Public Participation in the Development of a Management Plan for an International River Basin: The Okavango Case

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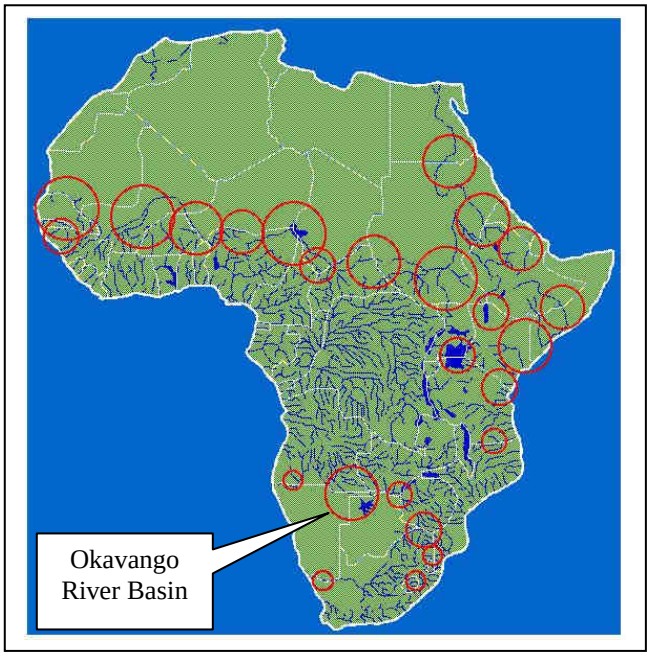
Abstract

The Okavango River basin is strategically important to its riparian states for a variety of reasons. This is particularly true for the two downstream states – Botswana and Namibia – neither of which has any perennial rivers flowing on their soil with the exception of a short reach of the Okavango River. These two countries are among the most economically developed in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, and both face water scarcity constraints to their future economic growth and diversification. The recent ending of the civil war in Angola has opened up prospects for the development of the Okavango River and has provided an impetus to institutional development in the form of the Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM). Central to this has been the drive to develop water policy for the whole river basin, a fact that is made difficult by the seemingly incompatible needs of the three riparian states. Green Cross International (GCI) and the African Water Issues Research Unit (AWIRU) developed a new approach to public participation in which experimental space was created for the commissioners from OKACOM to be sensitized to civil society needs and aspirations while being empowered by scientific know-how from the epistemic community. This paper documents key elements of this process and shows how public participation enabled OKACOM to eventually re-define the area in which they were capable of having a realistic impact.

Introduction

The Okavango River Basin is an endoreic river that rises in Angola, passes through a narrow piece of Namibia called the Caprivi Strip, and ends in the Okavango Delta in Botswana. It is unusual in that it does not drain into the sea, but ends instead in a large inland desert oasis covering an area of 15,844 km^2, where the water is seemingly "lost" to evaporation and the sands of the Kalahari Desert through a wetland system that is a Ramsar site (Ashton & Neal, 2003; Turton *et al.*, 2003a:20). The strategic importance of the river becomes significant when one considers that both the downstream riparians (Namibia and Botswana) have no perennial rivers flowing on their sovereign soil, being mostly located in a semi-desert (see Map 1). The Okavango River and its major tributaries function as a linear oasis in the otherwise relatively arid areas of Botswana and Namibia (Ashton, 2003:167). It is one of the last undeveloped rivers in Africa with great value attached to this condition by ecological special interest groups, most of which are located outside the basin and in many cases, outside the respective riparian states. It is therefore an internationalized river basin with many more stakeholders than a so-called "normal" basin would have, making it a good example of the problems related to policy-making in an 'internationalized' river basin.



Map 1: Perennial Rivers in Africa showing the sparse distribution across Namibia and Botswana (Ashton, 2000:77; Turton *et al.*, 2003a:10). The circles indicate known conflicts over water.

Given the fact that water scarcity is a constraint to the economic growth of four of the most developed states in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region – South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia – a hydropolitical complex is said to exist because the management of water resources in international river basins forms an issue-area of sufficient saliency to influence the patterns of amity and enmity between states (Turton, 2003c). Two of the Okavango River Basin riparians have been defined as being 'pivotal states' in the Southern African hydropolitical complex (Namibia and Botswana), and the Okavango River Basin has been defined as

being an 'impacted basin' (Turton, 2003a; 2003c; Turton *et al.*, 2003a:13; Turton *et al.*, 2003b:28). Water is thus a strategic resource and the management of transboundary systems has the potential for either triggering conflict or cooperation.

