



Interview with **Charles Reeve**, Team Leader at CRIDF, on the road to 2023 and beyond

Charles Reeve, Team Leader, charts the road ahead for CRIDF, leading up to the end of the programme in 2023. He looks back at how the facility's unique approach has informed its development over the years, and forward to how a future facility can meet the needs of the Southern African Development Community to prepare infrastructure and mobilise finance for climate-resilient water infrastructure projects across the region.

Q: How would you describe CRIDF's work since 2013, and what are you focusing on up to the end of the programme in 2023?

A: There is a backlog of water infrastructure in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) – the bigger stuff is getting picked up but there is a lot of small infrastructure that benefits people that isn't moving forward. CRIDF was set up to fill a critical niche – how can we reduce climate vulnerability for the poor? Our first phase from 2013 to 2017 focused on preparing the infrastructure for such projects, building capacity and mobilising finance for them, and actually building some of this infrastructure. As an organisation we were focused on building a platform – getting our legs under the table, as it were.

Once we showed that we were able to deliver climate-resilient infrastructure, we expanded into working with relevant institutions across the region, sharing what we were doing and trying to build their capacity to take projects forward, including at the basin level. It was clear that we could only meet part of a very real demand that would continue into the future, so now the momentum is on a long-term strategy looking beyond the end of the programme – what will we leave behind?

Q: What is your vision for CRIDF beyond 2023 and how are you positioned to achieve this?

A: In line with SADC's needs, we are looking to establish a facility that will be regionally owned, regionally governed and sustainably financed, with suitable capacity to take forward the work of CRIDF and act as a resource for the region.

We're in a pretty good place at the moment. There is broad acknowledgement from key stakeholders that such a facility is needed. We have a good idea of what the governance will be like, the capacity and financial needs and so on, though there are many details to be ironed out. The biggest concern is that we haven't yet secured the financing, and this is absolutely critical, but I am optimistic that we will get there.

Q: CRIDF's focus has been on catalysing small-scale, climate-resilient, transboundary water infrastructure projects. Will this change in the new facility?

A: A facility that will be regionally owned and governed to do what the region wants can't be too prescriptive. It will probably incorporate larger projects, and there will also be a greater focus on island states, as they will be more affected by climate change. So some of these projects won't be transboundary. But though all of our work has been in transboundary basins, much of it is applicable outside them. Because of the cross-cutting nature of water, it's also likely there will be more cross-sectoral engagement.

I think it's also accepted that the facility should continue to be a separate legal entity with its own finance and capacity rather than being absorbed into a larger organisation – CRIDF's experience shows this might be a better way to retain autonomy and flexibility and ability to react. The future facility must fall under the umbrella of SADC's Regional Development Fund, which is in the process of being set up. There is a clear infrastructural need in the region, and climate resilience is going to have to be a part of that, so CRIDF is well positioned to support this.

Q: What is SADC's approach to climate resilience?

A: Personally, I believe climate resilience should be front and centre. The region is already seeing massive impacts because of climate change – severe weather events but also genuine climatic shifts – it's happening.

Regionally, I think not everyone appreciates just how critical it is, partly because of not understanding how to deal with the uncertainty and risk involved. What CRIDF is trying to do is to give people the mechanisms and tools to deal with this. Of course there are many things that make for good project preparation, and climate is one more factor to take into account. My concern is that climate change is all-engulfing and it affects everything, so it should be a driving factor in how projects are selected and designed. We have to move from climate-proofing on a project-to-project basis to building resilience across basins. This trend mirrors our own approach over the years – right now, for example, we are working with the Zambezi Watercourse Commission, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the African Development Bank on a programme of infrastructure, the overarching aim of which is to build the resilience of people and ecosystems in the Zambezi basin, which has eight riparian states.

Q: How is CRIDF perceived by key stakeholders, and how can you leverage this in the future facility?

A: At the moment SADC sees us primarily as an entity that prepares project infrastructure and implements it. But financiers like us because of the innovative mechanisms we work on, such as blended finance – not to mention our autonomy and flexibility. If we can bridge the gap through the future facility, everybody is happy and we can move forward. Ultimately we have to bring in new money, and we would like to do this not by competing for the same grant financing but by bringing in the private sector, the philanthropists, the green bonds and so on.

I was listening to some of the sessions at the recent Climate Adaptation Summit and there was a lot of discussion about what we need to do to build resilience faster. The key message was that we need to bring the technical people and the financiers together and also seek innovative financial solutions. That's exactly what CRIDF has been trying to do since 2013! We've shown we can do it and by establishing the future facility we can leave this behind for SADC.

Q: As an organisation that is very much about engaging with ground realities through your projects, how have you adapted to COVID-19?

A: It came as a massive shock to all of us – I've never seen anything like it. There are two related aspects to the impacts of COVID-19. First, the impact it has on everybody as an individual on a daily basis. Second, the change to your entire lifestyle. We mustn't forget how this has affected our ability to work, but I'm amazed by how people have adapted, including on the CRIDF team. They've made the shift from face-to-face interactions to virtual platforms and it took some time and it's not the same, but in some ways it's better. It's more flexible and it's cheaper. So most of our work on strategy, stakeholder engagement and mobilising finance has continued. The biggest change, obviously, is on the infrastructural side, and our Chief Engineer Leonard Magara has spoken about this. There have been challenges, but we've been able to find solutions and make it work, and in the long term I think it will be better because we are building capacity in-country. We've found new ways of working that I think will be needed for a long time; COVID may have forced our hand, but in the long term it's going to be for the better.



ABOUT THE SERIES

The CRIDF Voices series provides a platform for key actors to share updates and insights on their work in Southern Africa's water sector.

