



## Interview with **Leonard Magara**, CRIDF's Chief Engineer, on making progress with water infrastructure under the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 struck at a critical time in CRIDF's sixth year of implementation, catching projects under way in many Southern African countries. In this conversation Leonard Magara, the facility's Chief Engineer, looks back at 2020 and its unforeseeable challenges. While CRIDF had to adapt to lockdowns in every country, the pandemic proved why water and resilience are both at the top of the agenda when it comes to facing the unexpected.

**Q:** COVID-19 is not a waterborne disease, but it seems to be connected everywhere with questions of water and sanitation – certainly in Southern Africa. Why is there such a water dimension to this pandemic?

**Q:** Has CRIDF been able to continue with its efforts to build climate resilience in water infrastructure through 2020?

**Q:** What aspects of the CRIDF design allowed the facility to adapt and continue on its path?

**A:** I agree that from what we know so far, COVID-19 is not a waterborne disease, but the key tool in the fight against infectious diseases is water. With no vaccine yet, washing with soap and water is still among the most effective preventive measures – including against other infectious diseases that are so common in this region. But it's well documented that access to safe water is a big challenge in Southern Africa. Add to that the COVID-19 pandemic and its demands for hand washing with soap and water, and it simply compounds an already bad situation.

**A:** CRIDF has largely been able to continue, but not without delays. At the onset of the outbreak, we had two projects under construction in Tanzania and Namibia. We had four projects ready to go to procurement in Angola, Botswana, eSwatini and Mozambique. And we had projects at various preparation stages across the region. Then COVID came in March 2020, and there was a total lockdown for regional travel. Our work was significantly slowed down. Even if a country like Tanzania did not end up imposing any restrictions, you couldn't get to Tanzania from outside. There were supply chain disruptions across the board and these caused delays across the whole chain of our project stages. Touch wood, none of our team members were personally affected. There have just been disruptions because of supply chains, because of lack of travel, but we have been able to continue – albeit at much reduced capacity.

**A:** It's a combination of our flexibility, the freedom to determine the paths of our projects, within the confines of our mandate and approvals of the FCDO, and the kinds of things that one just has to do to continue working. First thing was to establish the whole team working from home. This, actually, we did with quite remarkable speed and success, though various parts of CRIDF were affected differently – with those that require in-person meetings, travelling and training workshops being the worst affected. So we further moved to working through in-country experts. Whereas generally I would go to three different countries in one month, now I am doing a lot of training so others can go and represent what I would do – as if I would be there working with them. Also, the fact that water is an essential service gave us the platform to apply for exemptions from the authorities to continue our work, even under lockdowns. This had to be under very strict COVID-19 management protocols, but we could do it, and we have done it, and we're continuing to do it.

**Q:** Which CRIDF accomplishment this year are you most proud of?

**A:** There are many, but I would probably say the beneficial handover and completion of the Makonde Plateau water construction project in Tanzania probably tops it. It's our first CRIDF Phase 2 construction project to be complete and it was completed under COVID-19 conditions. So to tick that achievement is a significant and proud moment for the whole team.

**Q:** CRIDF is guided by the ideal of equitable access to water for all. During a very inequitable pandemic, has that ideal become harder to achieve?

**A:** I have to agree that COVID-19 has made it much harder. Many people take access to water for granted, but water is a public good – and we have seen a disturbing trend of deterioration in the governance of most public institutions. While not directly water related, there has been significant corruption in the procurement of COVID-19 PPE, and this undermines the equitable and cost-effective implementation of badly needed infrastructure and services. Corruption in parts can become a cancer that spreads to the rest. Critical resources end up being misappropriated, thus depriving the poor in most cases. Fortunately for CRIDF, we manage our funding and procurements so we can kind of ring-fence everything, but you get affected by the very idea that people are doing these things.

**Q:** Has it been possible to maintain the focus on climate resilience through it all?

**A:** Under a pandemic or any emergency situation, resources tend to get redirected towards short-term solutions. We have, however, maintained the argument that water *is* the solution that is required both in the short and long term. Be it for hygiene against the virus, or for social and economic activities, water is at the heart of resilience, and I would dare to say not only climate resilience but even economic resilience. So the demand for CRIDF's types of services has grown, and we are spreading that gospel to our partners: that resilience against pandemics like this, and climate resilience, are part and parcel of total resilience as opposed to just short-term solutions.

**Q:** Do you feel as though your role as Chief Engineer has shifted during the pandemic?

**A:** I would rather say that my role has expanded. While I'm not on the medical frontier against the pandemic, my role as Chief Engineer has been to embed COVID-19 management protocols across our work, across the project teams and our construction sites. I really like, and am guided by the FIDIC Golden Principles in my pursuit of project and infrastructure sector success. And in this work we have a very strong management team in CRIDF, so working together and making sure that whatever we say we should do ends up well documented in a contract or procedure becomes part and parcel of what I contribute as Chief Engineer.

**Q:** From what you learned this year, would you plan anything differently for a future pandemic?

**A:** That's a tough question because I don't know whether one can ever be prepared for every eventuality. You might have to change the path you are on and accommodate the new things you have to do against a challenge that has surfaced. Unfortunately, the understanding of COVID is still evolving, so in a way we *still* have to be ready to learn as we go. But the most important lesson I would like out of this is the realization – by all – that the services and infrastructure CRIDF strives to support in the region are crucial for both emergencies and long-term solutions. If there is any message, I would say it is this: *if we spend a dollar to fight COVID-19 under emergency conditions, we must spend a hundred dollars on infrastructure to ensure that by the time the next pandemic comes, we are ready.*

**Q:** What is your priority #1 for next year?

**A:** To restore our lost capacity due to COVID-19, but even under COVID – since COVID is here to stay! I would be most satisfied if this could happen with no outbreak of COVID among any of our sites, offices or team members, to the extent possible for us to control.



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