



## POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN AFRICA

PEDRO

### *The SADC Water Agenda: Managing or developing regional water resources?*<sup>1</sup>

This paper sets out to better inform stakeholders about why the Southern African Development Community and national level stakeholders operate as they do around the SADC agenda on shared water resources. It concludes with implications for support.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Political traction, member states interests and potential**

The SADC water agenda involves an uneasy compromise between the resource development aspirations of SADC member states and the environmental priorities of development partners. Reflecting the interests and influence of development partners, the formal SADC water agenda historically focused on water conservation, environmental protection and the establishment of transboundary river basin organisations (RBOs). But this agenda found limited traction among SADC member states, who are more interested in the development of water resource infrastructure for irrigation, hydropower, sanitation and water supply.

In recent years, water resource development has become more prominent on the SADC water agenda. This reflects increased recognition by stakeholders that water access issues in the region result from underdevelopment of the region's existing water resources, rather than from physical water scarcity, and the emergence of new opportunities provided by increased investment from China and other emerging powers in African infrastructure development. The SADC water agenda today emphasises the importance of the development and management of water resources in the region to contribute to SADC's sustainable development.

Overall, however, the regional water agenda in Southern Africa represents a series of compromises between SADC member states and development partners, rather than a coherent regional programme. Tension between the environmental concerns of development partners and the developmental concerns of SADC member states has impeded progress on the implementation of the SADC water agenda. Some capacity building and knowledge development has occurred, but relatively little progress has been made on the development of water infrastructure in the region.

One factor constraining the SADC water agenda is the absence of coherent national water resource development plans in SADC member states that could serve as building blocks for regional cooperation. Another challenge has been

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a March 2017 background paper by ECDPM, available at [www.ecdpm.org/pedro/backgroundpapers](http://www.ecdpm.org/pedro/backgroundpapers). The Policy Brief and background paper were prepared under the BMZ-financed project on the *Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations (PEDRO)*. Authors: Sean Woolfrey ([sw@ecdpm.org](mailto:sw@ecdpm.org)) and Mike Muller. Project team leader: Bruce Byiers ([bby@ecdpm.org](mailto:bby@ecdpm.org)).

<sup>2</sup> Other SADC papers deal with industrialisation and energy, trade and transport, and peace and security.

the inability of SADC to facilitate sufficient coordination between national and regional stakeholders across different sectors, including major water using sectors such as energy and agriculture.

While SADC member states generally do not seek to block the SADC water agenda, they see limitations in its current added value. This is because the water resource development and management activities they prioritise are mostly addressed at national or local level, and trying to address these through regional cooperation makes little sense while national and local processes, institutions and infrastructure remain underdeveloped. Furthermore, SADC member states tend to pursue resource development in shared river basins unilaterally or through cooperation with other riparian states in bilateral (or trilateral) arrangements, and not through RBOs or SADC.

Some interests which member states do seek to protect and/or promote through SADC and the region's RBOs include access and navigational rights to transboundary water flows and the right to use and develop transboundary water resources. Yet, in the absence of serious conflicts on these issues, member states do not appear fully sold on the need for comprehensive regional water cooperation. Instead, they seek to shape and implement only those elements of the regional agenda most relevant to their national interests.

SADC member state interests in regional water cooperation also vary by river. Botswana simultaneously has protective and development interests depending on the river, while Mozambique is active as a downstream country on frequently flooding rivers. At least in some cases, interests appear to be influenced by national and local elites and by specific interest groups, such as tourism operators in Botswana, transport operators in Malawi and mining companies in Mozambique.

Given their interests in water resource development, there is little traction among SADC member states for a regional water agenda focused solely on water management and conservation. There is also limited need in the region for joint water infrastructure development and little serious conflict between SADC member states over the impact caused by one state's use of water on its riparian neighbours. Nonetheless, there are areas of the regional water agenda that are likely to bring developmental benefits and which are therefore likely to find traction among SADC member states. There is agreement, for instance that more information is required about the region's water resources, and their use, as well as a desire to invest in improving relevant information systems. There is also agreement on the need for structured approaches to the planning of water resource development and management in order to support broader development objectives.

## Implications for support

### **1. Support to the SADC water agenda should target areas in which SADC (in cooperation with the RBOs) can effectively support national water resource development priorities:**

- There is little traction for a regional approach focused solely on water management and conservation among SADC member states. These countries, instead, tend to prioritise the development of national or local water resource infrastructure.
- A SADC approach to water needs to explicitly link regional water issues to national development concerns, such as energy generation and economic development.
- For SADC member states, it would be useful if regional activities focused on monitoring and information sharing, as such activities could support both water resource management and infrastructure development objectives.
- Support might assist member states to develop national water resource plans to coordinate with neighbours regarding the potential for cooperative development and to avoid conflicts.
- SADC might then be supported to coordinate planning and implementation of national water resource development projects in shared river basins, including to identify and mobilise synergies where these exist.

**2. Facilitating technical interactions between member states would help build relationships and trust, allowing countries to develop a more nuanced understanding of their interdependencies.**

- Despite the absence of serious water-related conflicts in the region, the SADC water agenda can nevertheless play a constructive role in helping to build relationships and trust, while allowing member states to develop a better understanding of their interdependencies.
- Potential roles for SADC include the gathering and sharing of hydrological data, as well as the facilitation of technical interactions between member states, not least to limit the impact of floods and droughts.

**3. Support to regional cooperation on water in SADC should ensure that relevant national structures and stakeholders are better involved in water cooperation activities**

- Since most water development, management and use in Southern Africa occurs at the local and national level, SADC could be encouraged and supported to do more to improve national water resource management capabilities to support the above regional activities.
- Improving the integration of national structures into regional decision-making processes and project implementation (in addition to the RBO's) may help foster practical cooperation between member states and better integrate water sector activities into national development activities.

Behind the formal structures of regional organisations is a messy world of regional power and politics. This messiness is often difficult to capture in the language of development cooperation and institutional development. Working with regional organisations and their programmes therefore implies engaging with complex, multi-level power and interest dynamics.

PEDRO, the Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations, is an ECDPM project that looks at the politics behind regional organisations, and the structural factors, institutions and incentives that ultimately define the way in which countries and different stakeholders engage at a regional level. PEDRO covers 17 African regional organisations and 11 policy areas. For each of these, ECDPM has applied a political economy approach to help understand the dynamics and their effects in different regions and policy areas.

The studies are framed around three key questions: the first relates to the political traction of the regional organisation as this helps assess whether the regional organisation has enabled regional decision making and if it has contributed to implementation. The second focuses on the member state interests in engaging with the regional organisation, especially the more resourceful and powerful ones (the so-called 'swing states'). The third looks at the areas with most traction where regional and national level interests seem to be most aligned for regional outcomes.

The reports aim to present information and insights that can help regional stakeholders navigate the obstacles and better respond to reform opportunities. Rather than providing specific operational recommendations, the political economy approach encourages more reality-based discussions among practitioners and reformers about feasible ways to address regional challenges. It is hoped that this may help tailor the ambitions and approaches of donors and reformers and help identify ways to support national or regional champions or coalitions to take regional cooperation and integration forward.