

GROUNDWATER IN ARID AND SEMIARID REGIONS

J.W. Lloyd

School of Earth Sciences, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, UK

Keywords: arid zones, recharge, hydrogeological domains, groundwater resources potential, groundwater mining

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Summary

Groundwater conditions in the semiarid and arid zones are described using a geological domain basis. The processes operative in recharge is discussed and the inferences for the low to zero recharge inputs outlined. The groundwater potential in the domains is considered and it is concluded that in many areas the future economic and social developments will depend upon carefully managed integrated water supplies based on a variety of sources, not exclusively groundwater. Some of the regional sedimentary basins are described as having extensive groundwater resources potential, although the development of such reserves will inevitably prove very expensive.

1. Introduction

There are many definitions of semiarid and arid climate, normally related to precipitation and temperature indices. Most are not reconcilable to groundwater

conditions, which are probably best illustrated in terms of recharge, if indeed climate definitions are of any value, other than to provide a broad introduction to a region. An approximate indication of aridity in relation to groundwater is shown in Figure 1.

On Figure 2 a general depiction of worldwide aridity is shown.

In the following discussion the pertaining recharge conditions are defined. Hydrogeology is considered with respect to the dominating geological conditions, the groundwater resources occurrence, and the general management situations. Some comments are included about the difficult subject of future use and water resources sustainability.

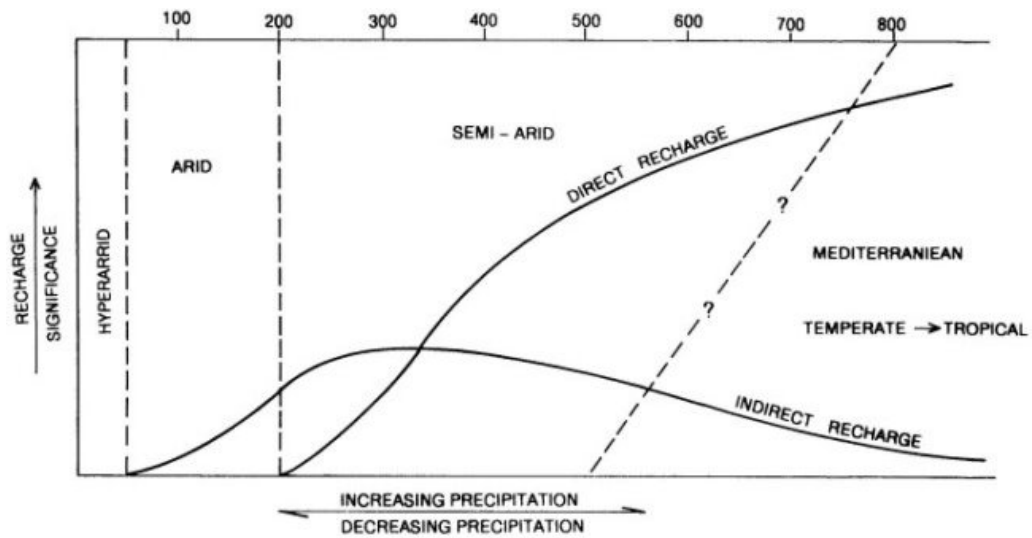


Figure 1. Definition of aridity using recharge criteria.

