

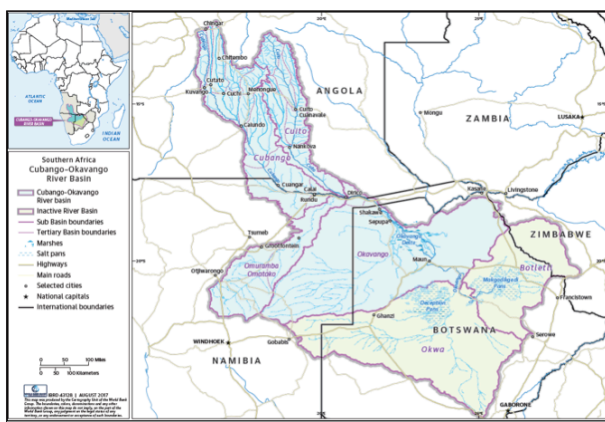
The Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM) 30 Years Later- Celebrating the growth



THE CUBANGO-OKAVANGO RIVER BASIN (CORB)

The CORB is a transboundary basin with a network of river systems traversing through Angola, Namibia into Botswana. The headwaters of these myriad rivers is in the Angolan highlands where the two main tributaries of the CORB the Cuito and Cubango originate. The two merges in Namibia (forming the border between Angola and Namibia) and flows into Botswana through the panhandle, subsequently spilling into the Okavango Delta. The Okavango Delta is recognised globally as wetland of international importance, a Ramsar Site and a UNESCO's 1000th World Heritage Site which was conferred in June 2014.

The CORB supports an astounding rich diversity and abundance of terrestrial and freshwater animal and plant life. This biodiversity is essential to livelihoods of more than one million people who directly rely on the CORB natural resources and ecosystem services for their sustenance. The basin is still relatively underdeveloped. However, it faces many interrelated threats and challenges that may move it from the status of near pristine to an impacted basin if these threats and challenges remain unchecked. These challenges are further exacerbated by the advent of climate change.



Source :OKACOM . The Cubango-Okavango River Basin with Sub-Basins (Source: World Bank)

The People of the CORB

The CORB is home to over a million people, whose wellbeing are sustained by the abundant rich natural resources of the CORB. These are predominantly very rural communities that are located along the river. High level of poverty characterises these communities. Their livelihood activity is mainly subsistence agriculture which is augmented by harvesting of natural resources notably fish, wild fruits, honey and vegetables. In some areas especially in Botswana and Namibia, tourism is an important livelihood option.

THE PERMANENT OKAVANGO RIVER BASIN WATER COMMISSION (OKACOM)

Angola, Botswana and Namibia have been cooperating for thirty (30) years in the management of the CORB within the framework of the Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM) established through an Agreement signed by the three States in 1994.

Mandate

OKACOM was established by the contracting parties to advise the Member States on matters of common concerns in the basin; the conservation, development and sustainable utilisation of the water resources in the Cubango-Okavango River Basin.

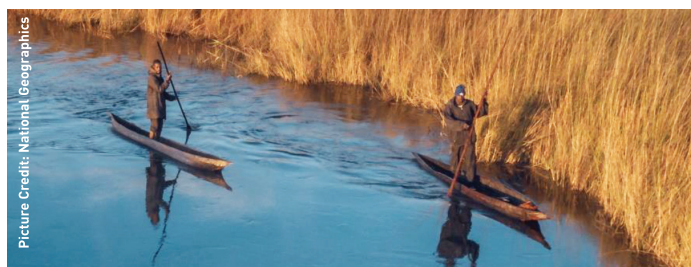
Vision

The OKACOM shared vision, which was adopted through a highly consultative process is to achieve an "economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally healthy development of the Cubango-Okavango River Basin"

Organisational Structure

OKACOM organisational structure has evolved over time - always guided by its evolving mandate. The current organogram was adopted in May 2015, and consists of four (4) principal organs.

The principal organs;



STRATEGY AND APPROACH

OKACOM agreed on a policy framework document, the twenty (20) year Strategic Action Programme (SAP) in 2011, that lays down the principles for the development of the basin and improvements of livelihoods of its people through the cooperative management of the basin and its shared natural resources. The SAP is a blueprint of OKACOM action on the ground. It is intended to promote and strengthen the integrated, sustainable management, use and development of the CORB at national and transboundary levels.

