not mean that there is

equal, or even mutual, dependency on the water from the rivers.

Countries that are most dependent on shared rivers [such as Mozambique](#) are not water scarce. The countries that are relatively water scarce, such as Malawi and South Africa, have very little dependence on upstream countries.

It is also striking that relatively little of the water in shared rivers is actually used. Less than 1% of the water from the [Zambezi](#), which flows through Angola, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe, is [used for irrigation](#).

## **Where co-operation is needed**

There is a need for countries to co-operate over the use of water.

Large infrastructure projects that serve regional needs are a case in point. These include the hydropower project [Kariba Dam](#), between Zambia and Zimbabwe and the [Lesotho Highlands water project](#) which supplies water to Lesotho and South Africa and the [Botoka Gorge](#) on the Zambezi or [Inga in the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) (DRC).

Greater co-operation in the operation of dams to regulate flows in the Zambezi River could help to reduce the impacts of floods and droughts. The river's dams could yield more power, more reliably, while still supporting agriculture and environmental protection.

Large political obstacles stand in the way. Such an arrangement would benefit some countries while imposing costs on others. The design of a satisfactory compensation mechanism presents substantial challenges.

The benefits of regional co-operation on trade presents a mixed bag. Intra southern African trade in water related products is a small

proportion of total trade. Only a few high impact strategic projects, notably the [Inga hydropower project](#) in the DRC, could substantially increase regional trade let alone promote greater regional integration.

Agriculture is one sector that presents possibilities. Because rainfall is unevenly distributed across the region and droughts rarely affect the entirety of sub-Saharan Africa, there are important opportunities for regional co-operation in agriculture. Again, many practical and political problems would have to be solved to co-ordinate food trade policies.

## **New political structures are the wrong way to go**

Creating large new political structures is not what is needed. These have already been shown to be ineffective in bringing about regional economic integration.

Efforts at integration in southern Africa have largely failed to achieve intended [goals](#) of increasing trade and harmonising financial policies. This is because member states are reluctant to cede their powers to a regional body, particularly when there is limited evidence of benefits.

This is true in the water sector too. The Water Research Commission's new research [report](#) criticises the Southern African Development Community's [emphasis](#) on building new organisations to manage shared rivers. This is often the result of pressures from donors more concerned with environmental protection than meeting peoples' immediate development needs.

## **What water can do for society**

The current priority for southern African countries is to concentrate on managing water to support social and economic development.

Water users and water managers in each country must talk to each other about their development needs. That will happen mainly at a national level which is where [water management](#) should focus. If new water developments are planned on shared [rivers](#), the main challenge will be to avoid the perception that actions of one country will have negative impacts on another. Simple information sharing arrangements through regular meetings between the parties can avoid this.

The study concludes with two practical recommendations. First, if water is to contribute to the goal of greater regional integration, the focus of its management should be on what water can do for society. The emphasis must be on meeting people's needs rather than giving priority to environmental protection.

Second, the focus of regional co-operation should be on practical functional matters – solving specific shared problems – and not building yet more ineffective institutions.

The water sector can show that, through limited pragmatic co-operation, all [parties can benefit](#). For that to happen, the approaches the sector adopts must be practical, affordable and yield results.

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