

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

– Delving into WRM on the ground



Janosch Förster

A broken water reservoir in the Crocodile (West)-Marico water management area.

South Africa's water resource management legislation and policy is among the most progressive in the world, but is it making a difference to the lives of people on the ground? This is the subject of a current study by Monash University's International WaterCentre (IWC).

Supporting some 6.7 million people, the Crocodile (West)-Marico Water Management Area is one of the most populous water management areas in South Africa. This is also the study area selected by PhD researcher Janosch Förster, who is analysing the South African government's integrated water resource management policy, its implementation means and impacts on the vulnerability of local livelihoods.

"Integrated water resource management (IWRM) has become an internationally-renowned and

dominant paradigm of water management," explains Förster. "It aims at a holistic way of managing water resources, trying to integrate economic, environmental, political and social factors. However, the socio-political side of water management is highly under-represented in IWRM literature and practical attempts to implement water governance based on this philosophy.

Therefore, Förster hopes that his research will fill in the gap IWRM research by identifying how this theoretical framework could be adapted to form a more effective concept for poverty alleviation and socio-economic development of marginalised poor people in countries such as South Africa.

Förster's project involves the review of relevant government policy documents and legal acts. During this year, he will also be undertaking field research in the Crocodile (West)-Marico catchment, mainly

comprising in-depth and focus group interviews with key stakeholders. This includes interviews with large- and small-scale irrigation farmers, relevant national and regional government officials, members and candidates of and for the local parliament, non-governmental organisation employees working on IWRM within the catchment, representatives from the water-related scientific community in South Africa and, crucially, members of local communities.

The current project is an expansion of earlier fieldwork undertaken as part of Förster's Masters Degree in Integrated Water Management Studies at IWC, completed last year. This study mainly involved interviews with relevant stakeholders in South Africa's Crocodile (West)-Marico catchment.

According to the post-grad student, the greatest initial challenge of his research was gaining the trust of people living within his research catchment, particularly the members

of the rural community of Koffiekraal – a major focus area of his studies. “When we first arrived in Koffiekraal, we went to meet with one member of the tribal council whom my research colleague already knew, but he was not there and we were not able to reach him by cellphone. Without him we were practically unknown to the community, and were thus treated as foreigners trying to extract knowledge for work not thought of as valuable by the community. So – reasonably – we were sent away. In the end, as we thought of leaving we got hold of the tribal council member, who allowed us back into the community to ask our questions.”

Another difficult task has been pinning down government officials dealing with water governance issues, who have either been too busy or not interested in being interviewed. “Again, luck was on my side in the end. I was invited by one of the local irrigation farmers to attend a meeting of the water user association and nearly all of the government officials I had tried in vain to contact were present there.”

Findings from Förster’s Masters study showed that South Africa’s present water policy did not assist local livelihoods due to a mismatch

of political mandate and practical capacity. “Among other initiatives, early government programmes run by non-governmental organisations for the achievement achieved safe water for 6,5 million people in rural areas between 1994 and 2001,” noted Förster. “Since then, however, the programmes have lost momentum.”

From the results of the study it is obvious that water availability for productive purposes in rural areas is not an official priority in the Crocodile(West)-Marico catchment. The desktop research also indicates that the problem of unequal access to water for productive purposes remains unsolved not only in this water management area, but throughout the country as a whole. That is the first major barrier to the socio-economic development of marginalised poor communities, notes Förster.

“Despite the progressive water legislation, newly established water governance institutions have failed to involve localised marginal low-income groups in the research area in the decision-making process for water management,” Förster continues. “Moreover, to some extent they have cemented old power inequalities.” This is because marginalised



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groups do not have the capacity or knowledge to participate adequately and raise their voice.

According to Förster, newly-established institutions have also failed to involve localised marginalised low-income groups, such as black communities in the research area, in the process of decision-making regarding water management. “There was almost no communication between water authorities and communities. That presents a major barrier to the socio-economic development of marginalised poor communities.”

The project is partially financed by the IWC and supported by Monash University South Africa. □

Standing in front of the Marico River are Monash PhD student Janosch Förster with political scientist Sysman Motloung, who among others has served as translator.

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GO Water Management

Gerhard Offringa PhD Pr Eng

GO Water Management
Suite 134
Private Bag X34
Somerset West
7129 South Africa
Tel: +2721 855 3755
Mobile: +2783 290 7223
www.gowaterman.co.za
Skype: gerhard.offringa3