



Water scarcity may stoke conflict in SADC, say scientists

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CAPE TOWN (WCN) The availability of potable water is already a source of some tension among Southern African countries and climate-change models are predicting increasing pressure on this dwindling resource, adding fuel to a mounting pyre of threats to human security.

Interviews with scientists such as the University of the Western Cape's (UWC's) Chairholder and director of the UNESCO Chair in Geohydrology, Professor Yongxin Xu, and hydrologist at OneWorld Sustainable Investments Arthur Chapman reveal that water scarcity is an increasing threat to stability in the SADC region – one for which sustainable solutions need to be reached soon.

One of the reasons for this, said Xu, was that many water resources such as rivers were either shared by different states or, as was the case with some 20 aquifers in the sub-Saharan region, crossed political boundaries.

South Africa, for one, was currently using 98 percent of its water resources according to the World Wide Fund for Nature South Africa (WWF-SA). On the strength of current growth statistics, the country would experience water shortages similar to the electricity blackouts of a year ago by 2025, if not sooner.

Chapman said Mozambique was already piqued with South Africa, believing it was not getting its fair share of water from rivers such as the Limpopo and the Olifants. Discussions at the third annual Global Water Dialogue – held on the 27th and 28th May in Johannesburg and addressing the issue of groundwater this year – alluded to political tensions over water in the region. He said tensions over the life-sustaining resource was also likely to mount in Botswana, Namibia and Angola over conflicting claims to the Okavango River and Delta. Each country relied on this source for various aspects of life and industry – of course, lying at the bottom of the source, geographically, Botswana had every reason to be nervous of plans to build dams upstream.

“Countries are at risk depending on where they are situated in the system. It's a geopolitical issue,” Chapman said.

With surface water sources close to being exhausted, attention is turning to the under-researched area of groundwater. Up until recently, said Xu, the hydrological research had predominantly focused on surface water, with the result that there was a “lack of data, information and knowledge about groundwater and its functioning as an important component in the overall hydrological and environmental system.”

But the danger is that as the resources contained in aquifers are discovered, the risk of conflict could escalate unless states are in accord.

Following the Sixth Ordinary Session of the African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW) held in Brazzaville, Congo, in 2007, Xu wrote in the *Hydrology Journal* (2008) that there was a "strong indication of potential human conflicts" over aquifer systems that cross national boundaries.

The potential for conflict, he said, was as a result of the poorly understood nature of subterranean water systems and nations' unwillingness to cooperate when it came to sharing resources.

The challenges around effectively managing the transboundary aquifers were "exacerbated through the well-known human challenges of equity, justice, power and governance," he wrote. "These are at the heart of the debate on any natural resource and particularly pressing for groundwater because of its hidden nature."

Uncovering this "hidden nature" by increasing our understanding and knowledge of groundwater and the continent's aquifers is key, not only to neutralising potential conflict over the resource, but developing a strategy to prevent its contamination and utilise it effectively.

But already, said Xu, "widespread degradation" of this hidden resource in Africa occurred as a result of pollution by both rural and urban sources. There was also the problem of overuse of some aquifers, while at the same time other groundwater resources remained untapped.

What's more, where groundwater sources were being tapped, it was done predominantly by a large number of small, individual sources that were not controlled by proper planning or sustainable management.

But it is exactly dialogue on these issues that the Southern African Regional Climate Change Programme (RCCP), led by OneWorld Sustainable Investments, hopes to foster, says the company's public services director, John Notoane. Funded by the UK Department for International Development and relying heavily on science across sectors (e.g. water, health, agriculture, economics, among others), this region-wide plan is being rolled out over the next five years. The programme will bring together research across sectors and identify viable funding opportunities for climate change adaptation initiatives.

Notoane says the point is to strengthen the region's capacity to adapt to climate change and to build resilience against climate change threats, including extreme events (such as floods and droughts) and human security threats across the region.

A memorandum of understanding with the SADC for the implementation of the programme was in the offing, he said.

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