

Designing back from practice: Keeping the Olifants River and benefits flowing through systemic, collective action approaches during the worst drought on record

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This paper describes the use of a systemic, collective approach to keeping the Olifants River flowing during the worst three year drought on record. Without this, flows in the lower catchment would have failed impacting on livelihoods and ecosystems both locally and downstream into the iconic Kruger National Park and Mozambique.

This success is described through the evolution of a resilience-building programme known as RESILIM-Olifants. For a number of years AWARD and partners have sought to support systemic, tenable governance arrangements reinforced by appropriate tools for Integrated Water Resources Management. The approach was initiated through a focus on ‘real-world’, practice-based needs of water resources managers and designing back from these to develop appropriate institutional and technological arrangements. Importantly the work is catalyzed by the implementation needs, rather than a research focus. The entry point was one of supporting the policy requirements for water resources protection whilst at the same time recognizing the practical needs of managers to allocate water in stressed catchment and to monitor both status and water use against legislated benchmarks.

This recognises that within South Africa, as in many countries, there is a commitment to environmental water requirements (EWRs). Whilst methods for their determination are well-developed, implementation measures are still weak. Constraints to this such as institutional uncertainty, weak capacity and inappropriate tools are discussed. We also describe the testing of such an approach to sustain flows in in practice in the Olifants River Catchment and explore the benefits of doing so. We conclude by exploring both strengths and risks for such a system in the longer-term.