This paper documents some of the key processes that occurred during the life-span of this project, particularly with respect to the evolution of a methodology for the development of a management plan of an international river basin through the process of public participation.

Statement of the Problem

The core problem that confronts OKACOM is encapsulated in four key aspects:

- The two downstream riparians (Namibia and Botswana) are amongst the four most economically developed states in the SADC region, and have water scarcity constraints to their future economic growth potential (Turton, 2003a). This raises water resource management to the level of strategic interest and potential 'high politics'.

- There is no consensus between the three riparian states on a common developmental vision and strategy, making sovereignty one of the fundamental stumbling blocks to potential cooperation (*vide* Turton 2002).

- With a highly variable and relatively small stream-flow (maximum - 16,145 x 10^6 m^3; minimum – 5,321 x 106 m3; mean – 9,863 x 106 m3) (Ashton & Neal, 2003:37) the river simply does not carry a large enough volume of water to satisfy all of the needs of the respective riparian states.

- The hydropolitical relations in the basin are characterized by asymmetry, particularly with respect to institutional development and management capacity among the three riparian states. Angola has been ravaged by civil war, which in turn has severely diminished the administrative capability of the state (Porto & Clover, 2003), whereas Namibia and Botswana both have relatively sophisticated administrative capacitates.

Combined, these four core aspects opens up the critical need to change the water resource management paradigm away from water sharing to benefit sharing instead, if conflict is to be averted in the future.

In Search of an Appropriate Methodology for Public Participation

Given the relative uniqueness of the social, historic and hydrological context of the Okavango River Basin, it was deemed necessary to experiment with a new methodology for public participation in the development of a management plan for the entire basin. The African Water Issues Research Unit (AWIRU) teamed up with Green Cross International (GCI) through the Water for Peace program. This in turn was linked with the UNESCO PCCP initiative. The broad objective was to develop a methodology that was acceptable to the commissioners of OKACOM, and thereby to create experimental space in which they felt comfortable enough to engage with civil society and members of the epistemic community (*vide* Haas,

1989; 1992; Haas *et al.*, 1995). Central to this was the recognition that sovereignty is a key issue for states in the developing world, particularly in regions where the colonial experience had been characterized by a liberation struggle (Turton, 2002). This meant that any methodology for public participation needed to be based on certain fundamental principles. In this regard the following core principles were used to guide the development of the methodology:

- In the case of international river basins it is governments (and not NGOs) that make decisions. Governments are therefore key stakeholders in the process of decision-making because it is them, and only them that are accountable to their respective electorates. This recognizes the fundamental principle of sovereignty in international relations involving transboundary rivers (Turton, 2002).

- Governments are neither inherently bad nor inherently good. The presumption is thus made that governments want to make the best possible decisions under the circumstances.

- In the context of the developing world, government capacity is generally low and decisions are invariably made against the background of imperfect knowledge (Turton, 2003b:88; Turton *et al.*, 2003b:71). This has the potential to rapidly escalate tensions in an international river basin when perceptions of threat are couched in terms of strategic interests, such as those arising from water-scarcity limitations to the future economic growth potential of the state.

- This means that decision-making capacity will be improved if government officials are engaged in a neutral manner by exposing them to civil society interests and technical knowledge from the epistemic community.

To meet these objectives, a series of interventions were planned and executed. Each intervention had a clearly defined objective and output. The best way to understand the process is to view it as a series of events, the details of which are laid out as follows:

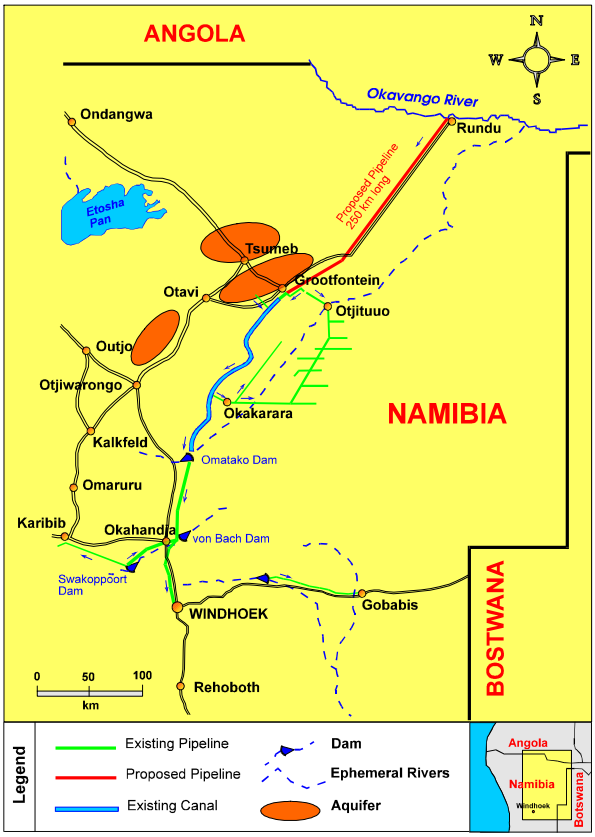
Event No. 1: Southern Okavango Integrated Water Development Project (SOIWDP)

