

K O F F I n f o S h e e t

Water Linking People – the Potential of Water for Cooperation

September 2007

Kompetenzzentrum Friedensförderung
Centre pour la promotion de la paix
Centro per la promozione della pace
Center for Peacebuilding

Content:

Why an InfoSheet

on «Water Linking People»?

Factors and Conditions for Cooperative Solutions

The Role of Development Actors

Challenges and open Questions

Links

Water is one indispensable resource on this planet. Even though the sharing of water can lead to competition and conflict, there is also a great potential for water to be an incentive of cooperation. People come together and find solutions for water management issues, sometimes for very pragmatic reasons. This InfoSheet offers a compilation of recently published lessons learnt, concerned with sharing insights on the decisive factors that make cooperation in water management successful, on local as well as national levels. The aim of this summary is to provide international development actors inputs in order to make their interventions more effective. Water is subject to many different uses, each of them having specific characteristics and challenges regarding its management. This InfoSheet will focus on «water for food», i.e. on water for food production, counting for 70 % of the total fresh water withdrawal on this planet.

Why an Infosheet on «Water Linking People»?

With growing population, water has become a scarce resource in some regions of the world, leading to an increased number of potential water related disputes and conflicts. World's renewable freshwater supply can be assumed to have been relatively constant over the last centuries, its availability per capita has decreased. Whereas in 1850 it amounted up to approximately 43'000 cubic meters per capita per year, by 1990 this figure has dropped to 9'000 cubic meters. This calculation translates a global average and have not yet included its uneven geographical distribution that can vary by more than factor 100. Hence, already now, it is estimated that 2 billion people suffer from severe physical water scarcity (< 1'000 cubic meters per capita per year).

Climate change

The effects of climate change such as erratic rainfall, floods and droughts are translated into higher variability and unpredictability of water quantities seasonably or locally available. In some parts of the world water availability can decrease whereas in other parts it can increase. This decrease in physical availability is often aggravated by declining water quality.

New ideas of water governance

Disputes and conflicts are inherent to water resource allocation and management, and can sometimes even escalate into violence. This InfoSheet does not deny the existence of conflicts, but seeks to concentrate on the positive and renewing forces of conflicts for social change. The main argument of this InfoSheet is that an efficient and effective water management system – beside many other aspects – should include a framework and the institutions needed to settle conflicts and to transform new ideas of water governance and legitimate demands into sustainable institutional adjustments.

Water creates interdependency

People come together for very pragmatic reasons, namely due to their mutual need and interest to use, share or protect a water resource. Water creates interdependency that may often constitute a great opportunity for cooperation and can foster cooperation and «link people».

«Good Water Neighbours»

Depending on the circumstances, sharing water can have different meanings. On the one hand, it can deepen existing, already good relationships between stakeholders, and on the other hand be a way to building trust in tense relationships, where parties are in conflict over other issues. One example demonstrating this on a local level is the project by by «EcoPeace / Friends of the Earth Middle East» called «Good Water Neighbours». This project was established in 2001 to raise awareness for the problems due to shared water of Palestinians, Jordanians, and Israelis. On the basis of a mutual dependence on a shared water resource, cross border communities are brought together in order to develop dialogue and cooperation on sustainable water management.

Momentum for dialogue

Sharing a water resource can foster trust between stakeholders which in time can go way beyond water issues and be the sound basis of a good relationship, preventing future or potential conflicts related to water management. Hence, water management negotiation platforms can be a momentum for dialogue between conflicting parties, providing a neutral topic that allows parties to sustain communication without needing to talk about conflict issues.

What are the preconditions?

This shift away from the focus of inherent potential for conflict over shared water resources towards the positive forces for potential cooperation leads to the questions: When does water link people? Or in other words: What are the preconditions to enhance chances for cooperative solutions? Which factors contribute to cooperative water governance?

Answering these questions is a complicated task, since what makes water governance and conflict management effective depends on the context and on cultural, economic, social and political settings. Nevertheless, the following chapter tries to outline some of the important aspects in order to get closer to respective answers.

Factors and Conditions for Cooperative Solutions

The following section outlines some of the aspects and concepts that have been identified by different development actors and researchers to have a decisive impact on cooperative water resource management on local and national level. When focusing on aspects of conflict prevention and resolution, it has to be kept in mind that technical measures are closely intertwined with social or socio-political ones and that a strict separation is not advisable.

