

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The hydro-political histories of South Africa's four international river basins – the Orange, Limpopo, Incomati, and Maputo – are complex and fascinating. They show similarities as well as disparities in their development trajectories. Where the hydro-political histories are similar, is where the rivers' development follows the general socio-economic and political progression of South African society.

These international rivers have been developed over time to such a degree that they are now interconnected through a multifaceted system of inter-basin transfers (IBTs). To varying degrees these rivers are now considered to be closed (Orange and Limpopo) or closing (Incomati and Maputo). Not only are the four rivers linked to each other, they are also linked to other national river basins, like the Fish and Sundays Rivers in the Eastern Cape. In fact, the first of these IBTs was the Orange River Project (ORP), one of the largest on the African continent, connecting the Orange with the Fish and Sundays. In January 2003, Phase 1b of the latest inter-basin transfer was completed. This is of the massive Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), which reverses the flow of Orange/Senqu into the Vaal River for use in Rand Water's (RW) supply area and for generating electricity for Lesotho. It is through RW's distribution system that the Orange and Limpopo Rivers are connected.

Thus, the rivers' development has come a long way since the first humans found their way to the southern tip of Africa, about 2 000 years ago. These were the hunters (San) and hunter/gatherers (Khoi-Khoi). The Bantu-speaking peoples who migrated later followed them from central Africa into the south-eastern parts of Southern Africa. This heralded a new era in the history of South Africa, one that differed fundamentally from the pre-historic. During this era, hominoids like *Homo erectus* were the dominant species. It was most probably *Homo erectus* that was responsible for the shaping of the present relatively tree-less Highveld savannah. However, these hominoids are no longer part of the landscape; only their fossil remains can be found at places such as Sterkfontein Caves, suggesting that they are part of the human evolutionary tree.

The San, Khoi-Khoi, and Bantu-speaking people's relatives are still today part of the rich diversity of South African society. Later colonisers of South Africa were the Europeans. They formally settled at the Cape of Good Hope on 6 April 1652, when Jan van Riebeeck established a trading post for the Dutch East India Company's (VOC) ships voyaging to India and beyond. The Europeans imported Roman-Dutch law practices regarding the management of the water resources of the streams flowing from Table Mountain. These practices evolved and were codified into the water laws of modern South Africa. This is not to suggest that the "indigenous" peoples of South Africa had no codification of water resource management practices. It is just that these traditional laws were not codified in writing, but were verbally passed from generation to generation.

The arrival of Europeans heralded the first phase (1652 to 1700) of the colonial frontier. Three other phases would follow. The frontier is defined by Thompson and Lamar (1981a:7-8) not as "a boundary or line, but as a territory or zone of interpretation between two previously distinct societies. Usually, one of the societies is indigenous to the region, or at least has occupied it for many generations; the other is intrusive. The frontier "opens" in a given zone when the first representatives of the intrusive society arrive; it "closes" when a

single political authority has established hegemony over the zone.” During the first phase, there was the amalgamation of a stronghold and bridgehead on Table Bay by Europeans. They gained control of arable land 30 or 40 kilometres inland from there. The second phase was during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During this period many *trekboers* occupied land in the semi-arid and arid hinterland eastward towards the Fish River and northward toward the Orange. The third phase began in 1835, with the advent of the Great Trek, and lasted until about 1869. The final phase of the frontier lasted from 1870 to 1900. During this time, whites controlled the land south of the Limpopo and into Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique.

It was during the final phase of the frontier that the hydraulic mission took off. In its initial phases it was small and was sparked by events like the discovery of minerals – diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1886. This led to the establishment of towns and markets. Agriculturalists started to farm more intensively, as their land area shrank, which necessitated practising irrigation to ensure that the market was supplied and a surplus produced. The government was constantly petitioned by farmers to implement irrigation projects. Thus, strong vested interests were already starting to rear their heads in the South African water sector. The final phase of the frontier ended in 1902, when the Treaty of Vereeniging was signed. This meant that the British had established their dominance over the two Boer Republics of the Orange Free State (OFS) and South African Republic (ZAR).