The SAP objective is to "Promote and strengthen the integrated ,sustainable management ,use and development of the Cubango-Okavango River basin at national and transboundary levels according to internationally recognised best practices in order to protect biodiversity, improve the livelihoods of the basin communities, and the development of the basin states"

The SAP implementation has defined OKACOM progress and growth over the years. OKACOM achievements or milestones are basically the outputs of the SAP implementation that was done as joint effort of the member states and international cooperating partners.

Significant events (Timelines)





Key Milestones

Milestone

Signing of the 1994 Agreement establishing Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM) – 15 Sep 1994	A unique event as it pre-dates the SADC Revised Protocol on Shared Watercourses and the UN Convention on Transboundary Waters and was done during war in Angola.
Commissioning of the Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis (TDA) 2006	A tool to understand the basin and assist OKACOM in the designing of a joint basin wide management plan
Launching of the Environmental Protection and Sustainable Management of the Okavango Basin (EPSMO) Project – 2007	The project that strengthened mechanisms for joint management of the CORB, completed the Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis (TDA), and Formulated a Strategic Action Programme (SAP)
Development of scientific technical products through the TDA process – 2006 – 2008	80 background specialist studies, Integrated Environmental Flows Analysis methodology and formulation of the concept of “acceptable development space” as one of the criteria to facilitate Member States negotiations processes
Endorsement of the Agreement on the OKACOM Organisational Structure in 2007	The 2007 OKACOM Organisational Structure established three OKACOM internal organs, The Council of Commissioners, The Okavango Basin Steering Committee (OBSC); The Permanent Secretariat (OKASEC)
Signing of the Host Agreement for the OKACOM Secretariat – May 09, 2007	The Host Agreement recognizes the OKACOM Secretariat as an International body with diplomatic status in Botswana
Signing 3-year plan for the operationalisation of the OKACOM Secretariat in May, 2007	The 3 Year plan for the consolidation and operation of the secretariat was designed to support member states with the implementation of the 1994 Agreement
Inauguration of the OKACOM Secretariat Office in Maun – February 2nd, 2008	Event marked the initial steps to a fully functional Secretariat
Approval of OKACOM internal Governance Documents – 2006	OKACOM internal governance documents supporting the operations of the Commission
Approval and endorsement of the Strategic Action Programme (SAP) in 2011 at Ministerial level	The SAP is a cooperative management response to the key challenges for the CORB, as identified and described in the TDA.
Approval Institutional Functional Analysis (IFA) – 2012	The IFA key recommendation is the re-arrangement of the OKACOM internal organs to include a new higher policy and decision-making organ the OKACOM Ministers Forum; transformation of Task Forces into Technical Committees (TC).
OKACOM submission to the 2012 Thiess International River prize shortlisted as one of the four finalists	OKACOM submission was selected as one of the four finalists for the 2012 Thiess International River prize, elevating OKACOM to become the first African river basin in this international river Olympic.
Rehabilitation of the hydro-met stations in Cuando-Cubango province, Angola (2018)	Key achievements towards proper data collection on the hydrology at the upper catchment
Undertaking the Multi-Sectoral Investment Opportunity Analysis (MSOIA) of the CORB 2017 – 2018	MSOIA explored development pathways to undress underlying drivers of poverty in the basin. Three programs developed -Climate -resilient livelihood enhancement program; enabling basin-wide ecotourism program; infrastructure development program
Establishment of the International Cooperating Partners Forum (ICP) – 2015	OKACOM expands partnership portfolio and created a Forum for coordinating the partnership with ICPs
Formulation of shared vision for the CORB (2015)	A joint basin-wide shared vision was developed and agreed upon in 2015 “ <i>economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally healthy development of the Cubango-Okavango River Basin</i> ”
Strategic Action Programme (SAP) Implementation, 2018 – 2024	SAP implementation through support from varied development partners such as UNDP-GEF, USAID, World Bank, European Union, German Development Cooperation, CRIDF etc.
Establishment of the CORB Fund 2017 – 2019	Registration of the CORB Fund as Company Limited by Guarantee in Botswana in December 2019
Undertaking joint monitoring and survey exercises in the basin 2019 – 2022	Major achievement in building capacity of OKACOM technical committees and collecting credible data jointly
Development of more technical documents – 2021 – 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Information and Communication Strategy • The Stakeholder Engagement Strategy • Financial Sustainability and Action Plan • Information Management Systems developed • Procedures and Process of Notification and Prior Consultations (NPC) approved • Payment of Ecosystem Services Framework • Groundwater assessment and monitoring strategy • Strategic Environmental Assessment with Transboundary EIA Guidelines, Socio-economic Monitoring Framework and Water Demand Forecasting • Concept of development Space
Revision of the OKACOM 1994 Agreement 2021 – 2023	The revision of the OKACOM Agreement in 2022 (yet to be signed in 2024) is critical milestone that was influenced by the evolving nature of the Commission and the need to align it with new trends in transboundary water cooperation as well as the SADC Protocol on shared watercourses

