

## **Abstract**

Inequality of access to water resources marks South Africa's history even more profoundly than inequality of access to land. Redistribution of rights to water to redress the results of past discrimination is an explicit purpose of the National Water Act of 1998 (NWA). In other respects the NWA is consistent with 'best practice' embodied in the 1992 Dublin principles. Under the NWA, water management is devolved to 17 Catchment Management Agencies (CMA), each with a governing board that is representative of the water users within the catchment. This paper traces the development and current status of the Inkomati CMA, the first to be approved (in 2004) by the South African government. In the Inkomati catchment water use is dominated by established commercial agriculture and forestry, by important environmental interests, including the Kruger National Park, and by the demands for improved access to water from a black population of around 1.5 million living in ex-bantustan areas. The paper reflects on the experience of the Inkomati CMA and considers the insights it provides, both on universal 'best practice' principles and also on the role of water management as an arena of political struggle, compromise and experimentation in South Africa.

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