



## Representation & participation in decentralised water management<sup>1</sup>

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ONE OF THE responses to the global policy thrust of 'integrated water management' has been the establishment of catchment-based management of water resources. This approach to water management seeks to promote the coordinated development and management of water with the view of maximizing the resultant economic and social benefits in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems (GWP 2000). Integrated water resources management sought to accelerate the devolution of responsibilities to water users and build transparent and accountable mechanisms for resource allocation (Ibid.). Explicit in the processes is the view that institutional reform, would foster stakeholder participation and representation in water management. However, emerging evidence indicates that decentralised water institutions do not necessarily mean greater representation and participation of all stakeholders as this can be limited by the political complexity and messy nature of decentralised institutions. Evidence from Budzi and Lower Save sub-catchment councils in Zimbabwe strongly suggests that participation of new stakeholders, mainly small-scale, communal and newly-resettled farmers in decentralised water institutions, is still peripheral. High transactional costs limit participation to stakeholders who can afford to pay the cost of traveling to attend meetings, as well as those who can communicate and articulate effectively. Consequently, the concerns and consensus that emerge from catchment and sub-catchment councils reflect the skewed nature of participation.

### Water Reforms In Zimbabwe

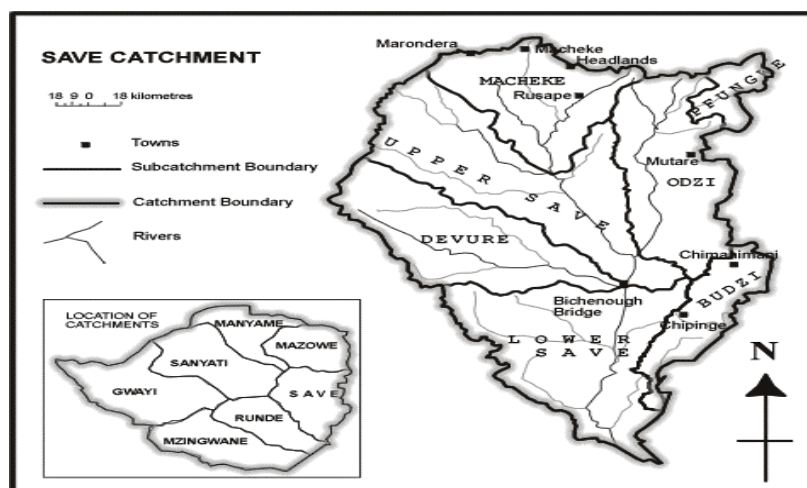
The origins of the inequitable access to water in Zimbabwe emanate from the political economy of the settler colony state (1890-1980). From the 1920s up to 1998, there existed a legal and administrative framework that governed ownership, access, control and use of water in favour of white commercial farming as well as mining and manufacturing industries. The various pieces of colonial legislation culminating in the 1976 Water Act saw black indigenous Africans being legally denied access to, and use of water for secondary purposes, such as irrigation. In the 1990s, there were concerted efforts to reform the water sector with the view to achieve an equitable distribution of water against a background of sound economic growth for the benefit of the whole country (Matinenga 1999:224). Broadly, the 1990s water reforms in Zimbabwe sought to:

- Repeal the Water Act of 1976 and replace it with another that was more appropriate to the contemporary social, economic and political order of Zimbabwe
- Reform institutions involved in the water sector, increase stakeholder participation and devolve water resources management to the lowest appropriate level
- Improve access to water for all Zimbabweans.

The reform process resulted in the promulgation in 1998 of the Water Act [Chapter 20:24] and the Zimbabwe National Water Authority Act [Chapter 20:25]. The latter established the Zimbabwe National Water Authority, an institution that was tasked with providing a framework for the development, management, utilization and conservation of the country's water resources through a coordinated approach. Related to this, the Act introduced stakeholder institutions known as catchment and sub-catchment councils, which were given the responsibility to manage water at the lowest appropriate level. The establishment of Catchment and Sub-Catchment Councils was a major step in devolving water management to stakeholders and closely followed the principles of IWRM. Catchment and Sub-Catchment Councils provided a platform for stakeholder participation on water resource management within a defined hydrological area.

