

# LIMPOPO River Basin

## Fact Sheet 2

**People and Settlements** The Limpopo River Basin is the most highly developed basin in the SADC region and supports a significant population, including some of the region's poorest and richest communities. The basin has numerous urban areas and commercial and subsistence farming communities, as well as important forestry resources and mines.

The Limpopo basin has a population of about 14 million people, which is 18 percent of the total population of the four basin countries – Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The basin is home to over ten ethnic groups, eight of which are communities transcending national boundaries and which share many cultural values and languages. Inter-marriages between people of these communities are common.

**Population Density** South Africa has the largest number of people living in the basin area – accounting for over 10 million people (representing 24 percent of that country's total population). Botswana, which has nearly 60 percent of its total population residing within the catchment of the basin, appears to be the country most dependent on the basin. This is largely a result of widespread scarcity of water resources in the country, which makes the Limpopo river basin a large attraction for human settlements and key economic activities.

The national interests and priorities of the riparian countries differ in relation to water resources management, as follows:

- water use control for Botswana,
- upliftment of the lives of marginalized people for South Africa,
- irrigation and agricultural development for Zimbabwe, and
- flood control for Mozambique.

Proportion of the Limpopo river basin covered by each riparian state



**Languages** English is the official language in three of the Limpopo river basin countries – Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe. In Mozambique, Portuguese is the official language, although English is taught in secondary schools. Thirteen other national languages (*Emakhuwa, Xitsonga, Ciyao, Cisená, Cishona, Echuwabo, Cinyanja, Xironga, Shimaconde, Cinyungue, Cicopi, Bitonga, Kiswabili*) are spoken.

In South Africa, the Constitution provides for 11 official languages, namely English, Afrikaans, *isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda* and *Xitsonga*.

Zimbabwe has three main languages (English, Shona and Ndebele), and Botswana has two. *Setswana* is the national language with minor differences in dialects, while English is the official business language.

**Settlements** Almost four percent of the Limpopo river basin consists of built-up hard surfaces. There are substantial urban areas including 10 large cities in the basin. The entire Mid-Rand area between Pretoria and Johannesburg is within the basin.

In Botswana, the Limpopo catchment supports the capital city, Gaborone and other urban centres such as Francistown and Selebi-Phikwe. In the rest of the country settlements tend to be scattered and are determined largely by availability of water and opportunities for extensive livestock farming.

In South Africa, human settlements are concentrated in cities and around service centres. The provinces of Gauteng, Mpumalanga, North-West and Limpopo (Northern) are all in the basin. Pretoria, Polokwane (formerly Pietersburg) and parts of Johannesburg are some of the basin's largest urban settlements. In the basin are also smaller towns such as Witbank and Thohoyandu.

The Mozambican and Zimbabwean portions of the basin, are predominantly rural, and settlements tend to be scattered. In Zimbabwe, the major urban centres in the basin are Beitbridge and Gwanda. However, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city is located at the divide with the Zambezi basin.

Large portions of the basin in Mozambique remain unsettled following years of civil conflict, and Xai-Xai is the only urban centre in the basin. The area north of Massingir Dam

is sparsely populated with very limited activity, while the south of the Massingir dam is characterized by growing economic activity, and accounts for over 90 percent of the population in the area.

Settlement patterns in the basin are determined by a number of factors. Among the most prominent factors are land tenure, poverty and the use of the environment to address poverty.

**Land Tenure** Land tenure and property rights in the Limpopo river basin are a blend of traditional systems, the colonial system and post-independence government policies. In most of the basin states, land is classified as state or public land, free or leasehold land, and customary communal land. State land consists of national parks, gazetted forests and protected land, and state farms. The national parks are largely uninhabited, while communal settlements are comparatively crowded to settlements under lease or freehold

In Botswana, the three major types of land tenure include ethnic land (70 percent of the country), freehold land (6 percent of the country) and state land (24 percent of the country).

Access to land has generally been inequitable in the basin states, most particularly in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In South Africa, the government inherited a land ownership problem in which 87 percent of arable land is white-owned, while just 13 percent is black-owned. The figures for arable land ownership in Zimbabwe were similarly at 70 and 30 percent, respectively.

In Zimbabwe, the inequitable land ownership forced the government to adopt a new land policy aimed at redressing the imbalances. However, the land redistribution process in the country precipitated a confrontation, and the resultant backlash led to an impasse with the international finance institutions and the donor community.

**Poverty** Poverty is one of the most perennial problems afflicting the basin. According to the SADC Regional Human Development Report, about a third of the people of SADC live in poverty. Mozambique is listed as one of the most deprived nations with 50.7 percent of its population living in poverty. In contrast, South Africa has only 20.2 percent of its population living in poverty. In Botswana and Zimbabwe, poverty has been increasing since 1995.

Well-known transboundary ethnic groups in the Limpopo River Basin	
Boundaries	Ethnic groups
Botswana – Zimbabwe	Va-Kalanga, Ba-Birwa
Botswana – South Africa	Ba-Tswana
Mozambique – South Africa	Xitsonga (Xichangana), Swazi
Mozambique - Zimbabwe	Barwe, Ndau, Manyika, Shangaan
South Africa – Zimbabwe	Shangaan, Venda

The main causes of poverty in the basin include joblessness, lack of resources such as land and capital, and inadequate access to markets for the sale of goods and services.

The poverty situation in the Limpopo river basin is compounded by income inequalities. In the aftermath of *apartheid* and colonialism in South Africa and Zimbabwe, respectively, poverty and race remain closely correlated in both countries resulting in the formation of a dual political economy of inequality between the rich few whites and millions of impoverished blacks

The poverty situation determines whether one can live in the rich and plush urban settlements, rural areas or squatter settlements.

