

Unlocking Groundwater Resources in the Horn of Africa Requires a Transformative, Multi-Scalar Approach

The Cooperation in International Waters in Africa (CIWA) programme, a multi-donor trust fund managed by the World Bank, supports the collaborative management and development of transboundary water resources across Africa.

Phase 1 of the ARCAN MEL Mid-line Evaluation confirmed CIWA's important niche in advancing transboundary water cooperation, though further evidence is needed on how upstream work – such as technical studies, capacity building, and stakeholder engagement – translates into downstream impacts on water resource management.

A phase 2 case study examined CIWA's interventions in the Horn of Africa (HoA), focusing on: (1) CIWA's regional influencing role in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, and (2) the downstream results of upstream interventions. The study reviewed two projects: CIWA's support to transboundary water management in Somalia (2018–2021) and the ongoing Untapping Resilience project which supports regional knowledge generation and the learning agenda of the World Bank's \$385m Groundwater for Resilience (GW4R) programme spanning Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia. The programme adopts a multi-scalar approach delivered through the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), national project implementation units, and engagement with sub-national authorities.

Identifying 'Easy Wins' Can Strengthen Regional Collaboration

Compared to surface water, groundwater in the HoA is perceived as less politically sensitive, providing an entry point for regional dialogue. Evidence of mutual benefits and a shift in mindset within government agencies from competition to collaboration have been supported by CIWA activities. CIWA's support to IGAD has contributed to joint aquifer feasibility studies, leading to tangible progress on data sharing and transboundary aquifer management, which could contribute to future collaboration on other issues. These lessons from the HoA could potentially also promote collaboration in other contexts.

Upstream Knowledge Alone Does Not Guarantee Effective Implementation

CIWA's support has generated valuable new technical knowledge, including operational guidelines on rangeland management, conflict sensitivity, and salinity. However, learning and implementation gaps remain. Findings from a field visit in Turkana, Kenya indicate that risks are not always adequately addressed in practice. Examples include unequal borehole distribution generating community resentment leading to vandalism or water tariffs creating perverse incentives to partake in illicit activities, such as charcoal production, to generate cash. Stronger processes are required to ensure tools and knowledge developed at programme level are systematically applied on the ground.



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Learning Must Be Institutionalised to Ensure Long-Term Impact

Findings from both CIWA projects point to internal processes and staff turnover working against institutional memory. Successive World Bank teams involved in CIWA's Somalia work had limited knowledge of earlier lessons, reducing continuity. Similarly, it appears that much of the key technical knowledge resides within external consultants rather than within CIWA and the World Bank regional water sector team. Although rich learning has emerged through both formal and informal processes, it is not consistently captured. Institutionalising learning is essential for long-term effectiveness.

Sustainable Groundwater Service Delivery Requires Policy Choices

While CIWA and GW4R adopt a holistic approach to groundwater service delivery, there remains a fundamental tension between water as a basic right and cost-recovery models used in service delivery. Evidence including a recent Oxfam evaluation in Turkana shows that the ability and willingness of marginalised communities to pay for water is unlikely to be financially sustainable. This contradicts GW4R financing assumptions and undermines sustainability. Cost-recovery appears unrealistic in fragile, conflict and violence affected (FCV) settings. It is worth considering possible solutions such as national cross-subsidy models – such as those used in Namibia – drawing on commercial, mining, and urban sectors.



“Boreholes may create resentment between communities that are not served, leading to vandalism of new infrastructure while water tariffs may create perverse incentives to partake in illicit activities, such as charcoal production, to generate cash.”

Failure to Adequately Apply GEDSI Undermines Value for Money

Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) is operationalised in GW4R through implementation tools developed with CIWA's support, including checklists and guidelines for groundwater sites. However, findings from the Turkana visit show they are not consistently applied in ways responsive to local context. Past failures to integrate GEDSI in groundwater projects in the Horn of Africa borderlands have contributed to community conflict, including destruction of infrastructure by groups who felt excluded. There is a risk that GW4R interventions could have similar impacts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop regionally aligned national standards** for groundwater projects, building on Ethiopia's example.
- **Revisit the GW4R theory of change** to better reflect how groundwater contributes to resilience in the borderlands environments.
- **Apply lessons from other groundwater actors,** including Oxfam Kenya's experience with private sector service-provider 'bundling' models.
- **Capture informal learning** systematically using existing structures.
- **Use emerging lessons to strengthen projects still under preparation,** especially around community inclusion, procurement, drilling, and O&M.
- **Engage graduate students to consolidate technical data** and expand publicly accessible research.

The Midline Evaluation Summary Report and full case studies will be available at: [DevTracker Programme GB-GOV-1-300808 Documents](#) and the Ecorys website at: [World-class research-based consultancy | Ecorys](#)

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