A grass-roots solution for water governance in Kenya

Population growth, changes in land use, and competition over resources have aggravated water scarcity in parts of Kenya over the last three decades. Water Resource Users Associations (WRUAs) have emerged as an effective community-based way of managing scarcity and conflict. To maximize their potential in one Kenyan river basin, ESAPP established a long-term capacity-building programme and a basin-wide platform for collaboration and exchange.

Sustainable development challenge

Water scarcity remains a major challenge in sub-Saharan Africa. Global efforts to address it have mainly focused on hotspots involving transnational basins and high-level institutional management structures. Far less attention has been given to intra-national conflicts over river water. These conflicts and their socio-economic triggers require institutions and approaches that are firmly rooted in local communities. They also require policy support and effective coordination at the regional level. Water Resource Users Associations (WRUAs) have been promoted as a possible grass-roots institutional solution. But they have often faced serious capacity issues and lack of political support, hampering realization of their full potential.

In the Ewaso Ng'iro basin, north-west of Mount Kenya, water scarcity has worsened over the last 30 years due to rapid population increases, land use changes, and competing resource claims. Water conflicts have intensified, including violent confrontations and loss of life, with some groups in the basin forced to go without water during extended dry spells. WRUAs that were formed to help resolve such conflicts often lacked sufficient knowledge, resources, and political support to execute their difficult mandate.

ESAPP's response

Under the banner of sustainable integrated water management and governance, ESAPP sought to promote institutional arrangements fostering multi-stakeholder participation at different levels and different scales.

Kenya's WRUAs were established to enable participatory management and governance of water resources, in addition to resolving water conflicts. Having grown out of reforms in Kenya's water sector, WRUAs faced many capacity-related challenges that limited their effectiveness. To address this, ESAPP supported a WRUA capacity-building initiative with four objectives. Its first aim was to design a long-term training programme based on a WRUA-specific assessment of training and information needs. Second, it sought to consolidate a user-friendly information and documentation resource to guide further operation of the WRUAs. Third, it aimed to facilitate face-to-face meetings between different WRUAs, fostering an exchange of valuable ideas and experiences. Finally, it worked to mobilize upstream and downstream WRUAs towards formation of a basin-wide forum that would support vertical and horizontal integration within the basin.

Main messages

- Growing numbers of Water Resource Users Associations (WRUAs), their success in resolving water conflicts, and their ability to raise funds attest to their strength. They are capable of improving water resource management and governance, especially in rapidly changing environments such as the Ewaso Ng'iro north basin.
- Forming WRUAs at the sub-catchment level is a necessary step towards inclusive management and governance of water resources. But it is not enough. Establishing a basin-wide forum is also crucial in order to foster integration among and between upstream and downstream WRUAs.
- To create an effective capacity building programme for grass-roots institutions, it is best to begin by conducting a participatory assessment of each institution's training needs. WRUAs should be disaggregated and supported according to their stage of development. A long-term commitment is necessary to ensure sustainability.

Motorized water pumps have become widely available, enabling farmers to practise irrigation agriculture and seeing them through dry spells, but also posing a risk of overuse. (Photo: CETRAD photo gallery)

Top and middle: River gauging stations (RGSs) are used to monitor the availability and temporal fluctuation of river water. They provide key information for the enforcement of abstraction regulations and by-laws, and are crucial to any early warning system informing farmers of anticipated water shortages. Most old, manually operated RGSs (top) are currently being replaced with automatic RGSs (middle) for live data transmission and interfacing with the Water Resource Users Associations. (Photos: CETRAD photo gallery)

Bottom: Water is not only used for irrigation agriculture, domestic purposes, and in urban areas; animals also depend on it. Conflicts can erupt when pastoral communities migrate their herds upstream, through farmland, in search of water – or, similarly, when wild animals' search for water leads them to invade farms or destroy crops and property. (Photo: CETRAD photo gallery)

The project story

Water Resource Users Associations (WRUAs) were officially created by the 2002 Kenya Water Act. In the Ewaso Ng'iro river basin, however, WRUAs arose as far back as 1997 in connection with a three-year water awareness campaign led by CETRAD (Centre for Training and Integrated Research in ASAL Development). With the support of ESAPP, WRUAs grew to 13 in number by 2003 and 32 in number by 2007. Today, there are over 80 WRUAs across the basin.

Formed at the sub-catchment level, WRUAs promote participatory governance of water resources and help solve water conflicts in their areas of jurisdiction. From the outset, WRUAs showed great potential and efficiency in tackling an increasing number of conflicts among water users. Out of 52 water-related conflicts recorded between 1997 and 2003, 48 were successfully resolved by WRUAs; only four were referred to the courts. Yet WRUAs also confronted serious capacity constraints, in particular lack of technical, management, policy, and legislative knowledge. This hampered their efforts. In addition, they lacked a platform for knowledge exchange and negotiation between upstream smallholders and downstream pastoralist WRUAs. Crucially, related government institutions also did not have the capacity to backstop the WRUAs.