PARTNERSHIPS

The core to sustainable management of the CORB requires that OKACOM forms broad and diverse relationships with relevant institutions. The past 30 years has seen OKACOM partnership portfolio grow tremendously, which has greatly contributed to fulfilment of the mandate.

“Cooperation in the CORB has generated a range of economic, social and environmental benefits. it has also generated peace and security benefits for all countries. But there are opportunities to deliver more and better distributed benefits...”
(UNECE-WB supported Assessment of Benefits of transboundary cooperation in the CORB)

Lessons Learnt

The journey of OKACOM throughout the 30 years of existence has not only accorded OKACOM and her stakeholders growth and challenges but also achievement and reaching great milestones. A wealth of lessons has been gathered that reflect OKACOM's ongoing journey to enhance cooperation and sustainable management in the CORB and provides a learning opportunity for other establishment of the same calibre with OKACOM.

1. Collaborative Governance and Institutional Strengthening

Lesson: Transboundary water management requires strong, inclusive governance structures.

OKACOM's efforts in promoting cooperation among Member states have highlighted the need for continuous capacity building. This has involved enhancing national institutions' ability to implement joint management strategies and policies. Regularly updating governance frameworks and aligning them with national policies is crucial for effective management.

Lesson: Permanent hosting of the Secretariat is a more appealing prospect than rotating hosting;

The initial idea of placing an office in the basin was challenging due to remoteness and unavailability of services. OKACOM commissioned a study to understand the appropriateness of rotating Secretariat and identifying appropriate location. The study recommended a permanently hosted Secretariat in the capital city of the host country. Thus, the relocation from Maun to Gaborone where the Secretariat is currently based.

Lesson: Neutrality of the Secretariat and equal representation of Member States are crucial.

The neutrality and the facilitation role of the Secretariat is important for building trust of member states. OKACOM made a conscious decision to ensure a balanced representation of staff from the member states. Consequently, in 2020, a deliberate move was made to recruit a bilingual translator and editor, and this position was only open to Angolan citizens as there was no Angolan at the Secretariat.

2. Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusivity

Lesson: Broad participation from all stakeholders leads to better decision-making.

Through initiatives like the SAP, OKACOM has emphasized the importance of involving all stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement mechanisms should be institutionalized to improve transparency and ensure that the diverse needs and interest of water users are addressed.

3. Data Sharing and Scientific Collaboration

Lesson: Reliable, shared data is essential for informed decision-making

OKACOM has established frameworks for scientific collaboration and data exchange, although challenges remain in harmonizing data collection among member states. The value of using scientific data was reinforced through joint monitoring exercises and the development of Decision Support system (DSS). This provided a platform for enhanced data sharing and collection, which promoted adaptive management strategies.

4. Adaptive Management and Climate Resilience

Lesson: Flexibility and the ability to adapt to changing environmental conditions.

The basin is faced with variable rainfall patterns, exacerbated by climate change. Rigid management plans are ineffective when facing climate-induced uncertainty. Adaptive management strategies, including the integration of scenario planning and climate smart agricultural promote long term resilience of communities and ecosystems.

5. Conflict Prevention and Resolution

Lesson: Institutionalized conflict resolution platforms are crucial to manage competing water demands;

OKACOM has successfully minimized potential conflicts through early dialogue and joint problem-solving. OKACOM's Guidelines on Notification, Consultations and Negotiations on planned measures as well as regular updates from Members on planned measures, have ensured transparency and enables consensus building that is valuable in conflict prevention and resolution.

6. Sustainable Financing and Resource Mobilization

Lesson: Transboundary management requires sustainable financial resources

Long term and sustainable financing mechanisms are necessary to reduce dependency on external donors. This requires diversify funding sources, intensified innovative resource mobilisation and member countries contributions. The CORB Fund established in 2019, is one such innovative thinking. This enhances self-sufficiency, sustainability and attracts external funding as co-funding is seen as proof of Member States commitment.