IWRM: Internationally promoted approach

Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) is an internationally promoted approach with the aim to better coordinate the development and management of water, land and related resources. The objective of the IWRM approach is an efficient and sustainable use of water resource and its infrastructure. This means that water management should be inclusive with regard to different stakeholders, different sectors and uses (agriculture, domestic, industrial, for nature, etc), placing people at the centre. IWRM is assumed to underlie all following aspects and concepts.

Strong and decentralized institutions

Strong institutions which are respected and trusted, and able to balance competing interests as well as ensure the fair and effective implementation of rules are crucial for a sustainable water governance both on a national as well as local level. As far as decentralized approaches are concerned, in the light of the decentralisation processes going on in many countries, local or community-based approaches may be valued for their own sake, as ways to preserve and promote local cooperation and self-governance. On the other hand, these approaches have also shown to be most effective in potentially increasing equity and in responding to local demands.

The adaptive capacity of institutions

Studies have shown that conflict is more likely when changes occur suddenly and when institutions are unable to absorb and effectively manage that change. The capacity of national and local institutions to adjust to real needs and to be able to manage water in a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable way is crucial.

Participation and integration of stakeholders

In order to achieve the best possible sustainability of a water management scheme, it should be designed in a participatory process, integrating all relevant stakeholders from the different sectors, ensuring that all existing and potential conflicting interests are taken into account during decision making. This multi-stakeholder negotiation process should tackle asymmetries among different actors by giving them the means (information, trained staff, and financial support) to act as equal partners.

Empowerment and capacity building

Empowerment and capacity building – in order to generate and analyse data, develop sustainable water management plans, enrich local conflict resolution techniques, or encourage stakeholder participation – should target the corresponding stakeholders, i.e. water management institutions, local non-governmental organizations, and water users' associations. On the local level it translates into strengthening the capacity of excluded, marginalized or weaker groups to articulate and negotiate their interests and hence to help them involve in cooperative water management.

	<p>Inherent in empowerment is the concept of participation and responsible citizenry: knowing one's rights as well as duties, which – in the case of water management – translates into a responsible water use as well as a responsible defence of interests, leaving room for other stakeholders' legitimate needs and interests in order to find best-possible solutions acceptable to everyone.</p>
Win-win solutions	<p>When stakeholders can identify win-win solutions with immediate gains, it does not only lead to faster practical solutions acceptable to all parties, but also increases the potential for sustainability. Environmental Payment Services can be mentioned as an approach for a win-win situation for sometimes conflictive upstream-downstream river relations.</p>
The notion of fairness	<p>The notion of fairness is very subjective and important for the success of any water management agreements and schemes. Sustainability of these negotiated agreements is better when giving involved stakeholders the feeling of fulfilling some acceptable standards of fairness. Hence, when problems arise, the risk for a possibly violent reaction triggered by the feeling of not being taken seriously and being passed over is much smaller and solution finding can rely on some basis of trust. A key factor in people accepting an outcome is their participation in the process that led to the outcome.</p>
Demand-side water management	<p>In vast parts of the world, water management for food production still has a huge potential for enhancing efficiency. Therefore, a responsible water resource management should, in the long term, focus on demand-side water management and concentrate on improving end user efficiency. In a second step, allocation efficiency should be tackled, for it is a potentially highly conflictive undertaking.</p>
Reliable data bases	<p>A sound and reliable data base with all relevant technical information, including meteorological, hydrological, and socio-economic data, is the «sine qua non» basis for negotiations in water management. On one hand, it enables parties to make decisions based on shared information, hence «talking the same language», whereas the joint building-up of such a data base can be a relevant process for trust building and finding a common cooperation mode. On the other hand, the objectivity of this information is important when confronted with the water sharing parties' often subjective perceptions and needs.</p>
Transparency and access to information	<p>Transparency in negotiation and decision making processes as well as access to information and to relevant water management policies is crucial for the trust of users towards existing water management institutions. Users should be informed about their rights as well as their duties, and the role of people involved in a water management system should be clear to all.</p>
Integrating local customary based rights	<p>Strong national institutions capable of the design and implementation of a generally accepted legal framework on a national scale are a prerequisite for decentralized local water management. The latter is often influenced by customary rights that might not be aligned with national water management policies or laws. With the idea of enhancing effectiveness and effi-</p>

Clear and enforceable water property rights

ciency of water governance on the local as well as on the national level, and of preventing conflicts, efforts have to be undertaken to overcome contradictions between formal versus customary water allocation mechanisms.

The role of property rights (private, state, communal) in conflict prevention and cooperation has become more and more apparent. Often water property rights are linked to land property rights, but this is not always the case, as the use of water can be diverse, calling for a bundle of water property rights. Traditional property rights on local level can differ considerably from the ideas of legal and formalized property rights, hence, when designing water property rights on a national level, local, and traditional concepts of property have to be considered.