The first relevant event occurred in the 1980's when the Government of Botswana decided to launch what was known as the Southern Okavango Integrated Water Development Project (SOIWDP). The core idea behind this project was to reduce evaporative losses in the Delta by limiting the area of floodplain in an attempt to develop the water resource base as a viable supply to the mining operation at Orapa (Scudder *et al*, 1993; Heyns, 2003). Central to the project was the dredging of the Boro distributary in order to make it deeper and wider, and thereby to reduce the flooding and consequent evaporative losses. This project was vigorously opposed by a number of special interest groups, and resulted in the early internationalization of the Okavango River basin. Central to the opposition of the SOIWDP was the mobilization of scientific knowledge that was used to oppose the Government of Botswana. That scientific knowledge was captured in a book *The IUCN Review of the Southern Okavango Integrated Water Development Project* that was widely distributed by the

IUCN (*vide* Scudder *et al*, 1993). After a vigorous set of interactions between the two main role-players at the time - the Government of Botswana and a cluster of special interest groups under the broad umbrella of the IUCN - the SOIWDP was aborted in 1992 (Scudder *et al.*, 1993:xxxi; Heyns, 2003:17), further preventing environmental damage caused by dredging (Scudder *et al.*, 1993:13). After this event, little happened in the Okavango Basin in terms of development of the water resources, but the foundation of the future hydropolitical dynamics had been laid. Those dynamics were firmly grounded on outside special interest groups, capable of mobilizing significant scientific knowledge and political pressure, with the stated objective of opposing development plans that they felt to be environmentally damaging. In other words, these special interest groups became the custodians of the aquatic ecosystem, but with special emphasis being placed on the Okavango Delta only. Another important consequence of this set of hydropolitical dynamics was the emergence of a degree of suspicion on the side of Government, of the motives and strategies of special interest groups, because the initial hydropolitical configuration had been adversarial in structure. This is particularly relevant in the context of states that had only recently been given independence and who tend to jealously guard their sovereignty.

Event No. 2: Namibian plans to develop a pipeline.

Shortly after attaining its independence in 1990, the Government of Namibia established a number of river basin institutions with co-riparian states (Pinheiro *et al.*, 2003:114; Turton, In Press). This included the establishment of the Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM) in 1994 (Treaty, 1994).



Map 2. The Eastern National Water Carrier in Namibia (Pinheiro *et al.*, 2003:113)

The Government of Namibia announced its intentions to proceed with the pipeline at the first meeting of OKACOM (Pinheiro *et al.*, 2003:115; Heyns, 1999). This formal announcement stated Namibian intention of developing a pipeline from the Okavango River, starting from an abstraction point near Rundu, and feeding water down into the Eastern National Water Carrier (ENWC), ultimately supplying the capital city Windhoek (see Map 2). This pipeline had been planned as part of the strategic water supply system of the country when it was still being administered by South Africa under a United Nations mandate, so the idea of the pipeline was not new. In fact, the construction of the ENWC began in 1969, initially deriving its water from the Cunene River, but with the stated intention of eventually linking into the Okavango River (Turton, In Press:282; Davies *et al.*, 1993:167; Davies & Day, 1998:296-9; Heyns, 1995:10). The need for the pipeline was acute however, because Namibian independence coincided with a significant drought, and water resource scarcity was identified as a limiting factor to the future economic growth potential of the state (Heyns, 2003:18).

Reaction to these plans within OKACOM was vigorous, particularly from the downstream riparian Botswana (Weekly Mail & Guardian, 1996a; 1996b; Electronic Mail & Guardian, 1997; Ramberg, 1997). In an attempt to protect its interests, and presumably having learned from the SOIWDP experience, the Government of Botswana registered the Delta as a Ramsar site (Jansen & Madzwamuse, 2003:143). While no official pronouncements have been made regarding the strategic planning behind this registration, it appears that Botswana was trying to use the status as a protected wetland to strengthen their case against Namibian intentions to develop the pipeline. In this case Botswana had seemingly learned the lessons from the SOIWDP experience, and now wanted to use the force of special interest groups to oppose Namibian plans with as much vigour as they had previously opposed Botswana plans.