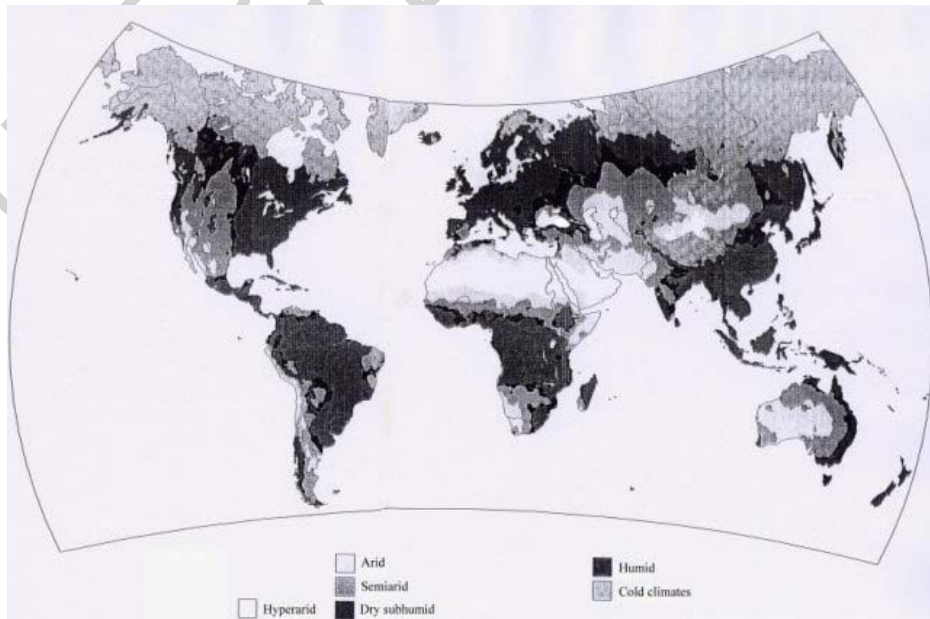


Figure 2. Global distribution of aridity.

2. Groundwater Recharge

In temperate and tropical regions considerable emphasis is placed on the assessment of recharge as it provides the basis for an understanding of groundwater resources sustainability. In most hydrological situations in such regions the dominant form of recharge is direct, in that infiltration entering the ground from precipitation, normally annually, eventually moves in a quasi-direct route to the free groundwater surface (water table), once any evaporative demands have been met. The recharge sustains base flow in the river systems and obviously, is an important factor in groundwater resources realisation.

Direct recharge is also a feature of semiarid regions, but as demonstrated in Figure 3, occurs on an intermittent basis owing to the variability in precipitation periodicity and volume, that is inherent in such regions. As illustrated in Figure 3, in some years direct recharge is substantial, but it can occur over very different time scales, while in some years no direct recharge occurs. The character of the recharge results in very variable base flow and much more associated water table lowering than in temperate, or tropical regions. Consequently, during periods of high volume flood runoff, influent river conditions are prevalent in semiarid regions and recharge can readily enter the ground indirectly from the runoff. Semiarid regions are therefore characterised through the significant occurrence of both direct and indirect recharge, in relative terms.