Remember:

- Cooperative water management is a challenging issue that requires time and commitment.
- Most socio-environmental conflicts, although they are essentially local in their more apparent manifestations, are framed within globalized processes, whether national or international. Hence, conflict dynamics are not endemic and their solutions cannot be found on the local level only.
- Address the underlying causes of the dynamics that lead to environmental degradation or enhanced competition on natural resources and avoid ostensible compromises.
- When building new institutions, it is better to begin with those that cause the least disruption to existing power structures. Sharing information and cooperation at these levels will eventually lead to the desired institutions with the needed authority.
- Even when win-win solutions can sometimes be hard to find, cooperative management mechanisms help to find «the best possible solution», i.e. a consensus that is more likely to be accepted by all stakeholders. One could add that these solutions are dynamic i.e. subject to almost «constant» negotiations.
- Agreements on water management are not definitive and static, but subject to almost constant negotiations.
- On the local level, include traditional community-based mechanisms for natural resource management and conflict resolution.
- Building new or changing existing infrastructure can mean a change in water allocation and have impact on societal power structures that can lead to conflict.
- Dialogue between all relevant stakeholders is often the best means to decide on sustainable water management structures acceptable to all. Power asymmetry between actors should, however, not be ignored.

- Community based natural resource management does not automatically lead to sustainability.
- Concepts of equality and representation do not necessarily have to be reflected in local natural resource management strategies, which still can work well with regard to sustainable resource management.
- In contexts where water is managed centrally, the promotion of decentralization and democratic governance can weaken existing water management structures, which then are not able to assure, let alone to enforce their decisions and rules. Decentralised institutions need to be established and strengthened first before handing over responsibilities.

The Role of Development Actors

Support national or local initiatives

The role of international or national actors is to support national or local initiatives towards the creation of the above mentioned conditions favouring sustainable water management and thus preventing conflicts and contributing to a sustainable water management by implementing locally approved and nationally accepted conflict resolution mechanisms.

Actors in conflicts

Water management has technical, social/societal, environmental, economical and political aspects. When sharing scarce water resources, conflicts are inherently part of the situation. Therefore, organizations that engage in water resource governance have to be aware of the fact that they are actors involved in potential or actual conflict dynamics.

Conflictsensitivity

Conflict sensitive tools are a very helpful way to think about an organizations role and impact on conflict dynamics. The involved staff of a programme have to be clear about programme objectives, and whether it wants to directly influence conflict dynamics (working on conflict) or not, even if it is working in a conflict context and will intentionally or unintentionally affect the conflict dynamics (working in conflict). This decision can depend on various factors, ranging from technical and political engagement strategies of an organization to the actual conflict dynamics and local demands and initiatives. Accordingly, an in-depth understanding of the actual or potential conflict situation as well as the local conflict mechanisms constitutes the sound basis of any programme intervention. Often such an assessment is best made together with the local actors (participatory conflict assessment).

External facilitators or mediators

International and national actors generally work and implement their projects with local partners. Development organizations therefore are in the role of external facilitators and/or moderators, supporting local processes. Development organizations taking up the role of mediators can have advantages as well as disadvantages. On the one hand, being external can be perceived as being impartial and neutral to the conflict, on the other hand, a certain knowledge of the local context is important. External mediation forms should be adapted to the local context and should strengthen traditional mediation capacities.

Present Challenges and open Questions

- How to upscale «participatory multi-stakeholder negotiation platforms» from community to watershed or regional level? Whereas the concept of negotiation platforms might work well on local level, when up-scaling to regional level, the number of stakeholder may increase substantially, transaction costs rise and processes can get very complex.
- How to identify directly and indirectly involved actors and how to decide if and how to integrate them into negotiation processes? The general claim that the higher the degree of participation by all interested parties, the more sustainable the resultant institutional frameworks, has its limitation. When power asymmetries are too large, consensus oriented dialogue is difficult.
- «How to bring the tiger to sit down with the rabbit?» How to truly empower weaker negotiation partners and sensitize stronger ones in order to make them sit down together on a table?
- How to deal with the risk of local or external power structures influencing participatory processes? Empowerment is an important strategy, but should not divert from the fact that power imbalances will continue to exist and that they always influence local decision making.
- How to consider and integrate traditional property rights when designing formalized legal rights at national level?

Links

The link below refers to a list of links to relevant books, reports, articles, newsletters, internet platforms, film, databases and international programs, published by organizations or researchers working on the question how water can link people.

www.swisspeace.ch/WaterLinkingPeople