Session report *Rivers and Wetlands: A Negotiated Approach*

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**Conveners general remarks about the session**

The capacity of rivers and wetlands to support and nurture life and livelihoods has been severely damaged by non-sustainable development. In Asia, Africa and Latin America these practices are reducing the ability of rivers to provide food, income and security for people. Large proportions of populations have been pushed into deprivation and poverty.

Considerable efforts have been made during the twentieth century by governments all over the world, in terms of investments in dams, irrigation canals, water supply systems, hydropower stations, water purification and effluent and sewage treatment plants. This has led to macro level food sufficiency and reasonable supplies of domestic water in urban areas, albeit with the accompanying risks of hazardous chemical pesticides and fertilisers. Regrettably, drinking water and domestic needs of poor people have not been addressed. On the contrary, large-scale interventions have aggravated existing situations of need, have led to the degradation of ecosystems and the disappearance of valuable ecosystem services, and have deprived large areas of rain fed agriculture from crucial, natural supplies of water.

In reaction to the centralized, ‘Big is Beautiful’ approach, local actors are developing their own approaches to wetlands and river basin management. These approaches are rooted in the principles of survival, conservation and equity. On a community level policy makers and water management experts recognize the potential of such local approaches to basin management. National and basin level policy makers must recognize this contribution and implement decision making processes that include local actors to present and negotiate their vision and approaches to sustainable rivers and wetlands management.
Synopsis

This session demonstrates how bottom up, ecosystem-based approaches address local poverty and environment issues and simultaneously contribute to sustainable and equitable water management policy frameworks.

The Negotiated Approach builds on initiatives to influence and change national and basin management policies. The Approach is based on the premise that local people’s water management strategies contribute directly to achieving MDG7, and provide practical responses to ongoing challenges of sustainability and equity faced by today’s water management. The Negotiated Approach allows local actors to develop basin management strategies specific to their local context. These strategies are then scaled up and negotiated through basin and wetlands management processes. Thus, local knowledge influences regional and national decisions.

Recognition of the value of this approach implies the creation of space for negotiation for local actors in basin level and national policy processes that recognize the diversity of ecosystems and livelihoods.

Local actions presented during the session

1. **Paraguay Parana Wetland System (LA0122)**

The Paraguay-Parana Wetland System is structured along a corridor of more then 3,400 km of rivers, in Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay. There are many areas along this corridor recognized under Ramsar Convention, World Heritage Convention or MAB Program. The services and functions of this wetland system are extremely significant to the population that lives at the region – more then 20 million people.

A bottom-up participatory process initiated by civil society has resulted in the acceptance by 5 national governments to manage all wetlands along the Plate basin as a unique Wetland System. They now recognizes that the wetlands at the Plate Basin deserve an innovative and integrative plan that guarantee the conservation of the Wetland System and sustainability of its local livelihoods.

The System’s formal recognition has been formalized in an agreement to develop a transboundary action plan. As a first step, the governments have committed to present a participatory program.

2. **Gestión de los recursos hídricos en la cuenca Ocoña, Arequipa, Perú**

For the past 10 years, AEDES is working at the sub-basin of Cotahuasi, promoting sustainable development. Their approach is based on the implementation process of Agenda 21, and promotes the use of existing comparative advantages of the region as a basis for local, regional and national management. AEDES main focus is to formulate and implement strategies that effectively respond to global problems such as: climate changes, desertification and biodiversity lost.

On a social level, AEDES promotes the development of associations and strenghtnes grassroots organizations. With regards to water management, initiatives are
developed directly with organization of irrigators but involve related social actors such as the local women’s federation through Round Tables.

AEDES supports the process for consolidation of a platform for the basin’s management by strengthening local water user associations in 4 sub-basins: Ocoña, Pausa, Cotahuasi y Chichas.

The general purpose of the strategy implemented by AEDES is to strengthen local initiatives of self-management by organizations of water users and to allow them to negotiate these in regional and national policy processes.

3. Water and Environmental Resources Management Project of the Senegal River Basin (LA0029)

As part of the implementation of its Action Plan for 2003-2004, the CODESEN Permanent Secretariat initiated a National and Sub-Regional Mission capacity-building project financed by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation. As a result of this funding, the CODESEN Permanent Secretariat was able to carry out various missions, making contact and eliciting information in Senegal, Mali, Mauritania and Guinea to consolidate and expand civil society involvement in the sub-region.

Nationally, CODESEN Permanent Secretariat missions took place on two occasions in 2004. During these two missions, contacts were made with members of CODESEN to organize information meetings and to set up focal points to coordinate in the Departments of Saint-Louis, Dagana, Podor, Matam, Bakel and Louga with NGO members, community-based organizations, and 20 residents within these Departments of the Senegal River Basin. During these missions, CODESEN Permanent Secretariat members also paid visits to government administrators as well as local religious and secular leaders to inform them about dams and development projects in the Senegal River Basin.