**Traditional Uses of the Environment** Largely as a result of poverty and pressures for economic development, the environment remains the traditional source of livelihood for millions of people who depend on it for their basic needs such as food, shelter and medicine.

The basin has also been of critical importance to the people because of its variety of wild fauna and flora used by communities for spiritual and medicinal purposes. Many species of birds, lizards, insects, trees, and mammals are preserved because they are sacred, while others are conserved because of their medicinal value. Currently, a plant widely found in the basin is being researched because of its many medicinal properties, including efficacy in the treatment of cancer. A number of other wild herbs are used in the treatment of AIDS-related illnesses. Hypoxicide, the chemical extract of the plant *Hypoxis* has been shown to inhibit the growth of tumour cells and also has anti-inflammatory properties.

Game meat, traditionally obtained through hunting, is a major source of protein for the people of the basin. There are however concerns about unsustainable and uncontrolled offtakes in most parts of the basin.

In Zimbabwe and some parts of Botswana and South Africa, the introduction of community-based programmes such as the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) have worked positive-

ly to meet the challenges for sustainable use of wildlife resources.

Another important source of food and income for the inhabitants is the mopane worm. In parts of Zimbabwe's Gwanda and south-east Botswana, a household can raise about US\$450 per year from the sale of the worms. However, there is need to improve the harvesting, processing and marketing of forestry resources such as mopane worms in order to increase the income derived from them.

The environment is also a major source of other commercial projects such as the development of marula, which are undertaken by communities for both local consumption and commercial trade. The marula tree is in fair abundance in the basin. Each tree can produce as much as 810 kg of fruit per year depending on the season. Besides producing wine, the fruit can also be used in the production of jam (from the fleshy part) and butter/oil from the seed.

Woodcarving is another fast growing industry in the basin whose economic contribution and environmental effects are often ignored or underrated. A visit to Beitbridge, Gaborone, Messina and Maputo shows a lot of roadside production and trade of carved products, which are carried out by residents of the basin. Woodcarving has always been a traditional speciality by local communities in the basin, and has been carried out mainly for the production of utilitarian items such as spoons, plates, hoe-handles, walking sticks and several other practical and spiritual objects.

**Conclusion** While the African culture has been hailed for providing checks and balances on human use of the natural environment, pressures brought about by poverty and modernisation have gradually eroded such ethos, thus raising serious concerns on the need to develop community-based projects for sustainable use of natural resources in the basin countries.

The richness of the environment is an important consideration for settlements. Arid and semi-arid areas are traditionally shunned for settlements, with preference being given to areas of high agricultural potential or areas that are rich in environmental resources.



## Sources for further information

Department of Water  
Private Bag 0029  
Gaborone, Botswana  
Tel: 267-360 7378 / 351601  
Fax: 267-300581

National Directorate for Water  
Av. 25 de Setembro, 942  
C.P. 1611, Maputo, Mozambique  
Tel: 258-1-305260 / 427011  
Fax: 258-1-421403 / 303100

Department of Water Affairs and Forestry  
Private Bag X313  
Pretoria 001, South Africa  
Tel: 27-12-336 8244  
Fax: 27-12-336 7399

Zimbabwe National Water Authority  
6 Pauling Drive, Borrowdale  
Harare, Zimbabwe  
Tel: 263-4-792772/3  
Fax: 263-4-700597

SADC Water Sector Coordination Unit  
Private Bag A440  
Maseru 100, Lesotho  
Tel: 266-320722  
Fax: 266-310465

See also the CEP partners listed below.

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See also the SADC Protocol on Shared Watercourses

## RAPID ENVIRONMENTAL APPRAISAL OF THE LIMPOPO RIVER BASIN

The Limpopo River Basin Factsheets are produced as part of the Rapid Environmental Appraisal of the Limpopo River Basin, and drawn from the technical report prepared for the SADC Water Sector by

Southern African Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC)  
Musokotwane Environment Resource Centre for Southern Africa (IMERCSA)  
15 Downie Avenue, Harare, Zimbabwe tel 2634-791141 fax 2634-791271 email cep@sardc.net  
SARDC Mozambique Rua Dom Afonso Henriques, 141, Maputo, Mozambique  
tel 2581-490831 fax 2581-491178 email sardc@maputo.sardc.net  
and

ZERO – Regional Environment Organisation  
158 Fife Ave, Greenwood Park, P.O. Box 5338, Harare, Zimbabwe tel 263-4-791333 / 720405 fax 263-730230 email zero@ecoweb.co.zw  
Other products in addition to fact sheets are a technical report, summary booklet and a “virtual library” of bibliographic and contacts information accessible through internet at [www.sardc.net/imercsa/limpopo](http://www.sardc.net/imercsa/limpopo)

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## COMMUNICATING THE ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (CEP)

This study of the Limpopo river basin is related to the Communicating the Environment Programme (CEP), a regional partnership which seeks to inform, motivate and empower people at all levels of environmental decision-making in southern Africa, from the individual and NGOs to the private sector and governments, to take positive actions to counter environmental degradation and move towards sustainable development paths by providing them with clear, objective and meaningful information on the environment. The partnership is also to facilitate understanding and communication between environmental groups, stakeholders and decision-makers. The CEP partners produce state of the environment reporting for the SADC region, and have also produced books on water, on biodiversity of indigenous forests and woodlands, and on the Zambezi river basin. The longstanding CEP partnership of the SADC Environment and Land Management Sector (ELMS), IUCN-The World Conservation Union Regional Office for Southern Africa (ROSA) and SARDC's, I Musokotwane Environment Resource Centre for Southern Africa (IMERCSA), has been expanded to include the SADC Water Sector and the Zambezi River Authority.