

An analysis of IWRM capacity needs in Malawi

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Abstract

It is now nearly a decade since the notion of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) was first conceptualized and popularized. Although the significance and value of IWRM has been discussed and debated at many fora, both local and international, the understanding has not filtered down to the grassroots level where tangible programmes can be implemented. IWRM continues to operate at a high and often idealistic level. One of the major challenges is the lack of capacity for the operationalization of IWRM on the ground. IWRM is about the process of integrating ideas and principles which in turn requires stakeholder participation. The overall objective of the study was to identify IWRM capacity building needs for the country. Data collection involved literature review and interviews with representatives of key institutions in the water sector using a semi-structured questionnaire. In this paper, we present some preliminary findings on IWRM knowledge from the Malawian context. We show that as a process, IWRM has only begun to have some impact on the ground. The study further shows that capacity building is required in the awareness, planning and implementation processes at different levels of society.

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1. Introduction

Capacity building in the water sector remains one of the major problems in Southern Africa. The region faces a number of challenges which require human, financial and institutional capacity to deal with. [Beukman \(2002\)](#) has cogently summarized some of these issues as follows: inequity in the sectoral allocation of water; inefficient allocation of water; inadequate capacity for decentralization; lack of integration; unsustainable supply side management bias; and the challenges of sharing international rivers. In his review article, [Swatuk](#) argued that one of the biggest challenges in Southern Africa is that of training students on how to be good physical and social scientists while at the same time instilling in them the ability to think ‘outside the box’ ([Swatuk, 2005](#)).

The traditional sectoral approach of managing the regions’ water resources was viewed inadequate to deal

with such complex issues. Hence, a new approach had to be found. In the 1990s, however, a revolution of some kind swept through southern Africa with the promotion of the concept of IWRM. Adoption of IWRM required the consideration of various players in the water sector; thus moving beyond the traditional fields of hydrology and water resources engineering which had hitherto characterized water resources management. A new era had been born where scientists and technocrats had to interact with social scientists on water issues. Naturally, this was no easy task for disciplinary boundaries and orthodoxies can be hard to break. This required a deliberate process of generating awareness and building of capacity across disciplines and nations. It was partly in light of such a situation that Southern Africa became one of the first regions in the world to launch capacity building programmes on IWRM: Global Water Partnership-Southern Africa (GWP-SA), WaterNet and the Water Research Fund for Southern Africa (WARFSA). SADC similarly promoted the integration of IWRM in national water reform processes through the Regional Strategic Action Plan. The operation of these

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organizations took water issues to new heights. In their own ways, all these organizations have contributed immensely not only to the promotion of awareness about IWRM but also to the development of capacity in water resources management.

As part of the global family, GWP-SA seeks to promote collaboration and sustainable utilization and management of water resources in Southern Africa. Its capacity building component lies, among other things, in the promotion of interaction among academics, policy makers and practitioners on IWRM issues. GWP has also done a lot of awareness through the launch of water partnerships in different countries in the region. On its part, WaterNet, a regional capacity building network, has been in the forefront of working with training institutions in the Southern and Eastern African region. Through a decentralized system, various universities are participating in the training of water managers who are equipped with knowledge and skills from a variety of water-related disciplines. In many ways, the Water Research Fund for Southern Africa should be seen as a complimentary partner in capacity building. Through the provision of research grants to scholars and researchers in the SADC region, the WARFSA initiative promotes the dissemination and utilization of research results. At the international level, CAPNET has also championed the cause of IWRM by providing training materials. The enthusiasm in IWRM and the capacity being built is reflected in the quality and quantity of papers presented at the annual symposium some of which are published in the *Journal of Physics and Chemistry of the Earth*.

While IWRM has now been widely acknowledged as a useful and relevant concept, it may not be a panacea for all of Africa's water problems. Indeed, as Van der Zaag has argued, IWRM is an elusive concept which should be taken as providing a common ground for understanding Africa's water problems. If not linked to real issues facing Africa today, it risks becoming yet another amorphous buzzword (Van der Zaag, 2005). Van Koppen similarly argued that IWRM can be useful if it is used to mobilize economic resources for human and development in general and agricultural growth in particular (Van Koppen, 2003).

Much work still remains to capacitate the majority of the people in the region, particularly those at the grassroots level. There is also need to come up with tangible examples that can demonstrate the benefits of IWRM, mainstreaming cross-cutting issues into IWRM as well as integrating IWRM into Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and economic growth and development strategies. This paper should be seen as part of the effort to understand capacity building using the Malawian context. We discuss the status of IWRM knowledge, capacity building needs and existing training institutions in Malawi. It comes out of a study conducted with the main objective of identifying IWRM capacity building needs for the country. The specific objectives of this study were to review the literature on IWRM status and to identify IWRM capacity building needs of stakeholders and training institutions.

2. Methodology

In order to carry out this study, two methods were used. First, we conducted a review of the literature, which involved an extensive and critical review of water-related documents on IWRM in order to provide a context in which water sector reforms are taking place. We consulted both published and unpublished documents in the libraries, government ministries and departments. Second, we conducted interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire with representatives of key institutions in the water sector. The study involved a purposeful sampling of those individuals and organizations that have knowledge of or are responsible for the implementation of IWRM, namely, policy makers, water providers, consumers, research and training institutions, private sector and non-governmental organizations. The purpose of these interviews was to get information on the knowledge and tangible benefits of IWRM, their training needs and ways in which IWRM could reduce poverty in Malawi.

Data collected from the literature search and interviews were systematically analysed and the findings are presented in the rest of this paper. But before doing so, it is necessary to examine the national context in which IWRM issues are being discussed and planned for implementation. Of particular interest will be the national policy and legislative frameworks.

3. The policy context

In recent years Malawi has undertaken a number of reforms in the water sector. These reforms are driven by the desire to meet changing national and international needs and priorities. The reforms include new water policies and legislation, decentralization of government functions and efforts to harmonise policies in the natural resources area. These reforms have not only exerted pressure on the already understaffed government departments but they have also called for a re-orientation of staff in order to make them conversant with emerging issues and trends.

The vision of Malawi's new national water policy is "water and sanitation for all, always" and seeks to provide every Malawian with "equitable access to water and sanitation services for sustainable socio-economic development of the country" (GOM, 2004). This is a big challenge for Malawi given the country's economic problems and the uneven distribution of water resources. In 2003, the Ministry of Water Development came up with a strategy paper which outlines plans for the implementation of its policies and programmes for 2003–2006 (GOM, 2003). One of the critical aspects of the strategy paper and indeed the 2004 policy is the recognition of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals and the need to work towards achieving them by 2015. In line with the Johannesburg Declaration of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Malawi has initiated several activities to attain

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