

Redressing inequities of the past from a historical perspective: The case of the Olifants basin, South Africa[#]

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Abstract

This paper analyses the continuities and changes in water management in the Olifants basin after the first decade of implementation of the National Water Act (1998). By taking a historical perspective of the basin development trajectory, the paper shows how the White minority rulers, who exerted power until 1994, systematically denied historically disadvantaged individuals (HDIs) the right to become significant water users, let alone 'economically viable' water users. In contrast, White water users undertook major water resource development, which, by the 1970s resulted in the emergence of a 'White water economy'. Under the new dispensation (post-1994), the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) took a two-pronged approach in the Olifants basin and elsewhere for redressing the inequities of the past. On the one hand, from the central top down, it opened up the 'White water economy' into a water economy serving especially 'economically viable water users', who rapidly ceased to be White only. As reflected in a range of new measures taken in the Olifants basin, in this new water economy DWAF better targets bulk domestic supplies to HDIs, has more public participation, and is strengthening its regulatory role in terms of cost-recovery, environmental issues, and pollution prevention. On the other hand DWAF seeks to fill the enormous backlog in water services delivery to HDIs, not only for domestic water uses, but increasingly also for productive uses. The major challenge of bottom-up coordinated service delivery for multiple uses through the newly established Provincial and Local Governments and the transforming line agencies is addressed under the recently launched Water for Growth and Development Initiative.

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