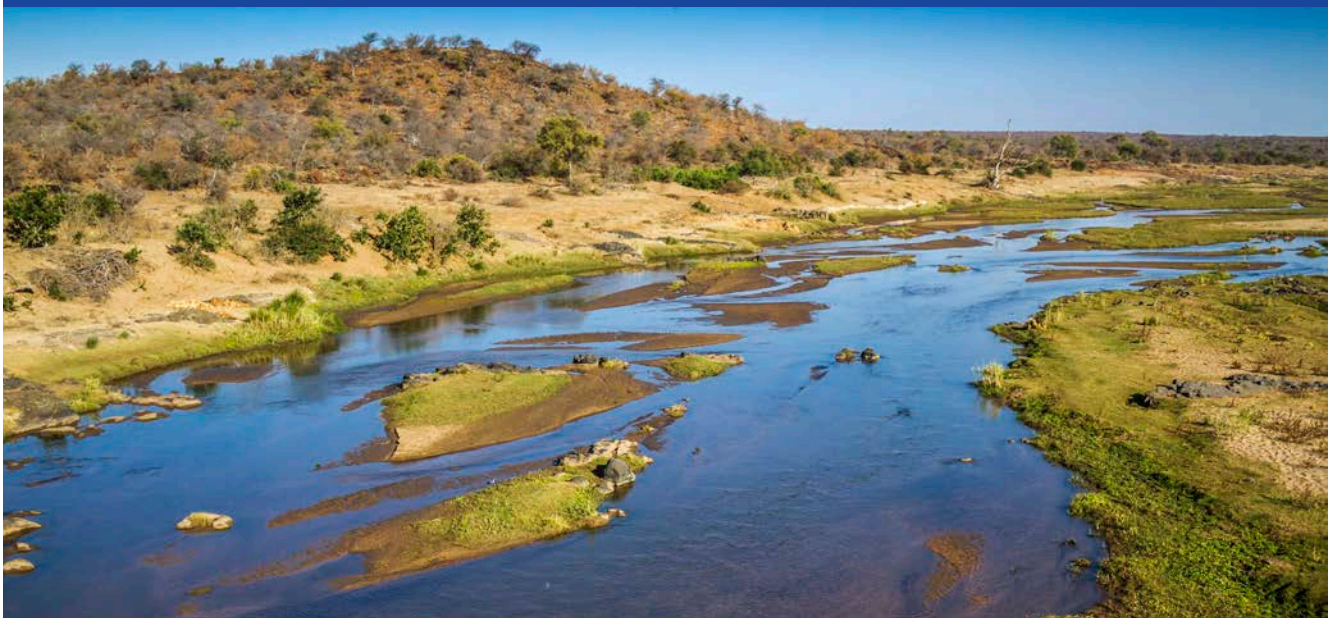
OPINION

Now is the time for us to rally behind South Africa's catchment management agencies

Catchment management agencies (CMAs) were designed to bring decision-making closer to the rivers, communities, and ecosystems they serve, promising more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable water resource management. With all six CMAs finally in place, South Africa stands at a turning point. The question is no longer whether these institutions should exist, but whether they can be supported to succeed. This is according to Dr Roderick Juba, former Senior Knowledge Coordinator at the Water Research Commission.



Chapter 7 of South Africa's National Water Act (NWA, Act No 36 of 1998) provides for the establishment of CMAs with the intention to "***delegate water resource management to the regional or catchment level and to involve local communities, within the framework of the national water resource strategy…***" However, the establishment of these (six) institutions has been slow, leaving a significant vacuum in South Africa's water resource management. As of 2024, all six of the CMAs had been established, but with significant sustainability challenges, as evidenced by the experience gained from the operations of the first two CMAs established more than two decades ago.

Following the establishment of the remaining four CMAs, the country is in a good position to improve the state of its water resources, but it is envisioned that all CMAs will continue to require significant support to effectively perform their mandated functions. South Africa now stands at a pivotal moment in water resource management.

This article argues for patience and strategic support to help CMAs evolve into effective, well-resourced institutions capable of coordinating catchment conservation, curbing resource deterioration, and unlocking global funding opportunities. The next five years are critical, and the sector must rally behind CMAs to give them the best shot at success.

Since the promulgation of the NWA, the establishment of CMAs has been slow and plagued by several hurdles. This prolonged delay in finalising the CMA rollout has held back progress in implementing decentralised water governance and advancing

catchmentbased decision-making as envisioned in the Act, with several impacts on water resource management in South Africa articulated as (Munnik, 2020):

- An inability to manage water allocation in light of droughts, current variability and the challenges of climate change.
- Ineffective water allocation reform, and support to resource-poor farmers and land reform.
- Inability to properly license water use, monitor compliance, and act on non-compliance.
- Inability to protect water resources against pollution from dysfunctional wastewater works, mines, industry, and agriculture.
- Inability to engage the public for awareness, and active participation of stakeholders in water resource management.
- Inability to plan strategically and respond to challenges through adaptive management.