To this end, seven catchment and their respective catchment councils were established in Zimbabwe. These were based on the seven major river systems, namely Gwayi, Manyame, Mazowe, Mzingwane, Runde, Sanyati and Save. Below the catchment, are sub-catchments, which are a collection of major tributaries that drain the catchment of a particular area. For instance, in the Save Catchment, Budzi, Devure, Lower Save, Macheke, Upper Save, Odzi and Pungwe constitute the sub-catchments (See Map 1 below). Catchment areas are managed by chairpersons and vice-chairpersons of sub-catchment areas that comprise a catchment area, as a catchment council. Sub-catchment areas are managed by representatives from large scale commercial farmers, communal and small-scale farmers, rural district councils, traditional leaders, private companies as well as representatives from both old and new resettlement schemes. These different stakeholders constitute a sub-catchment council.

The case study sub-catchment councils, Budzi and Lower Save in Save Catchment were established in 1999. The



Map 1. Save catchment area and its sub-catchment areas

catchment area covers three provinces, namely Manicaland, Mashonaland East and Masvingo, with Budzi spanning over two rural district councils of Chipinge and Chimanimani. On the other hand, Lower Save sub-catchment covers Chipinge, Chimanimani, Zaka, Buhera and Chiredzi rural district councils.

### Stakeholder representation and participation on Budzi and Lower Save sub-catchment councils

Prior to the 1998 Water Act, stakeholder participation in water management was limited to those with water rights, mainly white commercial farming, urban, mining and industrial sectors, thus communal and resettlement farmers were not involved in water management because they did not possess water rights (WRMS 2001). With the reforms, stakeholders from different water user groups are represented on the sub-catchment council.

However, the criterion for election or selection of stakeholders to both sub-catchments was viewed as 'unclear and lacking wide consultations with new stakeholders'. It was common among new stakeholders that they did not know how their representatives were selected or elected onto sub-catchment councils, and in some cases, not knowing if at all they had a 'representative'. The latter was true for small-scale farmers in both Budzi and Lower Save sub-catchments. One small-scale farmer in Budzi sub-catchment noted that 'he came to know of the sub-catchment council when a man on a motorcycle came with a receipt of water charges'<sup>2</sup>.

The lack of wide consultation, particularly with new stakeholders is largely attributed to the fact that the whole exercise of setting up decentralised water institutions and electing office bearers was done in a hurry (cp. Kujinga 2001; Manzungu, 2002). With regards to Budzi sub-

catchment council, one respondent noted that *we were invited to attend the inaugural meeting, where we were asked to vote for the chairperson and vice-chairperson...most of us were not clear of what was going on, so we just voted*<sup>3</sup>.

The problems of stakeholder representation are compounded by the lack of adequate resources to conduct wide spread information and awareness programmes. Despite the fact that there is an outreach officer tasked with informing the new water users about the water reforms the functioning of the outreach officer is largely confined to 'making sure that the people pay their water levies'<sup>4</sup>

Despite the willingness of new water users to participate in water management, the institutional complexity that they encounter militates against participation. This was aptly illustrated by a small-scale farmer from Nyanyadzi:

*These things about water are now confusing. I wanted to take water from Nyanyadzi and start some sort of irrigation in my field. I asked people about the process of applying for water. The majority of the people I asked were not clear about the process. So, I decided to take a bus to Chimanimani Rural District Council, which is 120 km away. I thought since they are the ones who deal with our needs, I would do it there and finish at once. When I went to Chimanimani Rural District Council, I was told to go to Lower Save Sub-Catchment Council offices in Chipangayi. I was shocked because I did not know about these developments. I was also informed that Nyanyadzi falls under Lower Save sub-catchment, but for any other needs besides water, I should continue going to Chimanimani. That aside, I scheduled another visit to Chipangayi to see officials of Lower Save Sub-Catchment Council. I took another bus from Nyanyadzi to Chipangayi, which is another 120 km. When I got to Lower Save Sub-Catchment Council offices with my concern, I was shocked again to hear that the water I want to abstract is agreement water, which falls directly under ZINWA and not the Sub-Catchment Council. I was ad-*

vised to go to Mutare, which is another 120 km from Nyanyadzi. I decided when I get back home, I am not going anywhere because I will also be referred to another office, 120 km away. I was paying bus fare to and from all these places. Transport is expensive these days, I cannot afford it. I decided to get the water from the river and wait and see who will prosecute me.<sup>5</sup>

