

Governance Issues in River-Basin Management: A Regional Perspective

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Introduction

Water governance refers to the “range of political, social, economic and administrative systems that are in place to regulate the development and management of water resources and provision of water services at different levels of society.” Effective water governance is concerned with how water resources are managed, and who manages them, i.e., the mandates, controls, rights and responsibilities of the different stakeholders in water utilization and management, and the relations between the different stakeholders in practice. The term “good governance” is avoided because it is value-laden and because there is no single model of effective governance. To be effective, governance systems must fit the social, economic and cultural peculiarities of each country.

Effective Water Governance

The effectiveness of a governance approach follows several fundamental principles, as follows:

- *Transparency.* An atmosphere of transparency wherein decisions are made in a comprehensible, open manner creates more trust and confidence within the system. Transparency likewise implies that the relevant information is circulated and made available to all stakeholders, and informed decision making is always sought.
- *Accountability.* Good governance bestows responsibility and accountability over decisions and resources, and provides for consequences (e.g., rewards, penalties) for outcomes.
- *Equity.* The equity principle seeks to address social, economic, political and geographical disparities among water users, by consciously incorporating the concepts of water needs and water rights, and by addressing the needs of the disadvantaged, including gender issues, in water management.
- *Participation.* A genuine participatory approach, whereby stakeholder representatives starting at the grass-roots level, increases the practicability and sociopolitical acceptability of water-management projects.

- *Communications.* A crosscutting concern, effective communications increase transparency in water governance and provide strong feedback mechanisms particularly for civil society and grass-roots organizations.
- *Incentive-based approach.* Rather than penalizing negative results, an incentive-based approach to water governance encourages positive, creative actions, and minimizes costs of water management by avoiding poor decisions or actions that could require expensive rehabilitative or reparative measures.
- *Coherence.* A rational and consistent approach to water governance, which constantly seeks consensus, integration and equity, and delivers a strong message that is easily understood and accepted by water users and stakeholders.
- *Efficiency.* Good governance promotes efficiency by streamlining procedures and processes, and reduces bureaucracy.
- *Integration.* A key strategy to improve efficiency in water governance, integration involves clear coordination among and within disciplines, geographical areas, organizational structures within and outside of governments, and administrative boundaries.
- *Ethics.* Often the most overlooked aspect of governance, ethics provides the social framework for water governance. In many societies, particularly in old, traditional societies in Asia, ethics provides strong foundations for good water practices and good governance.

An effective governance for water must be able to: a) create an enabling environment that facilitates efficient private and public-sector initiatives; b) provide regulatory regimes allowing clear transactions between stakeholders in a climate of trust; and c) encourage shared responsibilities for safeguarding river and aquifer resources.

Governance Dialogues

The governance dialogues take their roots from the Second World Water Forum in The Hague, The Netherlands, wherein the GWP Framework for Action stated that “the water crisis is often a crisis of governance.” The Hague Ministerial Declaration further reinforced this view and called for “governing water wisely to ensure good governance, so that the involvement of the public and the interests of all stakeholders are included in the management of water resources.” Likewise, during the 2000 UN Millennium Assembly, Heads of States emphasized conservation and stewardship in protecting our common environment, especially to “stop the unsustainable exploitation of water resources, by developing water-management strategies at the regional, national and local level, which promote both equitable access and adequate supplies.” During the Bonn Freshwater Conference in 2001 the Ministers further recommended action in three areas with water governance as the most important, proposing that “each country should have

in place applicable arrangements for the governance of water affairs at all levels, and where appropriate, accelerate water sector reforms.”

For Southeast Asia, national and regional dialogues on water governance are therefore being convened by the GWP Southeast Asia Technical Advisory Committee (GWP SEATAC), often in partnership with country water partnerships, national governments, and external support agencies to promote and facilitate the adoption of effective water-governance models.

Governance Issues in River-Basin Management

At the river basin, governance issues may be classified according to three major components: policy, institutions and management tools.

- *The role of policy.* Water-management policies provide the enabling legal and political bases for action on water management. A sound policy environment is highly dependent on three major factors: a) strong political will and decision making; b) decentralization and transfers of tasks; and c) provision of responsive water laws.
- *The role of institutions.* The institutional structures serve as the medium and implementation arm for good water governance. Obviously, good policies without good institutional support cannot be successful. Sound institutional support may be characterized by a) adequate representation of a wide range of stakeholders; b) flexibility; and c) representation of the grass-roots sector.
- *The role of management tools.* Management tools are the instruments and/or mechanisms by which institutional bodies carry out and apply the general and specific policy declarations. To be applicable, management tools should a) be based on clear delegation of responsibilities; b) have technical and financial support; c) be supported by an information network; d) promote capacity building; and e) assign clear authorities with regard to the monitoring and control of budgets and plans.

At the river basin therefore, the provision of a water-management framework that encompasses all three major components described above will result in a higher probability of success for a more sustainable water-resources management.