

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background and rationale

The Olifants River ceased flowing in 2005 prompting widespread concern and calls for an integrated focus on all of the easterly-flowing rivers of the lowveld of South Africa (the Luvuvhu, Letaba, Olifants, Sabie-Sand, Crocodile and Komati Rivers). Assertions were that despite the enabling legislative frameworks for water reform and environmental flows in 1998, the integrity of most of these rivers has not improved, or continues to degrade both in terms of quality and quantity. Given that all the rivers form part of transboundary, international systems, the implications were of wider significance than South Africa alone. In response, the Shared Rivers Initiative (SRI), an action-research programme funded through the Water Research Commission was initiated in 2007.

The work reported herein is one component of the SRI and concerns itself with exploring the progress towards meeting the commitment to sustainability of these lowveld rivers as set out in the National Water Act (RSA, 1998). It asks how well we are doing and why. Although the central focus is on healthy, flowing rivers, it is not just about that alone since without equity and stakeholder involvement the former can never be achieved.

South Africa is acclaimed for statutory water reforms and conceptual and methodological sophistication – particularly in the determination of environmental water requirements (EWRs), known in South Africa as the Ecological Reserve (or the Reserve). The Reserve offers a critical benchmark against which to track the progress in meeting the commitment to sustainability. Whilst the methods related to Reserve determination are now well-developed and many Reserves have been undertaken, attention has turned to implementation which is still in its early stages.

Consequently, this component set out to:

- a) examine the status of the Reserve (flows) in terms of progressive realisation (i.e. compliance) and,
- b) explore – together with all major stakeholders – why this might be so.

By understanding the underlying factors that constrain or enable meeting the commitment to the Reserve, a meaningful and tenable supportive programme can be designed (both research and practice focused) for real change.

As noted in the findings below, operationalising the Reserve moves the discourse and practice into a much wider arena than solely that of water conservation and protection. **Achieving EWRs – and indeed the Reserve – does not reside within the environmental domain alone.** It is predicated on water reform and the introduction of Integrated Water Resources Management (or IWRM) as a new and transformative way of managing the nation's water resources. Hence it is the collective contribution and synergies of a number of strategies, plans and practices (as envisaged in the National Water Act and the National Water Resources Strategy) that make up IWRM. It is these factors that are explored in this research.