South African society therefore entered the twentieth century at war. Throughout this century, a number of political and natural events had a dramatic impact on the development of the four international river basins. The first was the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910. This consolidated the four colonies of the Cape Colony, OFS, ZAR, and Natal under British rule. By then the hydraulic mission was already well under way, but was given new energy when the Department of Irrigation was established shortly after the establishment of the Union. This meant that a unified water law had to be codified – the 1912 Irrigation Act.

Nonetheless, irrigation and other water resource development projects would be implemented with seriousness after the great depression and drought of the early 1930s. Lewis, the then Director of the Irrigation Department, previously cautioned against large projects on the Orange and Vaal Rivers. Many large projects, like the Vaal Dam, were implemented on the Orange, Vaal, and the Limpopo Rivers. Many of the works were implemented to create employment among so-called “poor whites”. Although this practice had been implemented nearly fifty years before, it was the first time that a concerted effort of this kind was made. Politics therefore played a major role in the hydraulic mission in South Africa, as it does everywhere in the world.

This became strikingly clear when project after project was implemented in all four river basins for the benefit of a minority white electorate, especially after 1948, when the National Party (NP) came to power. In the Tomlinson Report of 1956, water played a central role in the establishment of Bantu homelands, especially when irrigation projects were set up to supply water to these territories’ agrarian economies. Thus, water was not only an economic resource, but also one with which the government could advance its ideological and political agendas, meaning that water was utilised as an economic and social resource. This was exemplified in the early 1960s, when South Africa embarked upon the construction of the ORP, and P.M.K. Le Roux (then Minister of Water Affairs) said that: “In the history of all

young civilised countries the time arrives when big and imaginative water development projects must be launched to promote growth of areas of development, the formation of industries and the generation of electric power, and to create the means of coping with the future population increase, so as to maintain the rate of progress for the country as a whole. That is the principal aim of the Orange River Project". This was also the case with numerous other water development projects to be implemented before the 1960s onwards.

Even so, between the 1960s and the 1980s, South Africa found itself isolated and ostracised within the world community as a direct consequence of its apartheid policy. The policy had international and national policy dimensions and reactions: the Bantustans, international mandatory and punitive sanctions, the armed struggle of the African National Congress (ANC) and other black resistance organisations, the South African armed forces' fight against communism in Angola, the state's search for security and status, the widening disparities of the haves and have-nots (not only in terms of money but water resources as well), and the implementation of the LHWP.

When the political transformation in South Africa was started on 2 February 1990 by the then President F.W. De Klerk, South Africa was a divided society, both politically and economically. The disparity between rich and poor was stark: nearly 18 million people, most of them rural blacks, had no access to running water or sanitation facilities.

In 1994, the ANC was elected the ruling party, and Nelson Mandela became the country's first democratically elected president. The new government immediately set out to correct the consequences of the past. Through the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) it implemented policies to address the disparity between the racial groups. The rural and urban poor were targeted as the main beneficiaries to receive adequate water and sanitation facilities.

Notwithstanding this, the newly elected government is not without its critics. For instance, criticism was levelled against it, project authorities, the World Bank, and contractors regarding the impact of the LHWP on the environment and people living in the Project area in the Lesotho Highlands. Whereas farmers were lobbying for the implementation of irrigation projects in the arid parts of the country in the nineteenth century, environmental and human rights interest groups were lobbying against the implementation of the LHWP, or at least better compensation for those affected.

History, although highly contentious, has, therefore, a tendency to repeat itself. This study indicates this, and the fact that water is an all-encompassing resource, permeating all spheres of society. Water is not only a life-giver, but also a powerful political tool. It is, therefore, the elixir of all life, and the resource that will sustain future South African generations.