

Improving the governance of the Stampriet Transboundary Aquifer System

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The Stampriet Transboundary Aquifer System is the only permanent and dependable water resource in an area that covers 87,000 sq. km from Central Namibia into Western Botswana and South Africa's Northern Cape Province. Understanding and managing this precious groundwater resource sustainably is essential to achieving water security in the area, and thus, improving the quality of life of neighbouring communities. With this in mind, the governments of Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, jointly with the UNESCO's International Hydrological Programme (UNESCO-IHP), undertook an in-depth multi-disciplinary assessment of the system. High level representatives of the three countries gathered at UNESCO Headquarters earlier this month to discuss findings and plan towards the establishment of a multi-country cooperation mechanism to manage the Stampriet Transboundary Aquifer System sustainably. Once established, it would be the first institutionalized transboundary aquifer cooperation mechanism in Southern Africa.

The assessment was carried out based on a multi-disciplinary methodology developed by UNESCO covering hydrogeology, socio-economic, environmental, legal and institutional aspects. It was carried out within the framework of the "Governance of Groundwater Resources in Transboundary Aquifers" (GGRETA) project, funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). An Information Management System was developed during this first phase of the project, as well as a joint database to support governance. In total, more than 60 thematic maps were prepared and are accessible through the Information Management System, and knowledge gaps were identified. Two conceptual models were developed to facilitate transboundary cooperation for the management and governance of the Stampriet Transboundary Aquifer System (STAS). Building on the results of the assessment, the three countries have launched discussions to develop concrete policies and strategies geared towards cooperative management and governance of the STAS. The meeting, which took place on 2-3 November 2016 at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, allowed the participants to report on the progress made and launch the next phase. During this second phase of the project, the knowledge gaps identified previously will be filled through capacity building modules on groundwater monitoring, groundwater governance, gender and hydro-diplomacy. These modules will also support the process for the establishment of the cooperation mechanism. Participants highlighted that, since freshwater availability is perhaps the biggest challenge facing the African continent today, therefore cooperation on shared water resources is essential to peace building and supporting economic and social development.

In response to this need, and to the UN General Assembly's resolution (UNGA Resolution 63/124 of 11 December 2008) encouraging UNESCO-IHP to provide scientific and technical support to States sharing transboundary aquifers, the International Hydrological Programme has inventoried almost 600 transboundary aquifers shared by two or more countries, 72 of which are in Africa, and is fostering cooperation on transboundary groundwater. This meeting is an important milestone towards this goal.

Photo:

Flood warning sign along a gravel road, Namibia, ingehogenbiji /Shutterstock.com

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