The institutional complexity highlighted by the small-scale farmer emanate from the different processes of decentralisation that mark the development landscape in Zimbabwe. The rural district councils were created during local government decentralisation, with a mandate to implement and oversee local level development activities within a defined political and administrative boundary. As such, they are the focal administrative points where stakeholders discuss various district developmental issues. In addition, complaints and problems were channeled to the rural district council, particularly by communal people, through ward and village councilors. On the other hand, catchment and sub-catchment councils and the Zimbabwe National Water Authority and its local level offices are decentralised institutions created specifically for water management in a given hydrological zone. Thus decentralisation process surrounding water reforms- under the IWRM paradigm, shifted water related problems to catchment and sub-catchment councils, without a concomitant shift in effective representation of the less powerful stakeholders. The two processes of decentralisation resulted in the overlaying of hydrological boundaries over political and administrative ones, with the former straddling over many political and administrative boundaries. Thus, people who were used to reporting to their RDCs were instead made to report water issues to a sub-catchment council, which may or may not be in their district thus forcing people to travel long distances to report water issues.

Further, the small-scale farmer in Nyanyadzi indicated the financial costs that are involved in trying to gain access to the decentralised water institutions. The cost of travel severely limits the participation of communal, small-scale, resettlement and newly resettled farmers in water management and indirectly confining participation to rich stakeholders who can afford the transport costs.

While physical attendance is one aspect of participation, there is a need to move beyond the mere headcount to consider and analyse the actual discussions of water issues at the sub-catchment council. The extent to which the 'new water users' are representing and articulating their interests and livelihood concerns is still debatable. This is largely because the 'new water users' do not have adequate information about the water reform, are not well organized as interest groups, lack the experience in debating and articulating water issues, and are incapacitated by the use of English in the conduct of water issues.

## Conclusion

Although the water reforms sought to improve representation and participation of stakeholders in water manage-

ment, the emerging picture portrays a negation of the key principles of integrated water management. There is a serious lack of knowledge by communal, small-scale, resettlement and newly resettled farmers about the water reforms and their role in the changes to water management. While some of the stakeholders are being 'represented' on sub-catchment councils, their 'elected or selected' representatives have limited knowledge of the water reform process. This severely cripples the articulation of their respective water user group's interests and concerns. The emerging picture indicates that the involvement and participation of new stakeholders largely assume a rubber-stamping function of large-scale commercial farming interests. This is largely true taking cognizance of the large scale commercial farmers' greater technical knowledge derived from a long period of experience of water management, and their overall capacity to attend meetings, and greater coherence in managing at sub-catchment level. This also, in part, defines the final composition of the sub-catchment councils and, in the long term, the major input into wider catchment management processes. Hence, whilst the principle of user access to decision making implies a range of users, in practice both the ability to participate and the use of participation will affect the real participation in active decision making. Currently, this appears to benefit the already established water managers and related commercial users. What can be learnt from Zimbabwe is that there is clear need for greater support to the institutional environment, and the knowledge-based and functional strength of participation in these new institutions.

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*Footnotes*

<sup>1</sup>This is based on the paper, Caught in the Act: New Stakeholders, Decentralisation and Water Management Processes in Zimbabwe. Mtisi, S. and Nicol, A. March 2003, SLSA Research Paper 14.

<sup>2</sup>Interview with Mr. Dhlakama at Gwenzi

<sup>3</sup>Interview with the Acting Chairperson Lower Save Sub-catchment Council, 07/03/2002

<sup>4</sup>Interview with the Outreach Officer, Budzi Sub-Catchment Council 12/3/2002.

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Mr. Mtetwa, a small-scale farmer, Nyanyadzi 30/7/2002.

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