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Secrets of successful RBOs

by

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Contributions are most welcome - in English or in Bahasa Indonesia.

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Acknowledgement

At a NARBO seminar in Malang, East Java, in June 2011, a participant asked representatives from '*RBO champions*' to reveal their secrets for success. Such secrets were readily shared by ms. Catherine L Buena, Laguna Lake Development Authority, The Philippines; mr. Sudharma Elakanda, Mahaweli Authority, Sri Lanka; messrs. Harianto and Tjoek Walujo Subijanto, PJT1, Indonesia; and mr. Herman Idrus, PJT2, Indonesia; with contributions by many participants. The exchange provided the inspiration, the title and much of the substance of this paper. The author serves as a messenger as much as an originator of the wise words.

Terminology

In this paper, '*river basin organization (RBO)*' is used as the general name for any kind of organization that is involved in tasks at the basin level - whether an '*agency*', '*authority*', '*committee*', '*corporation*', '*council*', '*organization*', or whatever.

Acronyms and abbreviations

CRBOM	: Center for River Basin Organizations and Management (Solo, Central Java)
GWP	: Global Water Partnership
INBO	: International Network of Basin Organizations
IWRM	: Integrated water resources management
NARBO	: Network of Asian River Basin Organizations
PJT1 and 2	: Perum Jasa Tirta 1 and 2 (Indonesian corporate RBOs)
RBO	: River basin organization

Summary

The present paper builds on the proceedings of a NARBO seminar in Malang, East Java, in June 2011, where a discussion was held about '*secrets*' of successful RBOs. The '*secrets*' include, in random order,

- political support;
- good stakeholder relations; and
- good leadership.

Between them, they may provide a necessary and sufficient basis for successful operation.

An RBO can be characterized by its mandate (geographic coverage and tasks); authority (formal and informal); and capacity (management, staff, expertise, tools and budget).

Balance must be provided and maintained between mandate, authority and capacity. Otherwise, the RBO will struggle to undertake its tasks and meet the expectations to its performance.

It is often seen that the mandate evolves in the course of time, in response to new concerns and new opportunities. If so, it is important that authority and capacity are adjusted accordingly.

The '*informal authority*' of the RBO reflects the respect and confidence, and hereby support it enjoys from decision-makers, water users and other stakeholders. Informal and formal authority are not directly related.

A high informal authority is an asset for any RBO. A council or committee, perhaps without much formal authority, cannot operate without it. A government RBO and a corporate RBO might just survive, but will face serious difficulties as soon as it comes to implementation.

Good performance and high informal authority depend on each other and can develop in parallel. The interaction can be supported by a high credibility; a suitable visibility; and a certain momentum.

1 Introduction

The advantages of basin-level IWRM were indicated in June 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Rio Conference: *'IWRM, including the integration of land- and water-related aspects, should be carried out at the level of the catchment basin or sub-basin'*.¹

Since then, the basin-level perspective has been mainstreamed into resource governance in many Asian countries - often with an RBO as the platform for implementation, and hereby as a key agent for healthy and prosperous river basins.

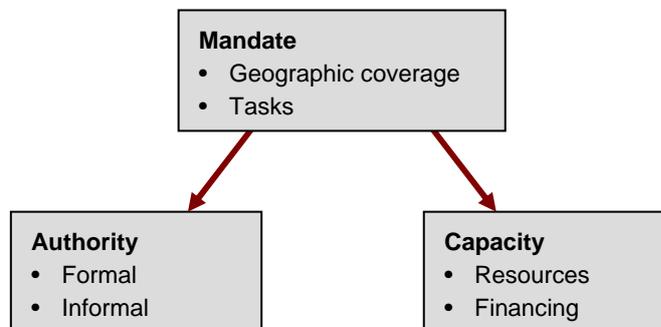
The present paper compiles some observations on aspects that can support successful operation of an RBO.

2 Mandate, authority and capacity

Asia's river basins can be managed by many different kinds of RBOs - from an advisory council to a resourceful state corporation. They can be characterized by their mandate, authority and capacity.²

For example, an advisory river basin council (or committee) may have important responsibilities but a low formal authority. A river basin authority, involved in water allocation and regulation, gets its name from its need of a strong formal authority.³

Figure 1: Mandate, authority and capacity of an RBO



Source: Isnugroho and Nielsen (June 11)

A distinction is made between *'formal authority'* (the power allocated by the government to the RBO) and *'informal authority'* (the respect and confidence, and hereby support it enjoys from decision-makers, water users and other stakeholders). These two characteristics are not directly related. A high informal authority is an asset for any RBO.

¹ Agenda 21, Article 18.9

² Chapter largely extracted from Isnugroho and Nielsen (June 2011)

³ See for example Isnugroho (July 2009)

The '*capacity*' of the RBO covers its management and staff, its expertise, tools and knowledge base, its network of partners, and its budget for operation and (perhaps) investment.

A suitable balance must be provided and maintained between mandate, authority and capacity. Otherwise, the RBO will struggle to undertake its tasks and meet the expectations to its performance.

It is often seen that the mandate evolves in the course of time, in response to new concerns and new opportunities. If so, it is important that the authority and the capacity are adjusted accordingly.

