

A WEBINAR SERIES ON:


CHANGING POLITICAL ECONOMY IN LARGE RIVER BASINS: ENVIRONMENT, VALUES AND SYSTEMIC PRESSURES

Webinar 4: The Nature of Water and 'Regionalism' in Southern Africa



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CONVEYED BY KING'S WATER AND INTERNATIONAL WATER MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE, COLOMBO



SPEAKERS

Inga Jacob-Mata (IWMI, South Africa): Inga is a political scientist and has a PhD in International Relations from St-Andrews University, Scotland. She specialises in water governance with over 10 years of experience in transboundary water governance (particularly cooperative governance in Africa), science communication, and research impact and uptake. She is currently the Regional Representative for the International Water Management Institute's Southern Africa regional office, in Pretoria, South Africa.

Maria Makali (DWAF, Namibia): Maria is a trained water professional with more than 20 years of experience in integrated water resource management, transboundary water management, and policy advisory. She is the Director of Water Resources Management at the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, in Namibia.

ESSENTIAL TAKEAWAYS

This webinar episode questions the notion of **the value of water** within the Southern African region. With views from the ground, the speakers intend to cover the unique aspects of the political economy of water, including its historical legacies, path dependencies of water institutions, the opportunities, and limitations of pursuing a shared water trajectory among different states.

Three takeaways from the webinar are:

1. It is necessary to find 'calm within the chaos': Regionalism in Southern Africa has been sucked into a leadership vacuum, resulting in the creation of conflicting and contested spaces that threaten the cooperation needed to effectively manage transboundary water systems. The way forward is dedicated leadership to drive a political transformation.
2. The role of river basin institutions, within the SADC region (*South African Development Community*), are inhibited from carrying out their responsibilities. Due to a lack of capacity, a fear of threatening political sovereignty, and a need to balance donor and member state interests, the institutions find it difficult to unite member states to negotiate the allocation of water across the region.
3. A disconnect exists within the notion of regionalism as each actor values water differently, and assertively tries to fit their beliefs into a specific development pathway.

SUMMARY OF WEBINAR 4: THE NATURE OF WATER AND 'REGIONALISM' IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

The development of river basins is a chaotic landscape for both state and non-state actors, grounded in various discourses, narratives and ideologies driving each system to uphold its water value depictions. The previous webinars discussed this complexity, exploring the ways of valuing water; and how belief systems influence water policy to be either beneficial or detrimental for society.

For the fourth episode of the series, we focused on Southern Africa, a **region rich with historical legacies but deficient in inclusive development strategies**. Due to agricultural trajectories, risky infrastructure development, and complicated management of water resources, the value of water is undefined. Political dependencies have threatened the capacity of transboundary institutions and diminished the opportunities that could have been achieved with strong regional relationships. To delve into the complexity of regionalism in South Africa, we heard from two speakers: Inga Jacob and Maria Makali.

Inga, a specialist in transboundary and cooperative water governance, joined us from IWMI South Africa. In her opinion, regionalism in

Southern Africa has been sucked into a **leadership vacuum**. With particular focus on the civil unrest in eSwatini, emerging from protests against the monarchy and a hard call for democratization. Also reminding the anarchy that erupted on the streets of South Africa when former President Zuma handed himself over to authorities to serve a 15-year sentence for contempt of court. Such events demonstrate the dividedness that weakens the region and far off from achieving regionalism (one that entails cooperation and integration). In terms of the political economy of water, to reach a level of water cooperation beyond the ‘diplomatic policy rhetorical levels,’ **a champion of change, that echoes strong leadership is necessary to uncover the interdependencies that water represents in the region**.



Figure 1:
[Map of major water resources in Africa](https://manuelgarcia266671426.wordpress.com/portfolio/africa-water-atlas/)
<https://manuelgarcia266671426.wordpress.com/portfolio/africa-water-atlas/>

The map shows that the Southern Africa’s **water resources are unevenly distributed**; stretched across countries, along with differences in levels of socio economic and water infrastructure development between member states. Such unequal diversity results in competing priorities, and transboundary water management not being the primary concern. Due to the underdevelopment of the region’s existing resources, many social groups lack access to water in sufficient quantity to meet their domestic needs and economic activities.