One of the results of this set of hydropolitical dynamics was the negative reaction from special interest groups to Namibian plans, specifically regarding the perceived impacts that the pipeline would have on the Okavango Delta (Heyns, 2003:18). This negative reaction is growing stronger with the recently announced plans by NAMPOWER to develop a small hydropower plant at Popa Rapids in the Caprivi Strip. This is now providing two distinct focal points around which international special interest groups can focus their energies, to the probable detriment of Namibian national interest. The Government of Botswana can therefore ease off in their open opposition to the Namibian proposals and leave the special interest groups to do their work for them.

Event No. 3: Namibian Reaction to Botswana's Strategy.

Being confronted by a debilitating drought, Namibia reacted to Botswana's perceived strategy by launching two specific initiatives. The first was the commissioning of a detailed environmental impact assessment (EIA). This was conducted by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), which is an internationally recognized institution with a high level of credibility and integrity. This study found that while there would be an environmental impact, currently available scientific tools were incapable of measuring the area that the Delta would be reduced by (CSIR, 1997a; 1997b). In addition to this, the impact could be significantly reduced if the water abstraction took place on the receding portion of the hydrograph. Significantly

however, the study found that two crucial components of the ecological functioning of the Delta were flooding (known technically as the Flood Pulse Concept (Davies *et al.*, 1993:10 & 94; Junk *et al.*, 1989; Puckridge *et al.*, 1993; Turton, 1999; McCarthy *et al.*, 2000)) and sediment transportation.

The second was the registration of a plan with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Water Sector Coordinating Unit (WSCU) that is designed to determine the feasibility of transferring water from the Congo River basin into the Okavango and Zambezi River basins (Heyns, 2002:164). The core argument that underlies this proposed development is that if Botswana objects to the reduced volume caused by abstracting water *via* the proposed pipeline, then that volume will be augmented from the Congo River and used by Namibia as the strategic need dictates. In other words, if Namibia puts a given volume of water into the Okavango River from another basin and then abstracts that same volume further downstream, then the nett flows into the Delta will remain unchanged (at least in theory, but certainly not in practice given the ecological ramifications related to this practice – in this regard Namibia is opening itself to a third focal point for the mobilization of special interest groups). This has not been officially stated in any document, but this logic is central to any understanding of the hydropolitical dynamics of the Okavango River basin.

At this stage of the hydropolitical history of the Okavango River basin, the dynamic interaction of the two downstream riparian states was based on the core issue of sharing water, and the prevailing trend was clearly towards conflict because there is relatively little water to be shared in the first place, and any upstream abstractions would impact negatively on the Delta downstream. This situation will be exacerbated when Angola starts to abstract large volumes of water for post-war reconstruction. As this will impact severely on both downstream riparians, this fact alone acts as a potential catalyst for cooperation and may end the prevailing adversarial relationship between Namibia and Botswana.

Event No. 4: Green Cross International (GCI) Water for Peace Intervention.

With the hydropolitical dynamics in the Okavango River basin clearly on a trajectory towards conflict, but with the possibility of cooperation arising in the form of the narrow window of opportunity that has been created by the outbreak of peace in Angola. Green Cross International (GCI) decided to focus a component of their Water for Peace program on the basin. After contracting the African Water Issues Research Unit (AWIRU) at the University of Pretoria to manage the project, some detailed planning was done. This planning was based on the core concepts noted at the start of this paper, the most important being the clear recognition that it is government and only government that make binding decisions in international river basins.

The GCI/AWIRU initiative launched a series of workshops in the Okavango River Basin with the objective of (a) isolating the key drivers of the hydropolitical processes in order to make them understandable to all interested and affected parties; (b) engaging OKACOM commissioners in this process; while (c) creating experimental space in which the prevailing paradigm of water sharing could be interrogated to the extent that it could be shifted to a new paradigm of benefit sharing instead.

Photo 1. Participants at the Green Cross International Water for Peace Workshop in Maun. The OKACOM commissioners are sitting with Sir Ketumile Masire, the former Botswana President, in the centre.

