



Interview with **Lenka Thamae**, Executive Secretary of ORASECOM on the Lesotho-Botswana Water Transfer scheme

Lenka Thamae is Executive Secretary of the Orange-Senqu River Commission (ORASECOM). In an interview in Stockholm during World Water Week 2019 Lenka spoke about the Lesotho-Botswana Water Transfer (LBWT) scheme – a new initiative that plans to supply water to Botswana, Lesotho and South Africa from the Makhaleng Dam. The scheme targets increased climate resilience, secure water supplies, electricity generation and the expansion of irrigated land.

Q: Tell us about ORASECOM. Where is the organisation based and what work do you do?

A: ORASECOM was established in 2000 and is based in South Africa. The bulk of our work is advising the four states that share the Orange-Senqu river basin – Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and South Africa – and encouraging them to work together to manage their shared water resources. To support this process we conduct and facilitate joint studies on water flows and water quality – to inform the development of integrated water resource management plans.

Q: One of the projects that ORASECOM is developing is the 'Lesotho-Botswana Water Transfer' scheme. What does the project involve and why is it so important?

A: The LBWT scheme plans to install a dam in Lesotho. Initially, the dam will supply water to two towns in Lesotho, but subsequently, after a route has been established in South Africa, further locations in South Africa and Botswana will also benefit. Feasibility studies have already been conducted at two possible locations.

Q: How and why was ORASECOM given the mandate to facilitate the LBWT project?

A: We advise states on how they can jointly manage their water resources and development planning, and are therefore uniquely placed to help the countries involved work together and refine their approaches. Through the studies we conduct, and the expertise we can leverage, ORASECOM can help to ensure the LBWT project is feasible.

Q: What makes the project different to other projects in the Orange-Senqu river basin and how have you adapted the approach to accommodate the involvement of four different countries?

A: The project is significantly more ambitious: it will supply water over a distance of 700 kilometres (km), incur costs of approximately \$2 billion and work across several populations and languages. From the beginning we attempted to build consensus among all participating countries on the approach needed. They have all been involved in the feasibility studies, environmental assessments and technical discussions.

Q: What stage of development is the project at?

A: Pre-feasibility studies have been completed and final reports are due in August 2019. We can then move forward to conduct feasibility studies which we anticipate will be finalised by the end of 2020 or early 2021.

Q: I understand you have already started engaging potential funders. What do you discuss with them, and why are you speaking to them at such an early phase?

A: Fundraising is a key part of the feasibility and pre-feasibility studies – given that the countries involved may find it difficult to raise the necessary funds. We have explained to donors that we know the basin well, are committed to addressing the challenges it faces, and with their support can conduct in-depth studies that are critical to the initiative's long-term sustainability and success.



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Q: There are often challenges deciding who gets water, when the water is available and who covers the costs of developing and maintaining the required infrastructure. How will you address these issues?

A: Water management is challenging and at this early stage determining precise allocations can be difficult. Someone has to cover costs and we need to find a balance between economic imperatives and the needs of local communities. However, the states involved are required to protect the water security of communities in targeted areas, and master plans for both Botswana and Lesotho ensure that no-one will be denied access.

Q: Climate change is predicted to negatively impact water supply in southern Africa. How can the LBWT scheme help address this?

A: We expect lower parts of the catchment area to become drier and source areas to either have the same amount of precipitation, or more. Climate science is still evolving, and we are hoping that with improved monitoring systems we'll be better equipped to address climate issues. Regardless, we believe it is better to invest now before the impacts of climate change are fully felt.

Q: Climate change could lead to an increase in conflicts. Do you think LBWT could help to promote regional peace and security?

A: I believe it can. Within the context of ORASECOM we promote solidarity and regional economic integration. Within the region we also share a cultural heritage and a common future, and realise that we need to work together to survive climate change and other pressing challenges. The LBWT project builds on this collaborative approach, establishing a platform for a coherent and cooperative region.

Q: Large dams have often been criticised for their negative social and environmental impacts. Are you worried this could also be the case with LBWT?

A: No. I'm confident this will not be the case. We have undertaken a significant number of impact studies to address potential issues. We're aware it will not be a 'natural' river anymore once the dam is constructed. But, climate change, water scarcity and population growth all require new approaches and infrastructure. We will do everything we can to minimise negative ecological impacts or disruptions to local communities – drawing on our considerable experience and expertise.

Q: How will the project impact poor communities?

A: By enhancing access to water and sharing this valuable resource equitably we can empower poor communities economically and allow them to move out of poverty through food production and other economic activities.

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