

First International Environment Forum for Basin Organizations

Towards Sustainable Freshwater Governance

UNEP, Nairobi, Kenya, 26-28 November 2014

*Chair's Summary*¹

Key stakeholders in the management of freshwater basins from all around the globe, such as ministers of water and the environment, heads of basin organizations and water directors, heads of national delegations to transboundary basin organizations, UN Agencies and other relevant international organizations, secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), civil society and academia, gathered for the 1st International Environment Forum for Basin Organizations.² The Forum took place from 26 – 28 November 2014 in Nairobi, Kenya. Parallel, regional consultative pre-session events for Africa and the Americas were held on 25 November 2014.

The primary objective of the Forum was to strengthen basin organizations as key building blocks for effective environmental governance. During a Technical Segment on 26 and 27 November participants shared their perspectives and provided insights on the importance of sustainable freshwater governance related to four main themes: 1. *Water Quality and Ecosystem Health*; 2. *Water-Energy-Food Nexus and Adaptation to Climate Change*; 3. *Environmental Laws and Regulations*; and 4. *Institutional Challenges*. This was followed by a High-Level Segment on 28 November 2014 during which participants deliberated on the way forward based on the discussions in the Technical Segment. This summary highlights their key messages.

1. The Importance of Sustainable Freshwater Governance

Participants underscored the importance of sustainable freshwater governance in light of the current worrying state of the global freshwater resources and the post-2015 development agenda. They highlighted that basin management has taken a positive development in many countries and that there are many experiences worldwide which show that integrated and sound water resources management organized at the basin level is essential today. However, participants stressed that sustainable basin management needs renewed and long-term commitments from Governments, regional, national and local stakeholders, as well as the international community, to deal with the great many environmental challenges ahead.

- Basin organizations are custodians of vital resources for humanity. They hold the potential to contribute significantly to poverty alleviation and shared prosperity.
- The protection and the restoration of freshwater ecosystems for water security should be prioritized.
- Cooperation between all relevant stakeholders, at the international, regional, national and local levels, and riparian countries needs to be reinforced.
- There is a need to further promote the harmonization and coordination of relevant guidelines and strategies for protecting water quality for ecosystem health, including through global water quality guidelines and common terminology for the assessment of ecosystems drawing on all available scientific and indigenous knowledge to produce internationally agreed criteria.
- Basin management frameworks should include clear long-term goals, sufficient capacity, technical and financial resources, policies for stakeholder engagement and cooperation in data generation, information sharing and water quality monitoring overall.

¹ This document sets out the insights and views expressed by the participants. It is not a negotiated document, but rather a reflection of the broad perspectives and thinking of the participants that does not necessarily represent country or institutional positions or consensus on each and every issue.

² The 1st International Environment Forum for Basin Organizations was co-convened by the International Network of Basin Organizations (INBO) and organized in partnership with the Organization of American States (OAS), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the African Ministerial Council for Water (AMCOW), the Global Water Partnership (GWP), the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the United Nations Commission for Economic Cooperation in Europe (UNECE).

2. Strengthening the Resilience of Freshwater Basins

Establishing or strengthening capacities to assess and monitor freshwater resources and related ecosystems is essential. Basin-wide information systems can serve as readily-accessible sources of information for reporting to enhance the dialogue among stakeholders, improve development models, guide policy decisions and support the development of analytical tools and benchmarking between basin organizations.

- Transboundary/basin-wide cooperation in adaptation to climate change reduces costs, prevents the negative impacts of unilateral adaptation and conflict. Basin organizations can play a leading role in such cooperation and in adaptation to climate change overall.
- There is a need to strengthen and/or establish integrated basin-wide water information systems to collect data on freshwater and related ecosystems and carry out in-depth assessments in support of the sustainable use of freshwater resources and the management of environmental stresses such as climate change.
- The continued exchange of experiences, promotion of shared language, terminology and indicators, and joint assessments based on agreed methodologies, should be encouraged.
- Ecosystem-Based Adaptation (EBA) in basin-wide climate change adaptation strategies must be prioritized to promote resilience and in order to reduce vulnerability.