The first workshop was held in Maun, Botswana, and was attended by OKACOM Commissioners from all three riparian states. The scene was set by initially taking all participants out onto the Okavango Delta in local Makhoro's (dugout boats), which provided all participants in the workshop with some insights into the complexity of the ecosystem within the Okavango Delta. This proved to be a valuable element in the process, because the Angolan Commissioner had never been to the Delta before and thus had no real knowledge of the significance of the aquatic ecosystem as a provider of ecosystem services other than merely a water resource. In addition to this, the best available scientists were invited to present papers on carefully selected topics. A core component of the strategy was to invite the three riparian states to present position papers in order to lay the foundation to the understanding of the needs and expectations of the three riparian states. The OKACOM commissioners declined the offer to present individual papers, and chose instead to present a joint paper. This was seen as an encouraging sign by GCI and AWIRU. The facilitator of the process at that time (Anthony Turton) had arranged with the BBC to send a TV cameraman to the workshop. An agreement had been reached with the BBC cameraman that he would not harass any of the Commissioners, and he would not try to trick them into making statements. This agreement was presented to the Commissioners who were informed that they were under no obligation to speak with the BBC cameraman, but if they wished to do so, then the opportunity existed for them to say whatever they wished to communicate to the world at large. The cameraman also spent his time shooting a documentary, into which OKACOM statements could be inserted as appropriate.

There were four specific outputs of this workshop:

- OKACOM presented a joint paper on their vision for the management of the entire basin in the future. This was significant because it represented a shift in focus away from the Okavango Delta region to the whole river basin. It was

also the first meeting of OKACOM Commissioners outside of their regular rotation of official engagements.

- All three riparian states used the opportunity provided by the presence of the BBC cameraman. Each made a statement, independent of the others, and in most cases with no knowledge of what the others had said. Each of these statements was overwhelmingly positive in its orientation, with a strong commitment to using water for peace. Significantly, the Botswana Commissioner recognized Angola's right to use the water in post-conflict reconstruction projects. In similar fashion, the Namibian Commissioner acknowledged Botswana's concerns about the impact of their proposed pipeline, and stated categorically that Namibia was committed to the peaceful resolution of the problem. The Angolan Commissioner stated that his Government recognized downstream concerns and that they wanted to use water as a catalyst for peace, because for too long they had been living with the bitterness of war. This was flighted by the BBC World Service as part of their coverage of the build-up to the Third World Water Forum. As such the message reached an estimated audience of around 500 million people.

- A set of high quality scientific papers was generated. These were brought together into the proceedings and made available to all participants. In essence these papers represented a summary of the best available scientific knowledge of the complexities associated with the Okavango River basin.

- The First Generation Strategic Report on the Okavango River Basin was developed in the form of a high quality scientific paper by Prof. Peter Ashton and Marian Neal, which summarized the strategic problems into one diagram that was easily understandable to all interested and affected parties.

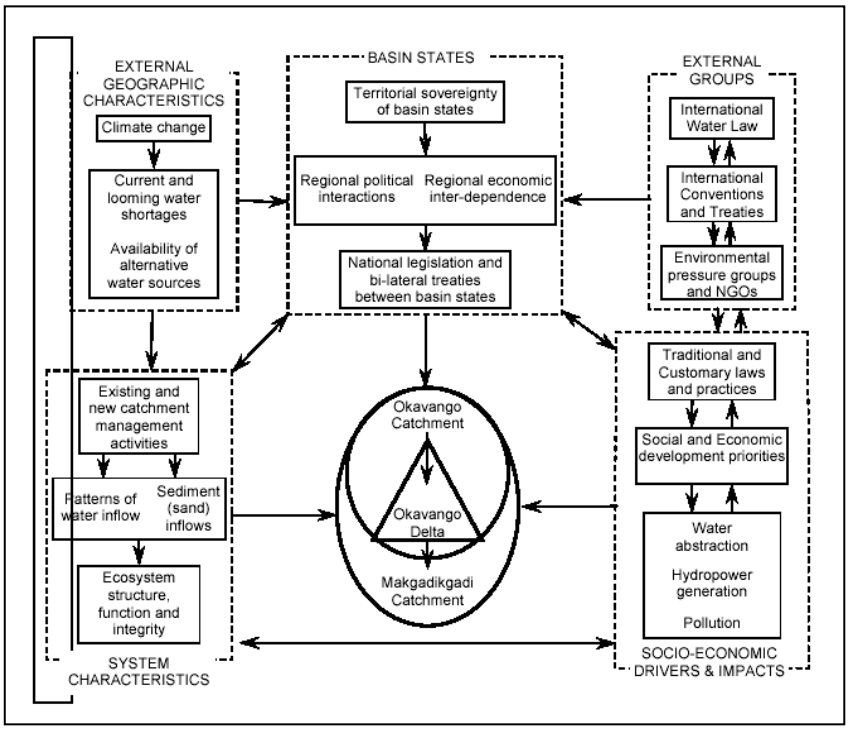


Figure 1. Graphic Representation of the First Generation Strategic Report on the Okavango River Basin (Ashton & Neal, 2003:58).