Inga highlighted that the lack of water security is not due to physical water but rather to an **economic water scarcity**, in which states concentrate the resource to meet their national needs, regardless of downstream consequences. Leading up to the question: how did we end up here? In the 1990s, multilateralism and policy innovation in transboundary water management were focused on. Nowadays, the multilateral dynamic faded. Inga points to two factors that could explain the current **plight in establishing regionalism**: the contested norms and interests of the region, and the need to look forward and build a new regionalism for SADC.

The development of the Regional Water agenda in Southern Africa led to **compromises** between SADC member states and development partners. The **states' aspired to develop their region into an economic hub**, promoting growth through revenue generation and exploitation of natural resources for economic gains. While **donor agencies**, try to influence water management strategies and instruments, i.e. river basin organization, to ensure the water sector adopts precautionary approaches. Inga concluded by questioning the efficiency of both sides due to the limited traction and impact in regional economic integration. Therefore, **a new regionalism is essential to propel SADC onto a clear path for political & economic transformation**; a change that will drive a region from relative heterogeneity to increased homogeneity.

The region lacks dedicated leadership to manage the water sector, especially during a time in which climate change and the pandemic hamper coordination within the region. Illustrating

water's multi-dimension Naho mentioned that **water isn't stuck within 'its own water box.'** Due to political developments, donor intentions and multiple economic drivers, the waterscape of the SADC region constantly changes to fit interests.

Switching from a broad lens of regionalism to a narrower perspective, Maria spoke river basin organizations. Their role is to institutionalizes the concept of regionalism within their framework. **How does one define the concept of regionalism when development across the SADC region is unequal?** Maria echoed Inga's thoughts in which the notion of water may be physically present, but the capacity and means to extract that water is deficient. **"Do we want to develop these basins with large infrastructure? Or do want to keep it pristine for tourism, through diversity of environmental management?"** With each basin reflecting a uniqueness, due to its surrounding nature and characteristics, how does one ensure equitable development schemes that will benefit all and guarantee water security?

As shown in the map, the basin is highly developed, equipped with multiple dams to benefit South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia and Botswana. Yet, each of the receiving countries (besides South Africa) are scrambling for water.

Figure 2:
Map of Orange River Basin

<https://www.dws.gov.za/iwrrp/Orange%20Recon/sa.aspx>



Member states are responsible for ‘negotiating’ the share of water but the extent to which efficient benefit sharing takes place is quite debatable. According to Maria, the dictated system that is in place is: first come, first serve. The states who already ‘have a seat at the table,’ a noteworthy reputation of being an economically well-off state and therefore have the means to keep on developing at unprecedented rates are usually the voices that are heard first. **Without any concrete basin sharing agreements, equitable water sharing rarely takes place.** Given such unbalanced circumstances, questions the **legitimacy** of the actor(s) administering the negotiations taking

place between member states. According to the revised SADC protocols, it is the role of the river basin organizations, who were established for the purpose of promoting joint management of these resources, to take the responsibility of bringing member states together. **However, the capacity for these organizations to conduct the role effectively, is limited by the states’ sovereignty, thus hindering cooperative water management from taking place.** As each actor within the system defends their vision of achieving water security, the task to balance between the environment, water supply, project development and economic investment is difficult. As Maria puts it, ‘politics will come into play. Those who can do, and those who cannot, will be left behind.’

Alan highlighted the **disconnect between actors** and the complexity of demand and supply for resources and development. Despite the SADC protocols, the notion of supranational development of basins, and its benefits, hasn’t been grasped by everyone. **Is there a need for a new regionalism?** Should there be a new way of thinking about these transboundary management issues? While the possibility might be appealing, Alan expressed the challenges surging from changing the role of external actors. Looking at the donor community (i.e. SEWA, AMCOW, NEPAD), **‘how will the changing nature of their role influence their contribution to the region?’** Adding to that, Deb, from the audience inquired, **‘what exactly is the role of international organizations?’** when it comes to managing such competing interests between actors. These were great questions that helped transition into the discussion segment of the series.

