

## Conference Report

### **Workshop on Linking Drainage Basin Management to Local Action Plans and PolicyQ1**

Within the framework of the Stockholm Water Symposium, which was held between 11 and 14 August 2003, a workshop was organized on linking drainage basin management to local action plans and national policy. It was convened by the Third World Centre for Water Management, with the Global Water Partnership and the United Nations Development Programme as co-convenors.

Linking drainage basin management to local action plans and national policy is a very difficult and complex task. The complexity has been for the most part grossly underestimated by the water profession. Even for a small and developed country like Sweden, some 400 institutions are involved in water management, in one form or another, at national, municipal and area levels. Often the interests of the different institutions may be different, their stakeholders may be different and their perspectives and agendas may be different. For example, nutrients in water could be considered as positive by farmers but negative by ecologists.

Policies made at national level may not be acceptable at the sub-national and/or local levels, and vice versa. Thus, the Spanish National Hydrological Plan, which was approved by the Spanish Parliament, has been rejected outright by the states of Aragon and Catalonia. Often the national policies, integrated drainage basin management plans and local action plans may not be compatible. In any democracy, such differences of opinion are to be expected and should also be respected. The issue then becomes how to reconcile such differences in a constructive manner for the long-term overall benefit of the society as a whole. Furthermore, as the number of inter-basin transfer plans increases, the relevance and appropriateness of the concept of a management plan for one single catchment area need to be carefully reviewed. These are complex issues and questions, which merit significant additional discussions within the water profession.

The issues of scale and the nature of the drainage basins and their institutional and legal frameworks need to be carefully considered. For major drainage basins such as the Ganges and the Mekong, the sheer magnitude and complexity of managing integratively at the catchment level must not be underestimated.

It was noted that cultural barriers, within which specialists feel safe and comfortable, prevent them getting their messages across to politicians and society. The hazards for the technocrats of stepping outside their comfort zone can be severe. Equally, the hazards of failing to engage the political world can lead to misguided, costly and unimplementable policies.

It was pointed out that Australia has reformed its water sector since 1995, but individual states have adopted different laws and policies. This does not promote inter-state dialogue and formulation and implementation of drainage basin management plans, which results in a lesser degree of integration between national-, state- and local-level actions.

Similar problems can be seen in major international rivers that originate from China. For example, China has not negotiated with co-basin countries when planning and executing projects on major international rivers such as the Mekong, which means that even if a drainage basin management plan for the entire river existed, it would not have been possible to link it to the national policies of co-basin countries, let alone link the plan to local-level actions.

It was successfully argued that water management issues may often be similar between areas, but solutions may not be universal. Even within small basins, core concerns and points of leverage are often much more specific and localized. Solutions must address problems of immediate concern to local populations. In any process of integration, who does the integrating is of fundamental importance, but such relevant questions are rarely asked, let alone addressed. Overall, the development of effective solutions to water problems depends less on integration and more on governance.

The discussions on the various workshop-related issues were wide ranging. The main issues raised were the following.

- *Institutions*: while many argue that a significant reduction in the number of water management institutions will promote efficient water management, reducing them to a very few may not be the optimal or a lasting solution. Democracy means proper consideration of a diversity of stakeholders, having different interests and agendas. Reducing water management institutions to a single one may not ensure that the different needs of the various social groups can be adequately addressed. It may even contribute to more centralization and inadequate local-level consultations. When there are many institutions, their roles, responsibilities and accountabilities should be clearly defined. An absence of such definitions often creates confusion and may contribute to inter-institutional rivalries and bureaucratic in-fighting.
- *Bureaucracies*: many water bureaucracies have proved to be remarkably sustainable. In fact, several water institutions in Asia have already celebrated their centenaries. The focus should not necessarily be on eliminating them, but rather on how to make them continually more efficient and respond properly and promptly to the needs of the society at different levels, eliminating the negative aspects of bureaucratic behaviour.
- *Diversity of problems and solutions*: the world is not homogenous; even all developed or developing countries are not identical, or at the same stage of development. The physical, climatological, social, economic, institutional, environmental and legal conditions may vary from one country to another, and often even within the same country. There is no single universal paradigm or solution that could be equally appropriate for all countries of the world and for all periods of time. Therefore, the quest for one solution that will be universally applicable is likely to be futile. Solutions have to be specific

to each and every context, and we need to consider the existence of a plurality of paradigms, over both space and time.

Even some existing major paradigms, such as integrated water resources management (IWRM) and integrated river basin management (IRBM), may not be universally applicable. Conceptually both are very attractive. The question then arises as to why, even though the two concepts have existed for more than half a century, has it been so extremely difficult to apply them in middle- to large-sized river basins anywhere in the world? While water is an important resource, catchment areas, especially for middle- to large-sized basins, conflict with existing administrative and/or political boundaries in most countries. Thus, a fundamental question that needs to be answered is, can water be managed in terms of a drainage basin, which may cover many administrative and/or political boundaries, whereas other resources and issues will continue to be managed in terms of administrative and/or political boundaries?

- *Participation and public dialogue:* both of these processes are essential as important means for learning values, concepts and local experiences, both good and bad.

The discussions during the workshop were very constructive. Many fundamental issues were raised which require significant additional work before they can be successfully resolved.

*Asit K. Biswas  
Third World Centre for Water Management  
Atizapan, Mexico*