Armed with the First Generation Strategic Report, and encouraged by the support that the OKACOM Commissioners had given to the Green Cross International Water for Peace Project, AWIRU took all of the material available and developed what was officially called *An Assessment of the Hydropolitical Dynamics of the Okavango River Basin*. For the purposes of this paper it can be called the Second Generation Strategic Report on the Okavango River Basin. This synthesised all available knowledge on the Okavango River basin and became an input into the second workshop, which was held at the Gobabeb site of the Desert Research Foundation of Namibia (DRFN). Present at that meeting were seconded representatives of OKACOM from all three riparian states. There was also a strong NGO presence. Included at this time were scientists from the Water Ecosystems Resources in Regional Development (WERRD) project (see http://www.okavangochallenge.com/okaweb/). The intention of GCI and AWIRU was to streamline the Second Generation Report and make it less technical and more user-friendly. In order to achieve this objective, the professional services of Dr. Barbara Heinzen were engaged. She is a highly respected facilitator with skills in the field of strategic scenario planning, and her brief was to use the material provided to start developing a set of scenarios that all interested and affected parties could relate to.

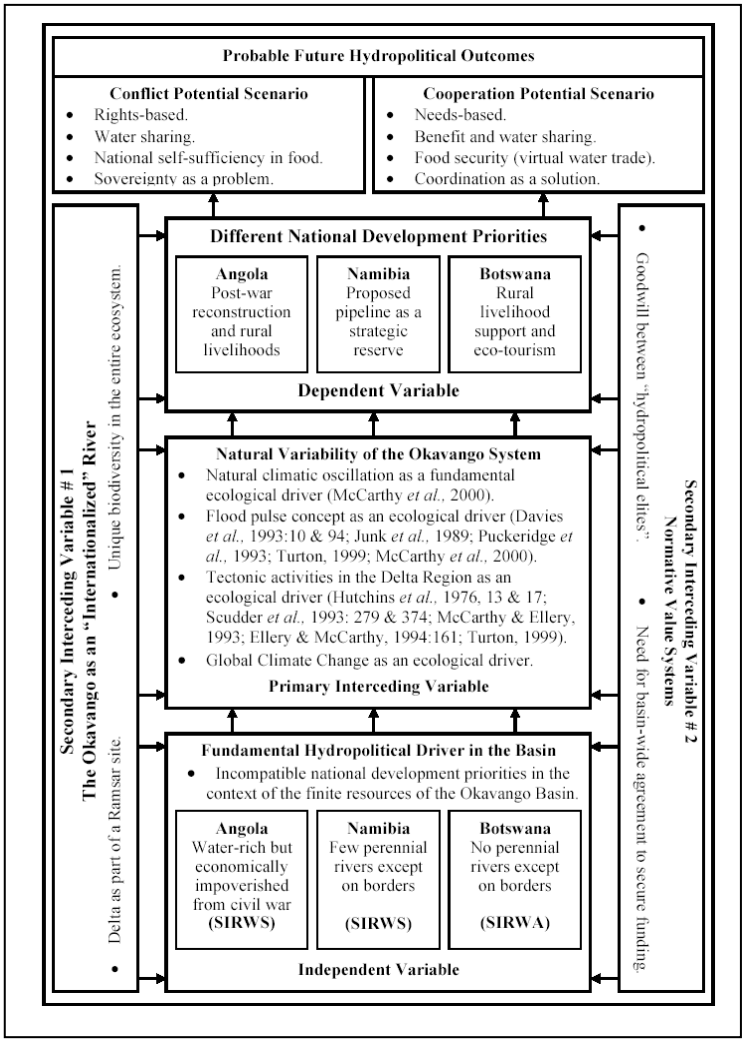


Figure 2. Graphic Representation of the Second Generation Strategic Report on the Okavango River Basin (Turton *et al.*, 2003c:361).

Dr. Heinzen broke the participants into four groups, with an OKACOM Commissioner in each group. Each group also contained scientists and NGO representatives. Over a period of two days the task of these four groups was to develop a consensus document that could be encapsulated in one graphic image, using all available scientific knowledge, but specifically based on the Second Generation Strategic Report on the Okavango River Basin. The output of this process can be called the Third Generation Strategic Report on the Okavango River Basin and is presented in Figure 3. This was taken to the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto and presented in an appropriate forum there. The honour associated with having the Okavango River Basin case presented at such a prestigious global event acted as somewhat of a stimulant to the participants, because they felt that they were being given a voice.