As a result, the continued decline in the state of the water resource has been evident, such that many other interested institutions have increased their contribution to its improvement. Prominent roleplayers include water boards and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). NGOs have generally been at the forefront of securing funding (locally and internationally) for specific catchment-level activities and contributing to the collaboration and coordination efforts of such activities. Water Boards are empowered under section 30 of the Water Services Act to "*...perform an activity other than its primary activity*…" and may include (Section 30-2c) "***providing catchment management services to on or behalf of the responsible authorities***".

Other public institutions, such as the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), are also starting to play a more prominent role in the space through projects focused on water-related ecosystems and their role in enhancing water security. What has been especially positive is the commitment from the City of Cape Town to support catchment management activities through the Greater Cape Town Water Fund, which is managed by The Nature Conservancy. The growing interest from sector partners has resulted in increased investment in catchment-level conservation, with funds that do not necessarily flow through the CMA. Now is the time for improved integration and coordination.

Within these examples lies a collaborative and integrated way forward, anchored by strong institutions. A current study on CMA support networks[1] has already uncovered an extensive network of institutions that are working alongside CMAs. The activities of roleplayers within these networks and the investments already made need to be coordinated at a catchment level to maximise their impact, and this does not necessarily require increased investment. Recent observations from the Breede Olifants water management area (WMA) and the Pongola uMtamvuna WMA suggest that this is as much an issue of coordination as it is about resourcing.

Catchment collaborating platforms have historically been great feedback mechanisms to provide insight into work done by various partners and identify potential priorities. However, these have not always adopted systematic work packages that partners agree to and endeavour to collectively put bulk resources towards. Such a proposed agenda should, ideally, be led by local CMAs as part of such institutional and catchment-based groupings. Thus, while it has been widely accepted that degradation of water-related ecological infrastructure has largely been a result of underinvestment, this is not always the case.

So, what are CMAs established to do?

According to the Act, the initial functions of CMAs are:

- To investigate and advise interested persons on protection, use, development, conservation, management and control of the water resources in its water management area;
- To develop a Catchment Management Strategy;
- To coordinate the related activities of water users and of the water management institutions within its water management area;
- To promote the coordination of its implementation with the implementation of any applicable development plan established in the Water Services Act (Act No. 108 of 1997); and
- To promote community participation in the projection, use, development, conservation, management and control of water resources in its water management area.

The Pricing Strategy for Raw Water Use Charges provides a framework within which raw water tariffs are set to enable CMAs to recover the costs of performing a set of ten water resource management functions within each WMA, as well as through parliamentary appropriation for augmentation. In addition to these sources, CMAs are able to solicit grant funding to increase the amount of resources available to them. However, the latter has historically been under-explored but presents an opportunity for these institutions to increase the resources available to them towards performing their core functions. Through a recently concluded agreement between SANBI and the Breede Olifants CMA (under the Ecological Infrastructure for Water Security project reported on in a special issue of the Water Wheel, https://bit.ly/3RiEXfk), this was recently shown as an intricate but desirable addition to CMA resourcing.

The WRC has been working alongside CMAs to contribute to their continued development towards sustainable and effective organisations. During a CMA-focused discussion at the 2025 AWSISA Africa and Global South Dialogue, stakeholders articulated the following as urgent considerations for improved sustainability of CMAs:

- Shared services across CMAs are essential for improving efficiency, but they must be underpinned by formal agreements between the relevant institutions.
- CMAs need greater visibility to build public trust and reinforce their role as the mandated authorities for Water Resource Management functions.
- Landscape-level partnerships are becoming increasingly valuable, and CMAs should actively strengthen collaboration with other watersector institutions with aligned mandates.
- CMA budgets require additional support, especially in

[1] Synergies Across South Africa's Water Governance Institutions: Strengthening Integrated Management in Water Management Areas; WRC project 2025/2026-01823.

regions with high levels of indigency, to supplement revenue from wateruse charges.

However, while CMAs play a critical role in the initial stages of the water value chain, the challenges experienced and addressed within this space often go unnoticed due to the popular focus on water service delivery. For instance, unabated pollution of waterways does not get the attention it deserves due to the proliferation of water weeds like water hyacinth and water lettuce. Within-sink responses to this problem show short-term improvements in percentage cover of these aquatic weeds but do not address the core problem of nutrients entering the system.

Urban flooding has received great attention over the last few years, with little consideration for the role of upstream ecological and engineered buffer zones. Similarly, the country's response to drought conditions has not been aggressive enough towards the complete eradication of invasive alien plants from waterways and the rehabilitation of riparian zones.

CMAs need to be empowered to respond to these challenges, and this requires an interrogation of the current modes of operation, funding models, and organisational structure to make these institutions fit-for-purpose. Most importantly, it requires time to figure things out. Through a growing Community of Practice, the challenges identified are being addressed urgently, starting with increasing attention to processes like the development of Catchment Management Strategies, and interrogating the implementation of the new Pricing Strategy for Raw Water Use Charges, including the Waste Discharge Charge System.

CMAs will likely experience significant sustainability challenges for at least the next five years because these are not small issues to deal with. However, with the right sectoral support, effective and sustainable water resource management could be achieved through these critical institutions.

References

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