Sub-regionally, CODESEN Permanent Secretariat sent out three missions: to Nouakchott, Mauritania; to Bamako, Mali; and to Conakry, Guinea, to increase partnerships and put in place national coordinating mechanisms for civil society organizations to better prepare for participation in the project, “Water and Environmental Management Resources of the Senegal River Basin” and related projects and programs of OMVS (Organization for the Development of the Senegal River Basin).

Lessons learned

Local communities have sought their own solutions to the problems of water management. Many intuitively adopt an integrated approach to water, reflecting their daily reality, where water and the basin’s other natural resources cannot be separated. Such operations show an awareness of the interactions between human and natural systems.

These local initiatives do not restrict themselves to a small section of a larger basin or a ‘micro-watershed’. The local actions presented are some of the various examples of local strategies that reach out to basin, national and regional levels. In
these cases, scaling up the approach is interwoven with work on a local level, allowing the local vision to remain intact and be integrated into basin and wetlands policies.

A Negotiated Approach, being decentralized and flexible, is effective in making water available at the grassroots level to areas where the mainstream system often does not reach. It provides access to water for domestic purposes and protective irrigation by developing systems that can be owned, maintained and managed by the local communities for satisfying various needs. Thus, a Negotiated Approach contributes to achieving the UN’s water related Millennium Development Goals.

The approach empowers local water users, through the creation of formal and informal water management institutions and the formalization of existing knowledge and vision. Simultaneously, it sets out to make wise use of ecosystems. Thus, in addition to helping to achieve the Millennium Development Goals related to water provision and environmental sustainability in 2015, it ensures that these achievements will be maintained after the MDG deadline.

**Key messages**

- The current top-down and conventional approach to the development and management of water resources and wetlands are seriously reducing the environmental integrity of these systems, as well as the ability to provide food, income and security for people.
- National and global decision-makers must recognize the contributions that local actors can, and do, make to sustainable water management policies and interventions. Their knowledge is vital and should be blended with knowledge of other actors such as research institutes and experts.
- Local action can engage in higher-level, larger scale river basin and wetlands management: the bottom up, eco-system based approaches presented in this session at diverse locations have proven to be replicable and can be up-scaled to effectively influence decision making on a national, basin and transboundary level.
- A Negotiated Approach takes time but is eventually more time-effective.
- Engagement through negotiation between civil society and government authority will lead to more sustainable and equitable river basin and wetland management, without stopping economic development processes: Negotiations and participation lead to ownership because local communities are engaged in processes that directly affect their livelihood. An important implication is that the community opts for development solutions which are the least socially and environmentally disruptive.
- Governments, donor organizations and international institutions have a major role to play in effectively engaging local actors.
- The socio-economic and environmental value of wetland systems and river basins must be recognized.
- Negotiation can be triggered by people on the ground, but decision makers can play an important role in carrying the negotiation further forward to higher levels.
- Local actors have profound knowledge about their natural environment and automatically adopt an eco-systemic and holistic approach to resources.
management. The Negotiated Approach values maintenance of basic features of the ecosystem. It values social issues over economic aspects only.
- Some vital social and environmental considerations are not negotiable.

Challenges
- There is a lack of appropriate water policies and an appropriate legal and institutional framework to enable and support negotiation processes, as well as lack of political will to implement a negotiated approach.
- Time frame: a Negotiated Approach requires much time. This contradicts with the conventional projects time frame. Also, problems change over time, so this requires flexibility and continuous monitoring.
- Ministries are usually sectoral and negotiate/participate with local communities on sectoral issues, while the communities themselves have a holistic, instead of a sectoral view of their environment. The sectoral approach causes confusion and ineffectiveness.

Orientations for action

It is strongly recommended to:

1. Recognize the contributions that local actors can, and do, make to sustainable water management policies and interventions and continue an open dialogue among civil society and policy makers and experts on a Negotiated Approach to rivers and wetlands management.
2. Create an international network where water-related agencies committed to a Negotiated Approach, including banks and donor agencies, policy experts and practitioners, can come together to understand and strengthen their roles and responsibilities towards replicating and scaling up the concept in as many wetlands systems, river basins and sub-basins as possible.
3. In financial terms, such activities would require the allocation of budgetary provisions by governments for scaling up the Negotiated Approach through regular policy processes. Plus the creation of a substantial international revolving fund to support negotiated initiatives.
4. An enabling environment should be developed for negotiated approach: There should be appropriate water policies and legal and institutional framework to support negotiation processes, as well as political will to implement a negotiated approach.
5. Although ministries and departments could be sectoral in their operational arena, there should be strong interfaces between sectoral initiatives.