



## **Conference Report**

### **Workshop on Integrated River Basin Management in Latin America**

*Mexico City, 26-28 April 1999.*

Integrated river basin management is not a new concept. Even though it was developed more than five decades ago, its implementation has left much to be desired. For Latin America, interest in integrated river basin management was rekindled in the 1990s, and it has resulted in the establishment of river basin authorities in several countries. Knowledge and experience transfer within the Latin American countries leaves much to be desired, and not surprisingly, the various Latin American advances in this area in terms of new ideas and technologies are mostly unknown not only within the region itself, but also often within the same country. In order to distil the Latin American experiences on integrated river basin management, objectively review the status of implementation of the concept in the region, and consider what other feasible management alternatives may be available, the Third World Centre for Water Management (TWCWM) convened a very high-level workshop on this issue in Mexico City, in 26-28 April, 1999, with the support of the Committee on International Collaboration of the International Water Resources Association (CIC-IWRA), the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), the British Council and the International Water Management Institute (IWMI).

Participation at the workshop was by invitation only, and was restricted to 25 senior policy makers and experts on water resources planning and management in Latin America. Thirteen background papers were specially commissioned to set the scene for the discussions. Among the papers commissioned were global reviews on experiences of integrated river basin development planning and management; experiences of the Inter-American Development Bank in the region; the role of the governments in the integral management of basins in Latin America, and specific case studies from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Venezuela. Technical, economic, social and environmental issues, as well as legal and institutional perspectives were reviewed in depth.

The issue of sustainability within the context of integrated river basin management, was as an important focus of discussion. It was noted that even though sustainable development is a very attractive concept, its operationalisation in terms of river basins has mostly not been successful. Progress has been basically incremental thus far. Among other major issues discussed during the workshop were lack of real public participation

due to the prevailing hierarchical decision-making processes; difficulties in integrated management of international river basins because of the national sovereignty issues; development of water markets and other economic instruments for demand management, institutional weaknesses, preservation of social and cultural values and environmental conservation. Often integrated development of river basins unfortunately seems to be more of a reflection of the interests and priorities of the main institutions involved in the water management and planning processes, rather than rational management of water and associated resources which should maximise the benefits to the populations concerned on a long-term basis.

So far as the concept of efficient river basin management is concerned, it was agreed that a better conceptual framework is needed, with strong emphasis on its implementation potential within varying technical, social, economic, environmental and institutional conditions prevailing in the region. Broad generalised concepts are counterproductive since people interpret them very differently and the implementation of vague ideas are very difficult, if not impossible. It is important to realise the complexity of the reality, and understand that the integrated management of river basins depends on political, economic, social, cultural, historic, and environmental issues, which could vary not only with time, but also spatially. Only two countries in Latin America, Brazil and Mexico, are now required by law to consider river basins as units of management for national water resources. These management units were considered as necessary for the optimal management of water resources by these two countries. While this arrangement appeared to work for a few cases (for example, Upper Tiete Basin in Brazil), it was agreed that it did not represent the best alternative for the management of water resources from a practical viewpoint in most cases. Regionalisation was recognised as a more feasible option to achieve practical solutions.

It was noted that integrated management of river basins, irrespective of the rhetoric, has made limited progress. Integrated planning of river basins should be based on a dynamic methodology which can be adapted to specific conditions. There should be long-term plans but with clear short- and medium-term goals. The authorities responsible for water management should not be isolated from the other ministries, which in reality is a difficult goal to achieve. For Latin America, water is a national priority, and its efficient planning should simultaneously include water requirements of different economic sectors as well as the impacts of these sectors on the water planning process. This again is difficult to achieve within the current overall political-institutional framework.

The present model of river basin management depends heavily on high initial investments for infrastructure, which some times may not be a feasible alternative for the Latin American countries due to regular economic crises they have faced in the recent decades. This reality is likely to force the water planners to develop models which depend less on very substantial financial investments and more on management-oriented solutions. The implementation of economic instruments requires special attention, since

the absence of adequate regulation and surveillance could result in monopoly situations and/or improper management processes. Economic issues are very important, but they should not be automatically considered to be the only, or even the main, alternative for sustainable river basin management.

Legal frameworks related to river basin management should be congruent with the economic, social, political and institutional conditions of the different countries. Legislations should be redefined so that they are compatible with the present trends of increasingly privatisation and social participation. Emphasis should also be placed on the implementation aspects of the existing legislations.

The meeting noted that adequate number of qualified and experienced personnel currently simply do not exist in the Latin American countries to ensure integrated management of river basins. Capacity building, holistic vision and interdisciplinary approaches have now become a “must” to manage the changing conditions of river basin management. A new generation of water professionals having a broader mind set and appropriate management skills, are now urgently needed to manage river basins in a rapidly changing world. Latin America is no exception to this global trend.

It was noted that social participation is essential for better water management. However, methodologically, it is still very difficult to ensure active social participation in water management processes. Often interest groups try to capture the water management processes to promote their own agendas in the guise of people’s participation. Access to data and information was also recognised as an important constraint.

The various Latin American countries have made considerable progress in certain specific areas of water management. In order to identify these advances, the Third World Centre for Water Management and the Committee on International Collaboration of the International Water Resources Association are jointly sponsoring a series of focused, invitation only, workshops. The present workshop was the second of this series. The papers commissioned for the workshop and its results have been published by Oxford University Press, with Asit K. Biswas and Cecilia Tortajada as Editors.

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