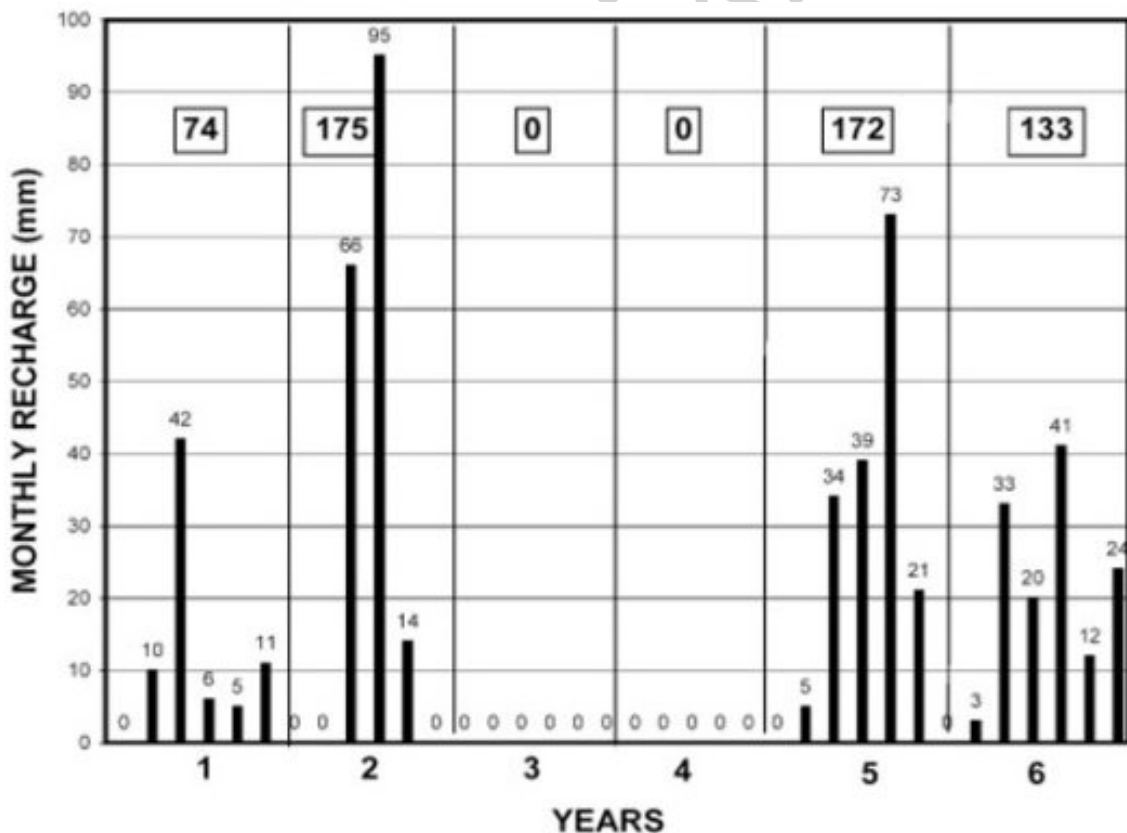


Figure 3. Example of semiarid region recharge from the eastern Mediterranean showing monthly occurrence for October to March with annual totals (mm).

Regional direct recharge assessments are usually carried out using soil moisture balance calculations (e.g. Lloyd *et al.*, 1966; Caro and Eagleson, 1981; Simers *et al.*, 1997) and calibrated through groundwater hydrograph simulation in transient numerical modeling. In some studies chloride balances have provided estimates of annual recharge input (e.g. Edmunds *et al.*, (1992) in the Sudan), while in southern Australia and Africa some success in assessing long-term recharge has been obtained with stable isotope profile balances (Allison and Hughes, 1978; Edmunds and Gaye, 1994) and with nuclear fallout isotopes in USA (Phillips *et al.*, 1988). An evaluation by Scanlon (1991) of chloride profiles in Texas sounds the warning that geomorphological features need to be taken into account when carrying out interpretations.

Indirect recharge is very difficult to assess. Lerner *et al.* (1990) provide various techniques, but unfortunately, measurement conditions frequently preclude the acquisition of reliable data so that only crude estimates result. Some discussion of the constraints of assessing indirect recharge is given below.

Arid regions receive much smaller recharge amounts than semiarid regions and in consequence, in groundwater terms, can be defined as being devoid of direct recharge, although in receipt of sparse intermittent indirect recharge. The most extreme form of aridity may be termed hyper-aridity, which describes those regions where no recharge in any form occurs that can be accounted in groundwater resources terms.

3. Hydrogeological Domains

For the purposes of this discussion the hydrogeological conditions appertaining in the most commonly occurring geological domains in semiarid and arid regions will be addressed as shown in Figure 4.

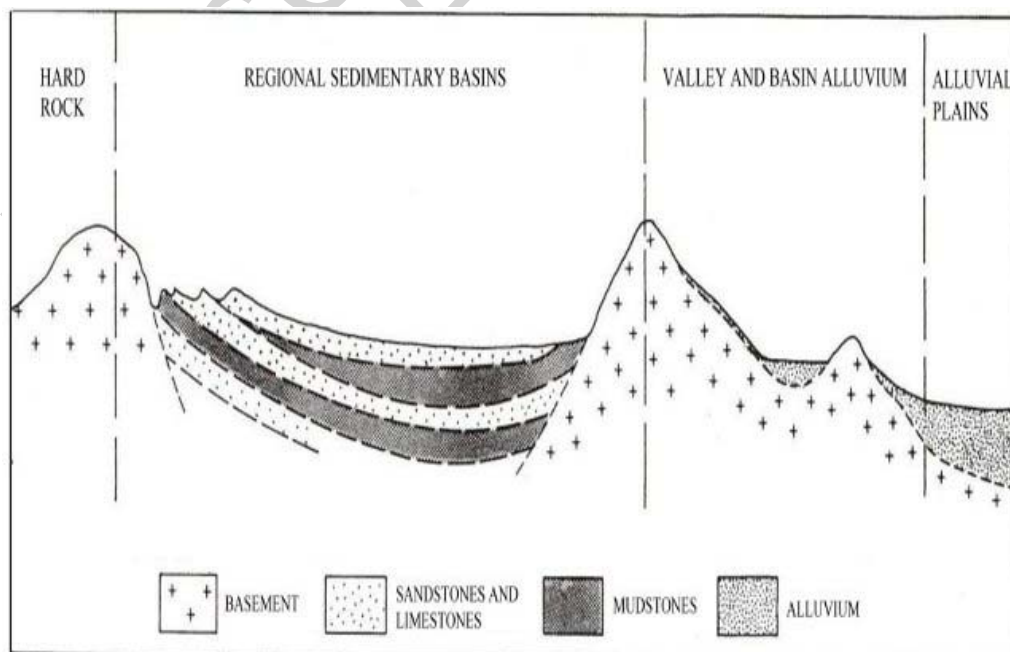


Figure 4. Hydrogeological domains.