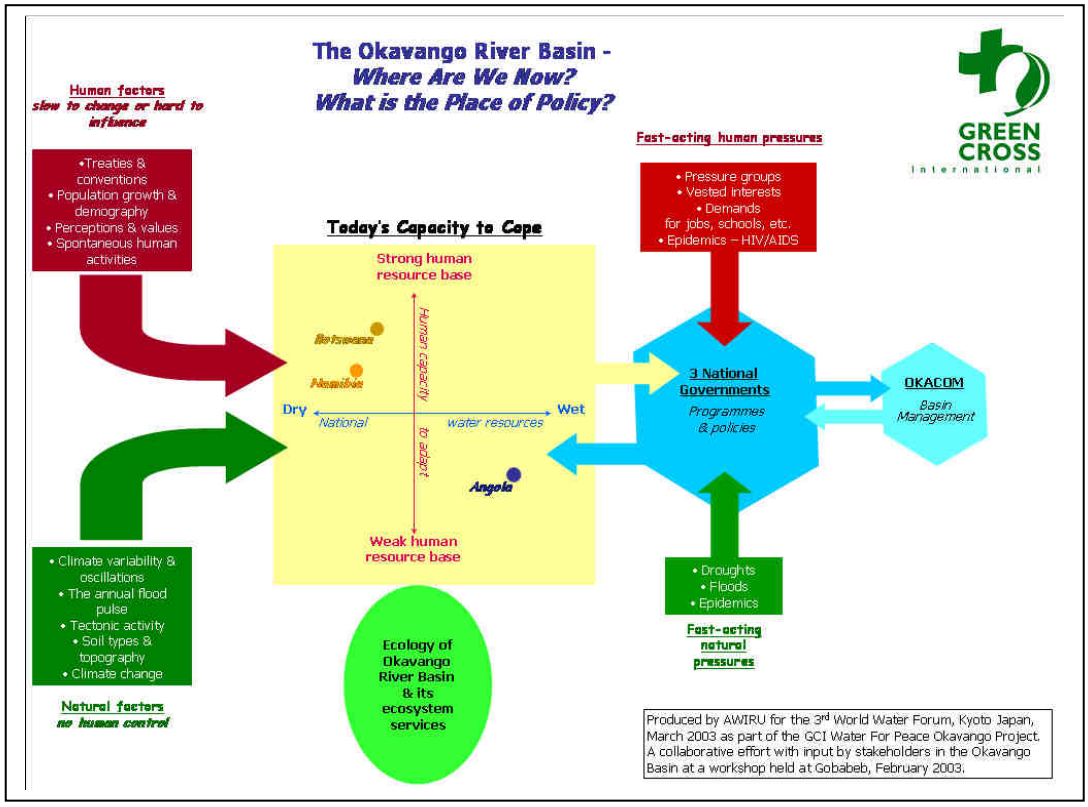


Figure 3. Graphic Representation of the Third Generation Strategic Report on the Okavango River Basin that was presented at the Third World Water Forum in Japan.

What the Third Generation Strategic Report on the Okavango River Basin contained in one powerful graphic image were the following core issues:

- There were human forces (shown in red) and natural forces (shown in green) at work at various points within the overall river basin.

- These two categories of force could be divided into slow acting forces over which no human control was possible (shown on the left of the graphic), and fast acting forces over which some degree of human control was imaginable (shown on the right of the graphic).

- These forces were acting upon the different riparian states in different ways, having been mediated through what was described as "today's capacity to cope". This second-order resource focus (the adaptive capacity of society) was different for each riparian, with Angola having a lot of water resources but with a weak human resource base; and Botswana and Namibia having relatively few water resources, but with a stronger human resource base (Turton & Warner, 2002).

- Today's capacity to cope was "balanced" on the ecological goods and services that could be derived from the Okavango River Basin. This balance is dynamic in nature and can change rapidly in a non-linear way in response to the human and natural factors at work.

- All of these combined impact in a dynamic way on the national government's programmes and policies.

- Significantly, OKACOM as an organ that has been created by all three riparian states, can only impact on a very limited set of issues.

The GCI/AWIRU intervention thus succeeded in achieving the following specific objectives:

- It generated a high degree of credibility with OKACOM.

- It showed OKACOM that all interactions with special interest groups need not necessarily be bad or painful.

- That the epistemic community is indeed capable of providing the level of scientific knowledge needed, in the format that is the most readily digestible, in a way that can cause a fundamental rethinking of the core problem being managed.

- That water sharing is probably not sustainable and is likely to lead to conflict, whereas benefit sharing is viable and will probably lead to cooperation instead.

- In order for benefits to be shared in a way that is fair and equitable, solutions need to be sourced at a high level of strategic thinking and planning. This implies that Strategic Environment Assessment (SEA) skills are an essential element of future management at the basin level.