3 Three '*secrets*'

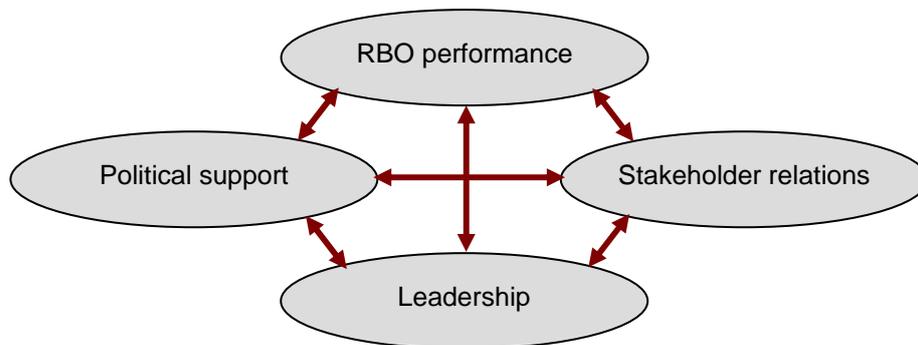
Three circumstances, listed in random order, will highly affect the performance of any RBO:

- Political support;
- good stakeholder relations; and
- good leadership.

Between them, they may provide a necessary and sufficient basis for successful operation. Easier said than done, though.

They are related. Good leadership will facilitate good stakeholder relations, which can, in turn, nourish political support - and the other way around. The challenge is to maintain a positive interaction.

Figure 2: *Secrets of success?*



3.1 Political support

Support from politicians (and other decision-makers within the government system) is material when creating an RBO - and remains important during its operation.

Such support is needed for the basic legitimacy of the RBO, and for allocation and maintenance of an authority and a capacity that reflect its mandate.

This includes *funding* - a common constraint for many RBOs.

Also, political support can facilitate interaction between the RBO and the various government agencies involved in water-related and environmental management, for example in connection with basin-level, intersector development planning.

3.2 Stakeholder relations

Good relations with water users and other stakeholders must be maintained. Apart from public and private water users (in-stream as well as off-stream, including agriculture and other water-dependent sectors), stakeholders can be representatives from a planning agency, line agencies, communities exposed to water-related calamities, investors, and indeed anyone with an interest in a decision by the RBO and/or playing a role in implementing such decisions.

Good relations must build on *confidence*. This involves knowledge-sharing, dialogue, and perhaps a bit of self-promotion of the RBO and its useful work.⁴

3.3 Leadership

Leadership includes maintenance of good institutional relations, and '*making the best out of people around you*', in support of the intended purpose of the RBO. Vision (and sense of direction), teambuilding and motivation can serve as instruments.⁵

Leadership involves commitment, eagerness and networking - external and internal. The challenges depend on the type of RBO:

- The head of a participatory *water council or committee* must be able to build confidence and facilitate agreed decisions among representatives from diverse bodies that can have widely different perspectives and priorities - not to speak of generation and maintenance of confidence and support from the bodies they represent.
- The head of a *public RBO* must assure liaison within the government system, often across sectors. If the RBO is involved in regulation and enforcement, it needs a high degree of legitimacy, which in turn requires a transparent and predictable operation, based on rules and procedures, involving national as well as basin-level standards. This can be compared with a classic string orchestra, where the music is played from printed sheets under the strict eyes of a director.
- Many RBOs are involved in *development planning*. This requires vision and openness, as well as institutional networking, oriented towards timely response to new opportunities - and can be compared with a jazz band, where the music is partly improvised, being created while it is played.
- The *corporate RBO* is partly independent from the government system and can build its own strong, tailor-made management and corporate culture - subject to good leadership. The head of a corporate RBO must be visionary, make timely decisions and generate support to their implementation.

Many RBOs undertake a variety of tasks in support of economic, social and environmental benefits. Some are involved in regulation as well as implementation, and others in infrastructural development as well as environmental conservation. It can well be more difficult to run an RBO than to run a private company.

⁴ For an elaboration, please refer to Budi (March 2011)

⁵ For an elaboration, please refer to Tjoek (December 2010)

4 Informal authority

Irrespective of its mandate, the RBO must maintain respect and support from various partners and society as a whole. Otherwise it cannot perform according to expectations.

A council or committee, perhaps without much formal authority, cannot operate without a certain measure of informal authority. A government RBO and a corporate RBO might just survive, but will face serious difficulties as soon as it comes to implementation.

Good performance and high informal authority depend on each other and can develop in parallel. It is important that the RBO is seen as useful by partners and by society as a whole.

The interaction can be supported in different ways:

- A high credibility, supported by documentation and knowledge-sharing;
- a suitable visibility, supported by promotion and openness, and good relations with newsmedia and opinion leaders. A vibrant website with a blog can assist with the dialogue, mobilizing the generation of future decision-makers; and
- a certain momentum, supported by a portfolio of tasks and activities that do not only include once-in-a-lifetime achievements (like a major storage reservoir) but also small but useful initiatives (such as education and awareness campaigns, and perhaps pilot and demonstration projects).

5 Learning from each other

Even with their different mandates and operating context, RBOs have much to learn from each other - both at the national and the international level. This can be achieved by measures such as exchange visits with roundtable discussions; mutual internships/ staff secondments; joint thematic task forces/working groups, and joint pilot and demonstration activities.

NARBO is one of several organizations that support exchange of experience and ideas among RBOs. Activities include international IWRM training sessions, seminars and workshops, and an RBO performance benchmarking initiative.

The demand is open-ended, the benefits can be immediate, and the costs implications are manageable.

6 Bottom line

The preceding chapters indicate sets of interacting cause-effect relationships that influence the success of the RBO. This can appear a bit complex - but does not need to.

Success can in itself create success. A minor but visible achievement can make life easier in unexpected ways if the opportunity is seized. In basin-level IWRM, one should never forget about '*what should be done*' - but keeping an open eye on '*what can be done, here and now*' can contribute to the perception of the RBO and hereby to its informal authority.

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