3.1 Hard Rocks Domain

Hydrogeological conditions in hard rocks are extensively described by Wright and Burgess (1992) and Lloyd (1999). The rock types included in the domain are igneous intrusives and metamorphics. Lavas are excluded.

Irrespective of climate and usually lithology, these rocks typically possess extremely small primary porosity and hydraulic conductivity and consequently have little to offer in terms of groundwater resources. Secondary processes, however, can modify their groundwater potential with fracture and weathering leading to moderate increases in their aquifer characteristics. Unfortunately, as both of the secondary processes are non-uniform in extent the resultant aquifer characteristics are extremely variably distributed leading to complex and usually tenuous hydraulic continuity. As can be seen from Figure 5, assuming that fracture porosity is a major hydraulic factor the distribution must be variable in the extreme.

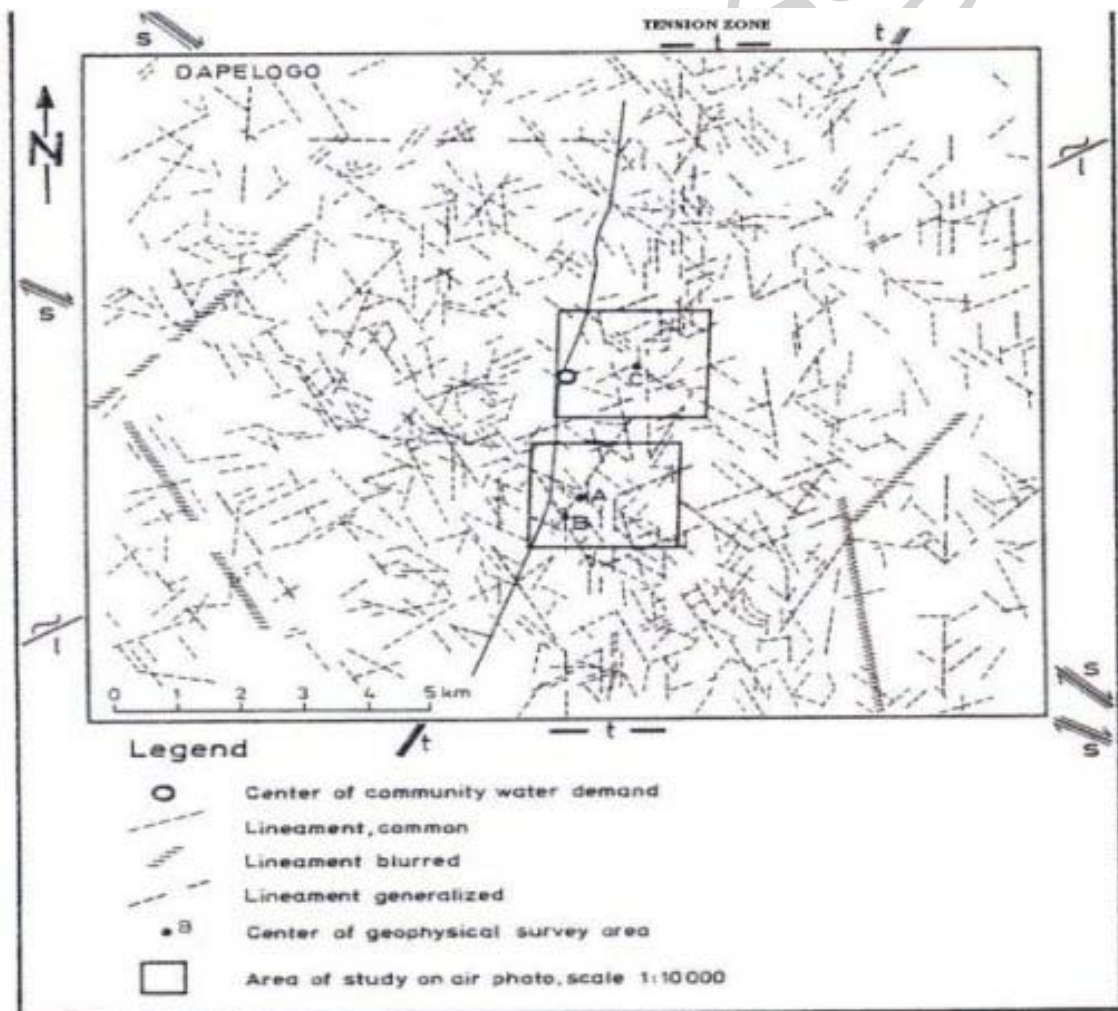


Figure 5. Example of fracture lineament mapping from Burkino Faso, using satellite imagery and air photos (after Boeckh, 1992).

Investigation techniques for fracture terrains in semiarid and arid terrains are highly developed (Sander, 1999). Structural mapping using satellite imagery and aerial photographs with ground truth, coupled with vegetation indexing, compiled into GIS format, provides an excellent basis for determining fracture distributions and structural style. With added well information statistics some progress is being made in understanding porosity extent, but inconsistency in fracture hydraulic characteristics make reliable hydrogeological assessment very difficult. The type of approach being adopted is summarized in Table 1.