7. Ecosystem-based Management (EBM) and Biodiversity Conservation

Lesson: Healthy ecosystem health is key to sustainable water resource management.

OKACOM has increasingly recognized the value of the basin's biodiversity and has implemented ecosystem-based management approaches. Stronger integration of biodiversity conservation and balancing water needs is necessary to ensure the long-term health of the ecosystem.

8. Capacity Building and Knowledge Transfer

Lesson: Capacity building of stakeholders enhances long-term success in transboundary management.

Several of OKACOM projects implemented has notable capacity building and strengthening components that saw improved skills. For example, the joint training on data collection equipment and joint monitoring exercises that were undertaken. Continuous training and knowledge exchange programs can sustain efforts in managing the basin's water resources.

10. Transboundary Legal and Policy Frameworks

Lesson: Harmonized legal frameworks facilitate joint management of shared water resources.

Differences in national water laws and policies can hinder effective transboundary cooperation. Efforts to align legal frameworks across Angola, Botswana, and Namibia are ongoing. However, it is a challenging process to harmonise legal frameworks across nations. Therefore, the move to harmonising practices is easier and practical in the long run.

11. Project design and implementation

Lesson: Projects or initiatives on the ground should be in response to local needs and consider local capacities and approaches.

Whilst it is important to meet the objectives of supporting organisations, projects need to be demand driven and align with government plans. This will ensure positive uptake by beneficiaries and stakeholder as they resonate with their needs.

Lesson: Ensure robust institutional arrangements for enhanced ownership
Institutional arrangement framework for programme implementation should be inclusive of stakeholders as it builds strong sense of ownership required to support the successful project implementation.

What the stakeholders say

"The first success of OKACOM was the decision to create OKACOM as a new institution and with the perspective to act as an RBO pursuant to the SADC Protocol on Shared water resources" **A. Gomes da Silva- Retired Commissioner -Angola**

"The establishment of OKACOM has managed to put in measures for sustainable utilization and management of the basin resources" **Dr. Kobamelo Dikgola, OBSC Co -Chair Botswana**

"The CORB is a unique system of high ecological, economic and social value and needs to be protected and preserved for future generations as a global public good, beneficial not only to the three states that physically share it but to the entire globe. OKACOM establishment was the most important development milestone to maintain and ensure the attainment of this noble vision 30years on" **P. Ramoeli, Executive Secretary -OKACOM**

"OKACOM values people alongside natural resources of CORB, and this is central to co-management by OKACOM and local communities. Let the value of OKACOM and other organizations be translated into tangible impact for our communities and for the benefit of nature to guarantee a prosperous future for the next generation." **Noel Valentino, ACADIR -Project and Program Manager**

"OKACOM:30 years of building common and better future, but we know the best is yet to come" **F. Kiowa OBSC Angola**

"Good diplomacy through OKACOM platform will ensure sustainable developments within the basin" **Dr. Dikgola, OBSC Co-Chair Botswana**

"OKACOM as an Inter-Governmental Organisation has maintained the health of the River system into its pristine form over the past 30 years". **C. Munikaso, OBSC-Namibia**

"Preservation of the basin will be utopia if we exclude its people" **C. Mendes- Commissioner Angola**

"It was important for the people in OBSC and OKACOM to realise it is not about them, OKACOM is about the people that live in the basin. The poorest of the poor" **S.de Wet- Retired Commissioner-Namibia**

"Together we shall quench the thirst but divided we will go thirsty" **T. Lobelo- OBSC Botswana**

Member

"OKACOM has evolved over the years into a reputable organisation for transboundary cooperation and has potential to grow" **Mahlalele Sethako- GIZ SADC TWM Programme**

"There is value in innovative financing mechanism such as the CORB Fund, which can open new channels for funding that are less dependent on traditional donors. Therefore, it has to be top priority and member states should put more resources into this initiative". **M. Mutelo, OKASEC**

"Member States should be prepared to fully fund the Secretariat on their own and assign active country personnel to these RBOs". **B. Khupe, Retired Commissioner- Botswana**

"The OBSC was a technical brain and driver of OKACOM" **- G. Gabaake, Retired Commissioner-Botswana**

"Translating documents and interpreters during meetings has by now been integrated into our tradition" **A. Tombale – Retired Commissioner-Botswana**



Picture Credit: National Geographics