

# Achieving a More Egalitarian Water Allocation System in Zimbabwe

A number of major changes have affected water use in Zimbabwe. These include an increased urban population putting heavy pressure on the inadequate and poorly maintained water infrastructure resulting in serious environmental concerns including deteriorating water quality; a land reform programme that has dramatically reduced the number of large-scale farmers and given rise to new smallholder and medium farmers in resettlement schemes and an increase in mining that has become an important water user and a significant polluter. The rural communal areas comprising almost half the land area and population have also been neglected. With the current water crises in Zimbabwe there is a clear opportunity to address these issues and to establish a more efficient, effective and equitable allocation of water between the wide range of existing and emerging water users.

## Water policies in Zimbabwe since 1990

Since the mid-1990s, Zimbabwe has adopted Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) as the underlying approach to its water policy. IWRM has been defined by the Global Water Partnership as the process which promotes the development and management of water, land and related resources in order to maximise the economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems. How to actually allocate water to achieve this in Zimbabwe has proved difficult. In colonial Zimbabwe water allocation mirrored the political-economic ideology designed to promote a white settler economy and to favour water development in the 'European' commercial farming areas.

In response to the highly unequal allocation of water, the Water Act and Zimbabwe National Water Act (ZINWA) of 1998 based upon Zimbabwean understandings of IWRM sought to redress and improve water management and allocation by promoting a more egalitarian hydro-society, with efficiency and effectiveness supporting rather than driving water allocation.

The 1998 Water Act put in place a devolved and institutional framework for water resources

management. It divided the country along hydrological boundaries into seven catchments and 47 sub-catchments along major river systems. Catchment and sub-catchment councils were mandated to carry multiple governance and management functions but without resources to do so once the donors withdrew. A range of European donors funded the activities of the Water Resources Management Strategy and its implementation in the catchment councils. When the donors withdrew, no plans had been realistically made on a strategy to fund the transition to national and local funding. The outcome has been a severe decline in water governance and management by these participatory institutions. While donors have re-engaged with Zimbabwe, the focus has been on infrastructure and water supply and not directly on IWRM.

## Categories of water use

Water use continues to be divided into three categories:

1. Primary water – including domestic human needs, animal life, making of bricks for private use, and dip tanks. No permit is required and is without cost.
2. Commercial Water – defined as water used for agriculture, mining, livestock, hydroelectric

power, and which has to be permitted and paid for.

- Urban, industrial and mining (UIM) water requires a water permit and attracts a charge. Cities are allowed to set their own rates for urban water.

Because of the economic crises from 2000-2009, ZINWA and the Catchment Councils have devoted much of their attention to generating income from permitted water. With salaries dependent upon revenues much less time or resources were devoted to water management. With the decline of commercial farming, payment for irrigation waters declined dramatically. This might be a time to refocus on water for multiple use in rural areas although this is absent in the new water policy.

## Access to water and positive development outcomes

Greater acknowledgement of the significant positive impact that broadened water access can have on development outcomes and currently high poverty levels is required. Improvements in water access can benefit a wide range of sectors including production, health and nutrition, and domestic needs including bathing, cooking and sanitation. In the current framework, commercial water is prioritised over protecting access to water for smallholders and communal area residents for both domestic and productive purposes. Furthermore, there is no legal protection of rural populations' access to primary water.

## Policy recommendations

- The human right to drinking water as included in the Zimbabwean Constitution (Section 77) should be made part of all water allocation strategies and included in catchment outline plans.
- All national gender and affirmative action policies need to be implemented in the water sector.
- A water permit should be taken as a right to use water and should guarantee the right of access and the rights of exclusion, and be protected from arbitrary suspension or termination.
- The practice of allocating abstraction permits in public streams should be discontinued and replaced by a system that jointly allocates water from streams and dams according to defined levels of assurance of supply.
- Holders of storage permits should pay a nominal fee to prevent water hoarding.
- Limited and guided transferable rights moderated by catchment councils should be allowed to promote water-use efficiency with excess water being made available water for a defined time.
- Environmental protection of water resources should be expanded to include protection of water sources, and water quality.
- The concept of beneficial use of water should be modified to prevent a situation where some water users claiming to use water more productively can 'jump the queue', ahead of water schemes for poverty alleviation.
- There needs to be a national debate about the new water policy including issues around water privatisation, accountability and if and how IWJRM should remain the guiding principle for water governance and management.

## Further reading

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## Credits

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