



Taking a second look at traditional institutional arrangements for transboundary water governance in Africa

Governance that starts by looking at local traditions and social arrangements can create stronger and more successful transboundary water institutions

■ Research Highlight #10



■ Traditional institutional arrangements can give new insight into management

In sub-Saharan Africa, there are around 63 transboundary river basins whose water resources cut across nations, catchments and regions. Most formal management of transboundary waters is done through treaties, agreements and protocols between the states which share a given water source. However traditional arrangements and customary law still

govern a large portion of water use especially in rural areas. Efficient development and management of resources in these basins require cooperation among the riparian countries and institutional arrangements that express the complexity of sharing water resources between different users and uses.



Burkina dam

The Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF) project, 'Transboundary Water Governance for Agricultural and Economic Growth and Improved Livelihoods in the Limpopo and Volta Basins: Towards African Indigenous Models of Governance' is investigating how governance that starts by looking at local traditions and social arrangements can create stronger and more successful transboundary water institutions. The management of transboundary waters through these institutions could provide valuable alternatives for improving water resources management because of the inherent flexibility of customary arrangements and the ability to take a basin-wide perspective on governance rather than a local one.

■ The approach

Beginning with an assessment of the current institutional arrangements from a historical perspective, the project is taking a 'bottom up' approach that gives voice to the poor

and aims to create an indigenous African model of governance. This has been undertaken through a literature review, using published and unpublished sources, to build a database of more than 150 African water treaties, many of which were previously unknown to today's water scientists and policy makers. This information was shared at a workshop with African decision makers, as a basis for discussing African water law. The underlying project concept is to provide access to knowledge sources within Africa. The project has also shown the importance of using traditional transboundary practice between different groups, not necessarily just countries, to inform and adapt governance systems.

The second phase of the project is currently underway and involves supporting groups of postgraduate students who are doing detailed case study field work in rural areas. Their work will help identify potential local traditions and social arrangements that could possibly be built into the design of larger-scale river basins.

■ An indigenous governance model

There are three important reasons why an indigenous governance model that draws knowledge from within the continent, specific to African contexts, is required to strengthen transboundary water management:

In sub-Saharan Africa water scarcity is primarily 'economic' water scarcity caused by a lack of financial and human resources and poor governance, not a lack of water. This means that there are options to overcome the problem if capacity building for new resource development is given a higher priority than the division of scarce

resources among competing users. Sub-Saharan Africa is overwhelmingly poor, and there is an extreme dependence upon access to water for rural livelihoods, particularly for the poor and women. These groups tend not to be represented in decision-making bodies at an international scale and their voices are seldom heard.

Indigenous arrangements in the management of natural resources, in particular land and water, continue to be very important in Africa, a point often neglected in international agreements and in 'modern' national water laws.



■ Transboundary water governance in the Volta basin

Traditional institutional arrangements governing transboundary water resources of the Volta basin have undergone significant change over the past 150 years. The basin is shared by Ghana and Burkina Faso. With independence, Ghana saw development of new institutional structures and legislation to manage water resources. Formal recognition of traditional and customary laws received little mention in these documents until the restructuring of the countries' water sector in the 1990s under a plan for Integrated Water Resources Management. In Burkina Faso, the situation was slightly different. Colonial rule did not have a strong impact on traditional structures in the country because of inconsistencies in French policies, particularly on water. Customary laws were therefore dominant in land and water management

practice especially in rural areas, until the introduction of modern laws recently enacted by the State.

In both countries during the pre-colonial era, traditional approaches to water and land management were able to regulate sustainable use of the resource due to the smaller populations and small-scale water use in the regions. However, changes in institutions over the years have led to need for assessment of management systems that takes a wider and more inclusive approach to transboundary water governance, especially with the current desire to create a transboundary institution for the Volta.

The project is conducting a detailed assessment of the community mechanisms, how they work and how they could be adapted for broader use towards building local indigenous institutional principles into transboundary water governance.

Photo: Amy Sullivan



◀ Upper east, Volta basin

■ Project information

CPWF Project
Transboundary Water Governance for Agricultural and Economic Growth and Improved Livelihoods in the Limpopo and Volta Basins: Towards African Indigenous Models of Governance

■ Partner organizations

- International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
- CSIR – Water Research Institute (WRI), Ghana
- Water Research Commission, Ghana
- Institut de l'Environnement et de Recherches Agricoles (INERA), Burkina Faso
- University of Pretoria – African Water Issues Research Unit (AWIRU), South Africa
- University of Zimbabwe – Department of Soil Science and Agricultural Engineering (SSAE)
- WaterNet, Zimbabwe
- University of Bonn, Germany : GLOWA – Volta Project



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