DISCUSSION

Inga started by affirming that international development partners assume the role of coordination. An example would be the South Africa Drought Resilience initiative (SADRI), by the World Bank, which aims to catalyze investment in drought preparedness by structuring around three key pillars: cities, energy systems, and livelihoods and food security. At times, in the absence of such a convening role, the responsibility falls onto the SADC secretariats, who are unable to move beyond creating awareness about the issue at hand. This creates some worry, as Miranda, from King's College, explained through her question: Without there being thorough oversight, is the focus on meeting the domestic water needs of society, linked to the political interests for those who want to remain in power? Or is it tied to the economics of water? Inga answered, 'It's about political self-interest right now.' **The 1990's were grounded in a special environment, in which multilateralism was encouraged across to the water sectors as it was a window of opportunity.** Today, the dynamic changed.

Moving on with the conversation, Mohsen Nagheebay was curious about the patterns of regionalism. With each country struggling to overcome their national political challenges, and therefore administering nationalism strategies, who will benefit the most at the end? To try and answer this, Maria reminded us that the SADC region is new in terms of regional establishment, but those who already have a head start in terms of being more developed, benefit the most. However, as outlined in the **SADC protocol watershed courses, the key to forming regional integration is through water**, but the next steps in how to use water to foster cooperation is a blur: "We want to manage resources, but for what? How do we develop accordingly? How do we strengthen institutions so that both national and regional communities are content in using the instruments that are set up within basins?" These questions revolve around the issue that

there is a need to harmonize policies. The secretariats are all talk but no work due to some not even having the budget to fill in the gaps of achieving a common understanding.

This brings up the **issue of whether having water, as the starting point, is the best way to manage water.** Alan quoted Mike Miller stating: "The **problem with International Water Management is that it doesn't have development in the title.**" That omitted word overlooks a broad aspect of segments, such as jobs, a point made by Michelle Hiestermann, from the Water Research Commission. Throughout her experience in developing value propositions for diverse sectors (private, agriculture, municipalities) to enter water security partnerships and secure investments, the common value has been jobs. However, with changing times and spaces, i.e. COVID, the question is, **does this agenda still stand within the SADC region or are financial investment partners interested in other impacts that might be more attractive to the value of stakeholders?** Maria responded by saying such values differ according to different levels. Speaking from a government perspective, they intend to negotiate upon values that will then be used by industries and key stakeholders. The harmonizing link remains to be that job creation is a key domestic driver that satisfies the demands in the landscape within each country. However, the truth behind that harmonizing like can be debatable, as Miranda reminded us through her point on political sovereignty. **With water being a national resource, governments may not want to give power to regional institutions, even if it means job creation. This creates conflict between actors and impedes any form of cooperation.** Inga agreed with the statement and indicated that such conflicts arise in **countries that must compete with hegemonic nations**, over water, due to being downstream. States that are more vulnerable have a greater need to collaborate, while the most powerful

ones, such as South Africa, have a higher chance of maneuvering and implementing their state-centric view, without there being any objections.

To overcome the challenge of a state exerting their dominance, a key tactic, that both Maria and Naho reflected on, was that one should have patience. **These river basin institutions are eager to move onto the next phase of their**

institutional development process; what they lack is capacity. Therefore, investing into developing the capacity of these institutions and molding them away from being top-down controlled institutions and into an establishment that is able to embed flexibility, to match the **underlying power dynamics**, is an achievable goal.

