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Comment on hess-2021-271

Anonymous Referee #1

Referee comment on "Quantifying the Regional Water Balance of the Ethiopian Rift Valley Lake Basin Using an Uncertainty Estimation Framework" by Tesfalem Abraham et al., Hydrol. Earth Syst. Sci. Discuss., <https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-2021-271-RC1>, 2021

This is a review of "Quantifying the Regional Water Balance of the Ethiopian Rift Valley Lake Basin Using an Uncertainty Estimation Framework" by Abraham et al. The paper presents a method to predict streamflow on ungauged basins in a region of Ethiopia. The method first uses behavioral parameter sets to identify parameters that are to be used in the regression analysis (for identifying relationships between parameters and catchment descriptors). A few parameter selection methods are proposed, which are then tested in regionalization using a leave-one-out approach. The authors then extend the study to include an analysis on the streamflow elasticity to better understand how changes in precipitation can affect variations in streamflow.

I found this paper to be informative about the study region, and I think there is potential to this paper. However, I think that there is a fair amount of work left before it can be considered for publication in HESS. Here are my concerns:

1. The literature review is quite outdated. Many seminal papers are presented in this paper, but a lot of work has been done in the past few years that could be used to set a clearer context to this study. For example, see Guo et al. 2021 for an up-to-date review on regionalization approaches across the globe. This will also help contextualize the claim in lines 57-59:

Guo, Y., Zhang, Y., Zhang, L. and Wang, Z., 2021. Regionalization of hydrological modeling for predicting streamflow in ungauged catchments: A comprehensive review. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water*, 8(1), p.e1487.

2. Lines 77-89: This section is more of a description of the method. I suggest the authors better define the problem they are trying to solve and provide clear objectives. The way they are presented in the paper, the objectives are not clear to me.

3. Lines 106-107: This sentence is unclear. Which global parameter sets? Which climate forcings? Please be specific. I suggest removing this "overview" paragraph and focus on a step-by-step description of the methodology. The steps can then refer to the figure to see where they fit in.

4. Figure 1: I think there are steps missing here. For example, how does the calibration fit into this process? I assume it is in the parameter estimation step, where the best set from the behavioral sets are identified, but that should be clarified. And the parameters are only computed on the gauged basins (obviously) but is there also a validation step?

5. Section 3.1: This section presents the data and catchment properties. I would suggest moving this to the "study area" section, since it deals with the data and properties of the study area.

6. Also, it would be important to state why the data are only available until 2007. Perhaps there was a decision to close gauging stations, etc., but for the reader it feels as if the study was completed on data that has not been updated in the past 14 years.

7. Lines 137-140: Please state clearly which properties and data are used as catchment descriptors here. These sentences as-is are pretty vague.

8. Lines 211-213: Indicate that CV is the standard deviation divided by the mean.

9. The methodology presented in section 3.5 seems biased, in my opinion. At this stage, towards lines 230-235, the authors explain that the three regression models (trained on parameters coming from the calibration period, validation period and "stable" parameters) are verified on the validation period only. This is problematic, because at this stage I could foresee that the regression model trained on the "best validation" parameter set would probably be the best during verification. This is because the hydroclimatic conditions play a major role in the ability to regionalize in the first place (as stated a bit further in the paper). So parameter sets that are "good" on this period, are probably going to be better in regionalization than parameters trained on other periods, simply because the hydroclimatic conditions are more similar by default (given the proximity of the catchments). I think that to even the field, the same process should have been completed by testing the regression models on the calibration period and the full period as well, to complete the experiment design. I would be fairly confident that the regression models

would perform best on their corresponding training period. I suggest the authors include this analysis in a revised version to be able to analyze this aspect and contextualize the claim that one regression model is "better" than the others. This can be done by updating figure 5b, where we can see the effect I am referring to.

10. Figure 4: It is important to note that the small distributions of 5, 8, 13 and 15 are caused by the fact that they barely hit 0.5 NSE, meaning that only a few parameter sets are even allowed in this analysis. Whereas catchments with higher NSEs have many more parameter sets that are above 0.5. Perhaps one approach would have been to keep only the top 0.1 NSE from the maximum or something similar. Why keep parameter sets that have NSE values of 0.5 if some runs give 0.7 / 0.8 NSE? It seems that these are less "behavioral" than those at 0.7 if the maximum is 0.75. Perhaps keeping a fixed range vs their maximum value would allow for a better comparison.

11. Following comment #10, line 275-276: "The parameters in these catchments remained insensitive" should be revised. It is not that they are insensitive. It is that the only few parameter sets with $NSE > 0.5$ had to have those parameter values.

12. Figure 5 is extremely vague for me, I am not sure what I am looking at even after reading the text, legend and caption a few times. Please consider displaying in another fashion or providing a more detailed interpretation.

13. Lines 297 – 315: I think these results should be provided with some sort of note that they are strongly dependent on the available dataset and that they must be taken with a grain of salt for the abovementioned reasons: 1- Not a lot of training data; 2- some catchments have a large spread of possible values due to having a $NSE \gg 0.5$, whereas others have NSE barely above 0.5, which plays on the identifiability of parameter sets.

14. Figure 8: Here the CVs are not clear to me. Why do 2 neighboring catchments have similar elasticities, but have CVs that range from essentially 0 to 180% ? a CV of 180 means that the standard deviation is 1.8x the average, so I am supposing that the precipitation is extremely low there? and neighboring catchments are very different in this regard? Please provide a bit more guidance to clarify.

15. Line 361: "With an average decrease of 0.40% from calibration to validation..." What exactly does this represent? 0.40% of the NSE value? Of another error metric? Please specify.

16. Lines 367-369. Please revise following my comment #9.

17. Lines 379-388: This section is restating the results. It would be beneficial to restructure the text to focus on the lessons learned from the experiment and dig deeper into the results to explain them and find links with the literature. this entire paragraph (lines 379-389) only has one such sentence of interest, the last one that compares to the Beck et al. 2016 study.

18. Lines 414-415: Was it really well identified, or is it simply that most parameter sets were barely able to provide 0.5 NSE (and looking at figure 3, it would seem that catchment #15 did not attain 0.5 at all in calibration)?

19. Line 442: "regress" à regression?

20. Lines 484-485: This sentence kind of pops up from nowhere and has little relevance to the rest of the paper. I would suggest removing it.

Finally, the paper should be proofread by a professional English speaker as there are quite a lot of syntax errors which sometime distract from the content. In a similar vein, it is more typical to use a neutral and objective writing style to "depersonalize" the text. Instead of writing "we use the HBV model...", try to use "the HBV model was used...". I am unsure of the official HESS policy on this, but it is good practice.