To address these gaps, a long-term capacity-building initiative was designed by CETRAD in collaboration with Kenya's Water Resource Management Authority (WRMA). Launched in 2008, the initiative targeted specific WRUAs representing different upstream and downstream user groups, as well as technical staff at the WRMA itself. A participatory needs assessment was conducted to ensure targeted, effective training. For this, the WRUAs were grouped by stage of development into three clusters: fledgling, young, or mature. From 2009 to 2014, over 300 management committee members were trained from 30 WRUAs.

An independent WRUA Forum was also founded and given a defined mandate and functions. Several inter-catchment exchange visits and a basin-wide tour were held under the Forum's auspices, bringing people together and alleviating tensions and mistrust between upstream and downstream WRUAs. In one case, upstream smallholders ceased irrigating for two weeks, increasing water supplies to downstream pastoral communities struggling with scarcity.

Further, a comprehensive Water Management Information Platform was developed based on long-term socioecological monitoring in the Upper Ewaso Ng'iro Basin. It served as a useful tool for planning and resource mobilization. The WRUAs have strengthened over the years, their activities expanding to include environmental education and awareness raising, catchment protection, water conservation, and more.

Innovation and relevance

Building on awareness-raising campaigns led by CETRAD, ESAPP successfully designed an innovative, multi-level, multi-stakeholder approach to long-term capacity building in water governance. In so doing, it went well beyond the one-time, two- to three-day workshop-based training approaches common to programmes of this nature in the global South. ESAPP's approach, based on successive cycles of intervention, gradually introduced different activities. These included participatory needs assessment, compilation of targeted training materials, and development of an information platform facilitating strategy development and effective implementation. The platform made it possible to hold legitimate, structured discussions between concerned WRUAs over how to share water and schedule its distribution during periods of scarcity.

The basin-wide WRUA Forum enabled effective institutional integration and coordination of action – a major achievement for a catchment as big as Ewaso Ng'iro (over 200,000 square kilometres). The catchment features high cultural diversity, socio-economic disparities, and spatially varied levels of resource endowment and user arrangements. The forum proved effective at fostering inclusive decision-making and consensus-building during periods of water scarcity and related conflict. It promoted cooperation between communities, represented by WRUAs, whose relations were previously marked by recurrent conflicts. Government policymakers were inspired to replicate the forum in other catchments throughout Kenya. The success of the WRUAs led to a cross-border transfer of knowledge to the Pangani Basin in neighbouring Tanzania.

Nevertheless, while the WRUAs are legitimate and recognized by the state, they are not permitted to enforce agreements. As such, their primary function is to facilitate negotiations and build consensus.

Top: A self-regulating weir in one of the 21 sub-catchments of the Upper Ewaso Ng'iro Basin. The weir is designed to allow abstraction of only the permitted amount of water; the rest of the flow is left for users and the ecosystem downstream. Knowledge of the number of water abstractions and permitted abstraction levels is decisive for steering negotiations and scheduling water abstractions towards an equitable and sustainable use of water resources in the basin. This information is contained in the upper basin's sub-catchment directory, part of the Water Management Information Platform. (Photo: CETRAD photo gallery)

Bottom: Large-scale horticultural enterprises and local farmers alike vie for the use of water for irrigation. Regulating the abstraction of water from rivers is therefore one of the key responsibilities of Water Resource Users Associations. (Photo: CETRAD photo gallery)

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Highlight profile

This highlight is based on the achievements of 8 ESAPP priority action projects.

Implemented during:
1999–2010; in 2011, ESAPP's activities were taken over by the Water and Land Resource Centre (WLRC) project at CETRAD within SDC's Global Water Initiative

Total funds contributed by ESAPP:
CHF 310,000

Implemented by:
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In collaboration with:
Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, Switzerland

Main beneficiaries:
Water user associations in the greater Mount Kenya area

Further reading

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What is ESAPP?

The Eastern and Southern Africa Partnership Programme (ESAPP) is a research implementation programme funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), coordinated by the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) of the University of Bern, Switzerland, and implemented jointly by CDE and a network of partner institutions in Eastern and Southern Africa. Launched in 1999 and completed in 2015, ESAPP implemented over 300 priority action projects in the programme region, which included Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Madagascar.

What are ESAPP Highlights?

ESAPP Highlights are a series of 24 project descriptions providing insights into ESAPP's research and implementation partnerships. Each Highlight describes a succession of demand-driven priority action projects addressing local and regional sustainability issues. The 24 Highlights are collected in a publication that includes additional background information on ESAPP (see citation above). The individual Highlights and the entire publication are also available for download on CDE's website: www.cde.unibe.ch (keyword search: "ESAPP").

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