3. The Water-Food-Energy Nexus

Participants discussed the many existing efforts to address the Water-Food-Energy Nexus and highlighted as well as shared many examples of good practices from all over the world. Cooperation across sectors and between public and private sectors within basins is crucial for sustainable resource use and effective governance of the water-energy-food nexus.

- Regular dialogues, data and information exchange about the nexus among basin organizations should be maintained.
- It is also necessary to establish and maintain strong cross-sectoral partnerships to improve energy, water and food security, strengthen ecosystem integrity, foster synergies, minimize negative trade-offs and support sustainable development.
- Strong coordination mechanisms supported by clear mandates should be set up to coordinate between all economic sectors, and to set up partnerships between stakeholders.
- Participants also encouraged the dialogue on the nexus between basin organizations and political decision makers as well as the involvement of farmers and all other stakeholders. Such involvement often results in unexpected benefits, including economic benefits.

4. Laws and Regulations

A shift in thinking is occurring among MEA-related policy fora on the inter-linkages between water, ecosystems and biodiversity. Whilst water has usually been recognized as being a central issue for the conservation and wise use of biodiversity, there is a clear shift towards recognizing how biodiversity, ecosystems, and ecosystem services offer solutions for achieving sustainable freshwater, including reducing risks from water related disasters. There is no reason to 're-invent the wheel'. A wealth of technical progress has already been achieved under various MEAs, as well as the 1992 UNECE Water Convention (concerning best practice, technical guidance, environmental/ecological standards, communication procedures, etc.), which can inform the ongoing elaboration of practice of basin organizations.

- The integration of environmental considerations into water law (the 'greening' of water law) and basin regimes is essential in light of current and future environmental pressures.
- The protection and the restoration of freshwater ecosystems should be mainstreamed in the regimes, mandates, strategies and management plans of basin organizations on the scale of local, national or transboundary basins of rivers, lakes and aquifers, including their related coastal waters.
- It is necessary to further develop understanding of international environmental law at the domestic level. It is particularly important to build capacity in this area among key national political decision-makers.
- A better understanding and promotion of the synergies between international environmental obligations, including MEAs, and basin regimes could help basin organizations and

Governments negotiate and implement agreements pertaining to the environment more effectively.

- Basin organizations are characterized by a great deal of diversity in terms of their structures and mandates. A key issue for all of them is that of acquiring 'trust' in their ability to operate, their capacity, capabilities, and their *bona fide* commitment to environmental values. Such trust requires consistent communication and an effective and broad-based participatory process.

5. Strengthening Basin Organizations

Basin organizations are important actors to improve environmental governance. Basin organizations are in a unique position to coordinate the work of riparian countries, international development partners, local authorities, private companies and other stakeholders at the basin level to strengthen coherent action for the achievement of shared environmental targets and to promote sustainable use of the world's freshwater.

- Participants stressed the need for continued institutional and policy reforms at the basin level to create enabling conditions for an increase in capacity and in order to open the way for the engagement of community-level organizations and private sector investment.
- Data on water quality and on ecosystems is critical as a prerequisite for major investments in the water sector, stakeholder buy-in and vital to emergency response strategies.
- In general, funding opportunities for basin organizations in the field of the environment should be increased.
- Conflicting and overlapping roles and responsibilities at the basin level can obstruct and complicate basin resources management. Participants underscored the need to coordinate, harmonize and streamline institutions and their objectives at the basin level.
- There is a need for increased engagement of basin organizations with political decision makers at all levels.

6. The Way Forward

- UNEP, as the leading global environmental authority within the United Nations system, and its partner organizations should continue to support and extend opportunities to basin organizations to collaborate with the aim of improving sustainable freshwater governance - including enhancing their participation in global environmental policy setting processes, such as the United Nations Environment Assembly, MEAs, and other conventions and processes relevant for sustainable freshwater management.
- INBO and other existing networks should be supported and further strengthened in order to improve the sharing of information, experiences, expertise and good practices, for improved freshwater governance at all levels.
- UNEP, INBO, and partner organizations should build on the outcomes of the 1st International Environment Forum for Basin Organizations and continue this important process towards sustainable freshwater governance.
