

Interactive comment on “Why a regional approach to postgraduate water education makes sense – the WaterNet experience in Southern Africa” by L. Jonker et al.

Anonymous Referee #3

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General comments: This paper reports an interesting water regional network experience in Southern Africa and the academic outcomes from the first eight years of their also regional postgraduate programme on integrated water management. However, I am not quite sure the article addresses relevant scientific questions within the scope of HESS.

I should admit I was thrilled to read a paper about regional capacity-building on water management because I consider the bi-nome knowledge-agency to be important and I truly believe that the regional scale can provide a productive platform for proactive initia-

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tives particularly coming from water policy networks. However, I am certainly surprised that this discussion is addressed in a geoscience journal such HESS. Even when the aims of this journal includes a line about the “. . . holistic understanding towards sustainable management of water resources”, it is actually uncommon to find related papers in previous issues. Therefore, I lack references to contend that the topic of this article fits within the scope of HESS (I would rather expect to find this type of literature in other regional analysis journals). Nevertheless, I truly applaud the initiative to broaden the hydrological-earth-system-science discussions to include socio-regional analysis.

About contribution facts (novel concepts, ideas, conclusions reached):

There are no research questions and no new concepts introduced, therefore, we basically find a descriptive paper which only seems to justify and promote the existence of the WaterNet South African partnership and their master degree programme in Integrated Water Resources Management. Data is provided but only concerning the outcomes of this master. Even though the article builds on previous discussions on curriculum development and the initial reflections of the cited collaborative master degree programme, it is missing a critical analysis, questions and challenges about these initiatives.

The authors state three main objectives: First, they argue that “it makes good sense to organize postgraduate education and research on water resources on a regional scale”, on the basis that water has a transboundary dimension that poses “delicate sharing questions”. It is a fact that water crosses borders, but that is a well-known fact understood by water experts. What it is important here, and unfortunately not developed in the paper, are the related sharing questions that the authors do not describe. I wish to know what kind of questions would the future water specialists with regional approach will face. For example: What is the regional urgency? Water access for all the regional population? Water distribution schemes? Water pricing? Water quality issues? Does the SADC implement regional water planning like the European Water Framework Directive in Europe? Do the WaterNet partners truly agree with regional

water sharing? Does the partnership have/lack trust in information sharing about water quality and volumes? Certainly delicate but timely important questions if we aim to develop a regional water management scope.

The second objective is the introduction of the WaterNet experience as a positive example of proactive/productive regional approach. Authors focus on the current institutional partnership framework, but there is not much information about what the need behind the creation of WaterNet is, or what are the previous efforts in the same field such as the Southern African Water Information Network (SAWINET). Readers like me would enjoy further information on the historical patterns of management, distribution, and access to water in this region. What are the current water challenges in South Africa? Which percentage of the water supply in the partner countries is covered? Are people aware and informed of related water challenges? Are there social participation schemes on water management? Why develop a regional network on water? I suggest that the text should include a brief discussion of the South African concerns that led into the need to conform WaterNet.

Thirdly, it draws three generalised lessons from the WaterNet experience concerning 1) the legitimacy of the ownership structure and “clear mandate” to encourage future cooperation, 2) the regional water Transboundary scope, and 3) the recognition of important funding behind WaterNet’s operationality. Authors may fill their expectations, but the conclusions read a bit arid as there is no sufficient justification about the socio-political and economic context behind the three WaterNet lessons. I said above, I wish to read more about the South African water problems, complexity, and Transboundary ‘delicate’ questions. Specific comment: I can suggest the following reference to address this issue: the work from Jaqueline Ann Goldin, “Water Policy in South Africa: Trust and Knowledge as Obstacles to Reform”, published at Review of Radical Political Economics June 2010 vol. 42 no. 2 195-212. This article is important not only because Dr. Goldin has a relevant regional role as SADC-WaterNet Chair for Water and Society at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, but particularly be-

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cause it addresses a critical historical legacy of water in South Africa, draws scenario of the multi-stake holders participation in water management, and talks about important “. . .constraints determined by racial, economic, or social structures that retain and reproduce dominant power relations”, of course in water management.

About scientific methods, clarity and grounded results:

There are no scientific methods because the text does not aim to prove any scientific assumption. The overall text is well structure according to author’s preliminary statements and it reads clearly and direct, but more in the style of an executive report than a scientific article.

However, it is fair to say that the authors achieve their stated objectives. After reading the whole piece plus annexes, and besides the lack of socio-political elements in the text, I am pretty convinced that WaterNet and their graduate programme constitute a useful contribution towards the development of local resource management capabilities in South Africa. In my opinion, the involved states are making a big step forward for regional cooperation (among countries and institutions), opening up the creation/development of water policy networks and addressing issues of knowledge transfer, capacity building and agency. It is an important bet and vanguard effort, the straightforward business of supporting local water technicians to study further in their practical disciplines in regional universities. I look forward to read further outcomes of this interesting initiative.

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