Transboundary Waters Knowledge-Sharing: an overview of GEF's International Waters Learning Exchange & Resource Network, and the UNEP-IW:LEARN Best Practices Database initiative.

Janot Mendler, Project Coordinator, GEF-IW:LEARN

While the elegance and intricacy of the hydrological cycle may not be at the forefront of the average person's thoughts, humanity is incontestably united in its passion for and reliance on water. Yet, water can unite or divide. The destabilizing and compounding effects of land degradation, water mismanagement, ecosystem degradation, and climate change tear at the fabric of our societies. The World Summit on Sustainable Development has underscored the fact, that as we begin this new millennium, water issues also pose increasing threats to international peace and security.

The GEF, the Global Environment Facility – and its international waters focal area – was created in response to the world community's recognition of the serious degradation of freshwater and marine systems occurring across borders. The GEF operational strategy emphasizes the framework of sustainable development in addressing transboundary waters issues.

Collective processes are necessary for countries to work together in establishing priorities. GEF projects have found that while time-consuming, the process of conducting a Transboundary Diagnostic Assessment (some of you may have heard the term "TDA") can catalyze building a broad base of stakeholder engagement and political buy-in while establishing the foundations and strengthening cooperative multi-country management institutions.

Joint processes are also key to the adoption of policy, legal and institutional reforms in those economic sectors responsible for degradation or use conflicts.

In agreeing to share commitment and responsibility, basin countries also share a vision of mutual and sustainable benefits. A focus on shared benefits, including reductions in poverty and resource degradation, is the best way to address conflicts arising over water.

Transboundary diagnostic analysis is particularly useful in developing collective Strategic Action Plans. These are roadmaps for "learning by doing". The "doing" is an on-going process of confidence and

consensus-building, inter-ministerial consultation and cooperation, multi-stakeholder participation, public awareness-raising, capacity-building, public-private partnerships, and innovative mobilization of financing resources.

The GEF tests the feasibility of incremental investments to address conflicts and reverse degradation. This means that the GEF funds that extra stimulus required to catalyse transboundary cooperation.

To maximize return on investment, the GEF encourages networking and knowledge-sharing across the international waters community, so that projects - and the people within and among basins who drive and will sustain the gains catalyzed through GEF support - can continually learn from and teach each other.

Biennial GEF International Waters conferences are proving to be an invaluable means to collectively and globally assess needs and accomplishments, synthesize and exchange learning experiences, and identify emerging issues and priorities.

The GEF International Waters Learning Exchange and Resource Network, more familiarly known as the IW:LEARN project, strengthens the architecture of a global knowledge-sharing community.

The website at www.iwlearn.org and International Waters Resource Center, the prototype open-source 'water portal' at www.iwlearn.net) strive to make the information, knowledge, and capacity-building resources generated by the GEF International Waters community freely accessible. IW:LEARN is partnering with UNESCO and the World Water Assessment Program providing training to web developers so they can create intercompatible portals to be linked through a series of regional umbrella portals into the World Water Portal.

Pilot activities pioneering innovative locally-developed solutions include a partnership with the World Bank and an NGO in southern Africa to up a Distance Learning Information Sharing Tool (www.dlist.org) and create an ICM (Integrated Coastal Management) short course in the Benguela Current region.

Working closely with the 3 GEF implementing agencies – UNDP (the United Nations Development Programme), UNEP (the United Nations Environment Porgramme) and the World Bank - IW:LEARN promotes means to identify, disseminate, discuss and learn from "best" or "wise"

practices as well as those "lessons" (or should we say "worst practices"!) gained from waters project experience.

To give you a look at the new International Waters best practices database system UNEP is developing with IW:LEARN, and which we hope you will find a useful resource for your colleagues and organizations – and also contribute the considerable insight and wisdom of your basin experiences to it! - I'd like to introduce my colleague from UNEP, Sean Khan.