

Lessons in collaboration to help strengthen SA's water governance

By [Margo Paterson](#) and [John Dini](#)

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Ongoing experiences with load shedding impacting on water provision have once again raised the importance of thinking about how we build resilience into our water supply chains. In January 2023, water utilities across South Africa drew attention to the multiple challenges that high levels of load shedding presented to the provision of reliable water services. The City of Cape Town issued a warning about load shedding causing water supply limitations in higher-lying areas, while the City of Johannesburg urged residents to reduce consumption as its water infrastructure took increased strain.



Image source: Kelly L from [Pexels](#)

These challenges have focused attention on resilience in those parts of the water supply chain that are close to home – the network of municipal reservoirs and pipes that bring water to the end users. But the concept of resilience also applies to how water resources are managed in distant catchments where water is collected, stored and transferred in bulk to areas where it is needed for human use.

Important lessons were learned from Cape Town's severe drought of 2016-18, by examining resilience along the full length of the water supply chain. In the aftermath of the drought, a [study](#) by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlighted how a lack of integrated and coordinated management of the catchments supplying water to the city contributed to the crisis.

Catchment Management Agencies

In light of this, it is encouraging that the Minister of Water and Sanitation is in the process of expanding the jurisdiction of the existing Breede-Gouritz Catchment Management Agency to cover all the catchments that make up the Western Cape's water supply system.

In South Africa, decentralisation of water management to catchment management agencies (CMAs) is seen as fostering greater inclusion of local water actors, enhancing coordination, enabling local learning and adaptation, and improving decision-making on water resource management. Although establishment of CMAs nationwide has been slow, they have been shown to make a difference in areas where they are functional.



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While bringing the management of the water resources in all these Western Cape catchments under one roof will certainly facilitate better integration and coordination, it does not solve the problem entirely. Other organs of state also have functions that overlap with or impact on the management of water resources. This is a prime example of why our Constitution places so much emphasis on the concept of cooperative government – how different parts of government need to work together as an integrated whole across and within national, provincial and local spheres.

Partnership case study

In this instance, there has been much interest in the emerging relationship between the soon-to-be expanded CMA and the Western Cape Government, through its Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning (DEA&DP). This stems from the overlaps and complementarities between the environmental management mandate of provincial government and the water resource management function of the CMA.

A partnership between these two entities, one within the national sphere of government and the other provincial, is serving as a case study to test adaptive and collaborative water management practices. In so doing, a model is being developed to enhance cooperative governance between CMAs and provincial governments that can equally be applied elsewhere in the country.

Since the formalisation of the partnership, this level of collaboration has minimised duplication of efforts, improved management of water quality monitoring and improved relationships between the two institutions. The partnership has provided an opportunity to learn and fill in some of the gaps in how CMAs can embrace cooperative governance to improve water resources management. This is becoming more pertinent in the context of the increasing complexity in managing water resources.



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Guidelines

Practically, these learnings have been used to develop [final.pdf collaborative and adaptive management guidelines for CMAs](#). The guidelines rest on six partnering stages – from building the foundations through to learning and adapting - and

provide insights into how a relationship between a CMA and provincial government could be established and maintained. Understanding each partnering stage helps to strategically guide the use of collaborative and adaptive management practices that are required for effective cooperative governance at catchment level.

Effective partnering, built on collaborative and adaptive practices can address challenges in water resource management and cooperative governance. Effective partnering requires attention to both the structure and the practices, and is about building a culture of willingness, cooperation and trust, while putting in place necessary structures for the effective governance of the water system.

While these guidelines have been developed to support CMAs and provincial government partnerships, based on experience in the Western Cape, the framework and principles could be beneficial to partnerships in other regions, and between other groups, including multiple partners. Building cooperative governance through a partnering framework can overcome the many challenges seen in our water system today, including fragmented water actors and megatrend influences, while increasing resilience in water systems. By actively working together, water institutions are better equipped to navigate complex systems and societal issues.

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Margo Paterson is a Programme Lead at the Western Cape Economic Development Partnership (EDP). John Dini is a research manager at the Water Research Commission (WRC). The partnering guidelines were developed with funding from the WRC in collaboration with the EDP and Stellenbosch University's Centre for Complex Systems in Transition (CST). The guidelines drew on lessons learned through the Breede River Partnership between the Breede-Gouritz Catchment Management Agency and the Western Cape Government, which was designed and implemented with support from the EDP between 2017 and 2020.

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