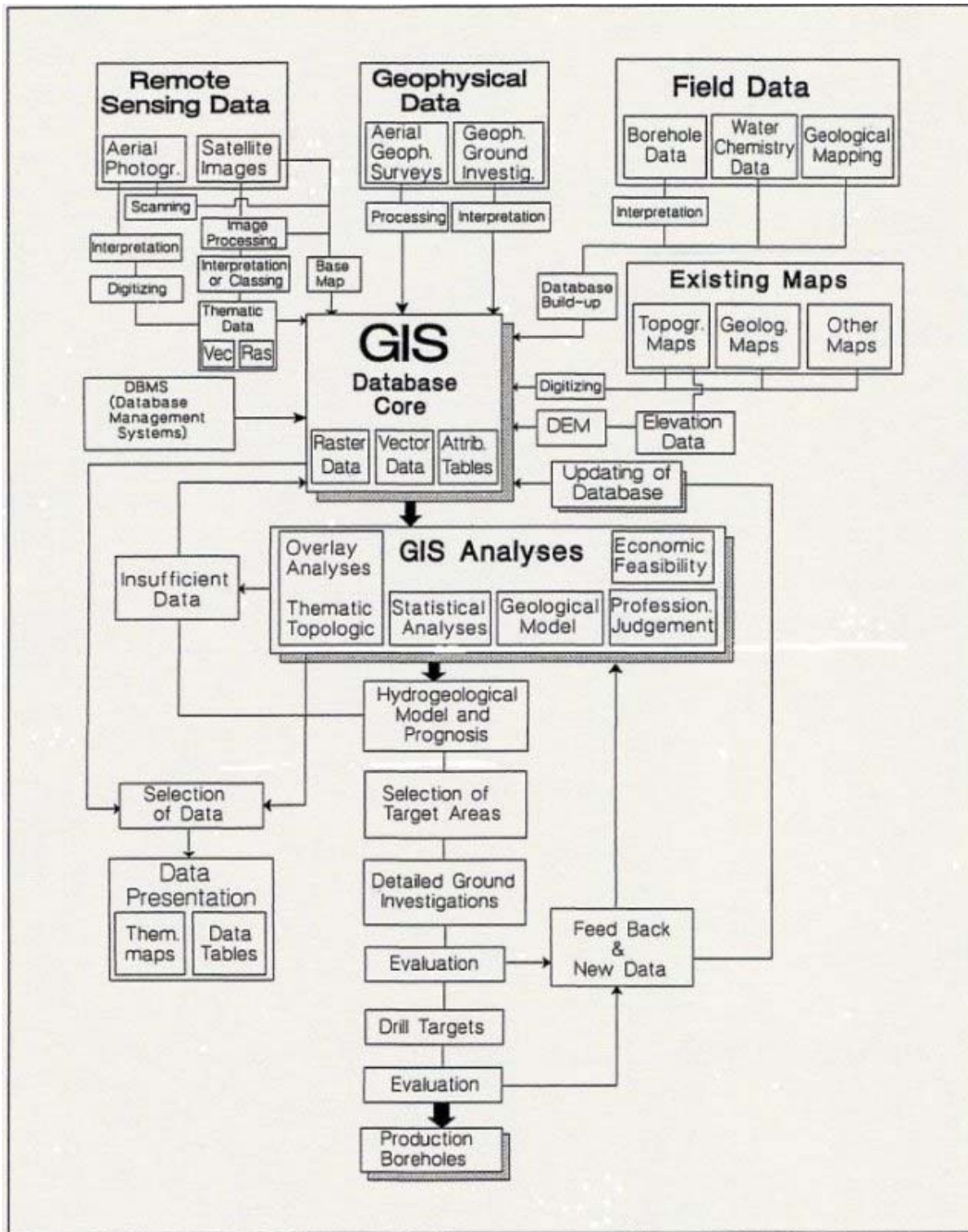


Table 1. Summary of GIS procedure used in evaluation of drilling targets in arid zone hard rock terrain (after Sander, 1999)

The character of fracturing can be modified by weathering, which is a feature of hard rocks in semiarid and arid areas and has been studied in detail in terms of mineralogical and lithological changes. Hydrogeological understanding is limited. While a universal feature, weathering is prone to preferentially effect fracture zones and therefore may enhance fracture porosity. An indication of the hydraulic properties in a weathered profile is shown in Figure 6. Unfortunately, the effects are very inconsistent and the resultant aquifer characteristics highly variable, as noted above. Irrespective, of the secondary process influences, hydraulic conductivity and porosity in hard rocks are very small compared to other aquifer rocks and would appear normally to decrease with depth. Generally, aquifer conditions in hard rocks tend to be unconfined.