CONCLUSION

The concluding remarks circled around the **opportunity that lies ahead in reimagining a new regionalism.** With there being an imbalance with water, due to climate change, water scarcity, and unequal benefit sharing, what lies ahead is a **need to challenge the norms and 'look beyond what the basin offers.'** Maria referred to Namibia and their focus on seawater desalination as an alternative; due to not having their own source of water and sharing 3-4 river basins with Botswana. Inga recognizes opportunity in the 'information space,' in terms of **collecting scientific evidence to help inform water sharing discussions,** develop data sharing protocols and mechanisms, and to deliver information on a daily basis. Such data and information sharing can be considered as the **building blocks for institutions, equipping them with the resources to adapt to uncertainties that go beyond the water sector alone,** but also include disaster management, agricultural systems, and other multiple political, economic, and social factors that intersect around water. At the end, regional water management should be **designed in a way to increase the climate resilience of all social actors as the world is becoming unpredictable day by day.**

FURTHER INFORMATION

The POLECOR website gathers recordings and reports of the past webinars. Biographies of the speakers and outlines of the webinars are also available.

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/geography/changing-political-economies-in-large-river-basins>



Convened by King's Water & International Water Management Institute, Colombo

Changing political economies in large river basins: Environment, values and systemic pressures

The ever-present relationship between large river basins and development has been a feature of global political economy for hundreds of years. A recognizable 'water crisis' narrative emerged in the last few decades of the 20th Century, which shifted attention to improving water governance and considering systems interconnectedness – a concept epitomised, perhaps, in the water-energy-food nexus advocated in policy circles and key global water events. Yet these relatively technocratic narratives have sat somewhat uneasily alongside wider discourse on values, the politics of contestation, everyday struggles over water and, increasingly, the actions taken up to deal with climate change.

Embedded in these new concerns and challenges are global politics of trade, shifting geopolitics, aid siloes, climate security and post-colonial legacies. These processes of complex value (re)construction, absorption and contestation are beginning to shape river basin systems in new ways.

We are excited to be launching a webinar series at this particular moment of 2021, when the World Water Day 2021 theme is on valuing water. In this multi-episode series, we will examine values from a political economy perspective and with respect to a selection of the world's key river basins and regions. Extending our thinking beyond the 'water box', we invite a range of speakers from multiple fields to join in on the conversation.

Organisers



DR. NAHO MIRUMACHI (KING'S COLLEGE LONDON)

Reader (Associate Prof.) in Environmental Politics, she has over 15 years of experience in interdisciplinary research, bringing together thinking on political economy of international transboundary river basins, security and geopolitics, particularly in developing country contexts. She has extensive experience in training and working with policy makers.



DR. ALAN NICOL (IWMI)

Director of IWMI's Strategic Program on Water, Growth and Inclusion, he has more than 20 years of experience in research, policy advice, consulting and program development across Asia, Africa and the Middle East. He is a specialist in a range of water policy issues, working closely with both governments and policy influencers.

This webinar series is dedicated to the late Prof Tony Allan, our friend and colleague who advanced academic and policy debate on the economic and political processes that (under)value water



14 July 2021 13:00-14:00 BST(GMT+1)

Webinar 4: 'The nature of water and 'regionalism' in Southern Africa'

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Joining details will be sent after registration

In this episode, we will consider the questions of water, value and regionalism. With views from the ground from our speakers, we will cover, amongst other topics, unique aspects of Southern Africa and its political economy of water; historical legacies and path dependencies of water institutions; opportunities and limitations of regionalism. Bring your questions and thoughts and join in for an hour of exciting debate!

Speakers



INGA JACOBS-MATA (IWMI-SOUTH AFRICA))

Inga is a political scientist and has a PhD in International Relations from St-Andrews University, Scotland. She specialises in water governance with over 10 years of experience in transboundary water governance (particularly cooperative governance in Africa), science communication, and research impact and uptake. She is currently the Regional Representative for the International Water Management Institute's Southern Africa regional office, in Pretoria, South Africa.



MARIA AMAKALI (DWAf, Namibia)

Maria is a trained water professional with more than 20 years of experience in integrated water resource management, transboundary water management, and policy advisory. She is the Director of Water Resources Management at the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, in Namibia.

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Based at the King's College London Department of Geography, we are home to research expertise on water, environment and development. Our hub spans social and physical sciences to explore the challenges of water governance from global to local scales.	IWMI's mission is to provide water solutions for sustainable, climate-resilient development. IWMI is a research-for-development organization, whose research results have led to changes in water management that have contributed to social and economic development.
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