Event No. 5: Universities Partnership for Transboundary Waters (UPTW).

Taking the outputs of the Green Cross International Water for Peace Project as a foundation of cumulative scientific knowledge in water resource management, the Universities Partnership for Transboundary Waters (UPTW) (http://waterpartners.geo.orst.edu/) hosted a workshop at Oregon State University from 14-16 April 2003. Under the official title of "Dialogue on Sub-national Stakeholder Participation in International River Basin Environmental Initiatives – Models, Successes and Failures", the initiative brought together managers from the

Okavango, the Lempa and the San Juan River Basins, with AWIRU as a co-facilitator. This event was funded by the Carnegie Corporation through the Pacific Institute. It enabled the experience gained in the GCI/AWIRU process to be presented to other river basin Commissioners from Central America. Emerging from the resultant dialogue were three clear issues relevant to the Okavango. (a) OKACOM is being hampered because of the absence of a permanent secretariat. (b) Interaction with donors is problematic for a variety of reasons. (c) It is difficult to coordinate the needs of the riparian states with the needs and interests of the donor agencies. Significantly, the UPTW/AWIRU initiative succeeded in providing a firm deliverable to OKACOM, who felt that their problems were starting to be aired in a way that could realistically lead to their resolution.

Event No. 6: National Heritage Institute Sharing Waters Project.

In similar vein to the UPTW case, the National Heritage Institute Sharing Waters: Towards a Transboundary Consensus on the Management of the Okavango River Project is currently ongoing. Involving a consortium of partners including the IUCN Regional Office for Southern Africa (ROSA), and funded by USAID, this will accomplish a range of objectives. One of these is to take the goodwill generated by earlier work and translate that into capacity building within the basin in a sustainable way.

Event No. 7: Woodrow Wilson Centre Project.

The Woodrow Wilson Centre for International Scholars in Washington D.C. is running a project called Environmental Change and Security (http://ecsp.si.edu). One element of that project is the Water Working Group. AWIRU has facilitated cooperation with OKACOM and has brought together the Woodrow Wilson Centre Water Working Group and GCI in what is officially entitled the "Okavango Focus Meeting". This will be held in the Delta from 23 – 25 October, 2003. It will be used to consolidate the position of the Third Generation Strategic Report on the Okavango River Basin and hopefully take that to a new level of sophistication.

Event No. 8: Water Ecosystems Resources in Regional Development Project.

Since the Gobabeb Workshop in which the Second Generation Strategic Report was developed into the Third Generation document, WERRD has shown an interest in the GCI/AWIRU initiative. One of the tangible elements of this has been a slight shift in focus for the WERRD project to include scenarios about future resource use in the Okavango River Basin. As there is no solid output from this process yet, nothing else can be reported at this time. The reader is urged to see http://www.okavangochallenge.com/okaweb/ for further details as the project evolves.

Conclusion

The Green Cross International Water for Peace Project has shown that public participation can become a meaningful part of river basin management in the international sphere. More importantly, the GCI/AWIRU intervention has shown that trust is a vital element in the relationship between government and the epistemic community. The hydropolitical history of the Okavango River Basin has a period in

which a highly adversarial relationship existed between special interest groups and government. This is ongoing and has had a strong impact that has tended to make government suspicious of the motives of special interest groups. A major achievement of the GCI/AWIRU initiative has been the change in paradigm away from sharing water to sharing benefits instead. This is deeply encouraging and is relevant to a number of international river basins that are characterised by a high level of contestation and a low level of resource availability, such as the Nile, Orange, Limpopo, Incomati and Maputo, to name but a few. In fact, it is relevant to all of the river basins that Wolf *et al.,* (2003) have defined as being "at risk". The change in focus, away from broad aspirations, to a more clearly defined set of realistic feasibilities instead, is a characteristic of sustainable river basin management, in the sense that it represents a shift away from what should be done, to what can be done. The project also represents the expansion of the management focus, away from simply a Delta Management Plan, to a plan that encompasses the entire river basin and beyond, as the sharing of benefits is sourced from outside. The support of third party actors as honest brokers is also highly relevant. The key impact that the GCI/AWIRU initiative has had, can be measured in the significant changes between the First, Second and Third Generation Strategic Reports on the Okavango River Basin. Each evolution has become increasingly nuanced, and has been accompanied by a higher level of legitimacy for the core elements than was evident in the efforts of the scientific community alone. This shows that legitimacy is a quality that is given to the basin management plan by key role players such as government, *via* a process of engagement in which the epistemic community is brought to bear in a manner that is non-threatening.

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