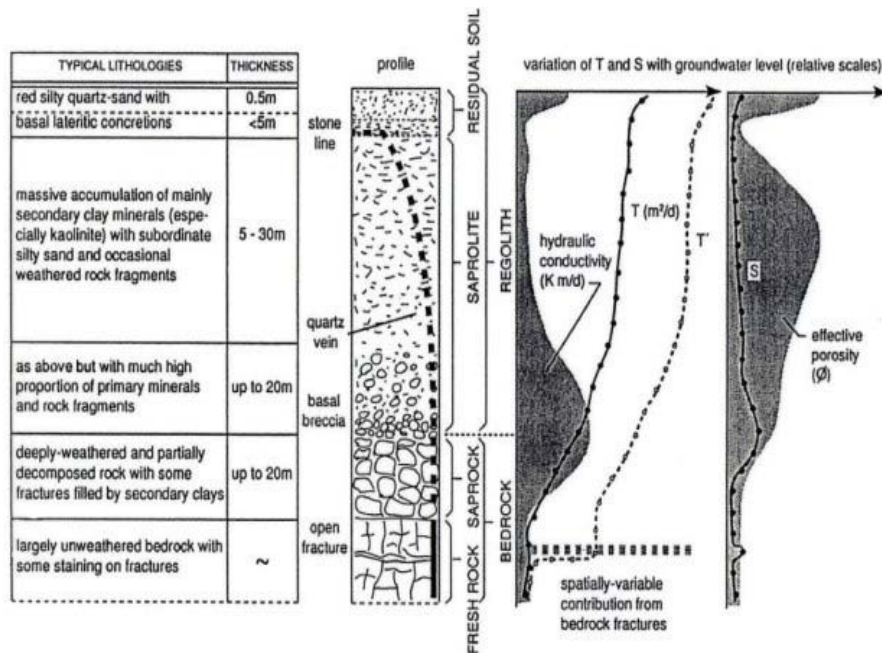


Figure 6. Example of hydraulic characteristics distribution in a weathered granite profile (after Chilton and Foster, 1995).

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Biographical Sketch

John Lloyd is a Fellow of the British Royal Academy of Engineering and the Institution of Engineers. He holds a Doctorate of Science and a Doctorate of Philosophy, both in hydrogeology. He has worked for seven years in Jordan and three years in Chile, in the desert areas of those countries before being employed to lecture in the School of Earth Sciences of the University of Birmingham, UK, where he was appointed Professor of Hydrogeology in 1985. He has worked extensively in arid areas in the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, Australia, South America and Southern Africa. His main interests are the study of groundwater flow systems and the methodologies of groundwater resources development under semi-arid and arid conditions.