

**The First Thematic Session** of the International Conference on Regional Cooperation in Transboundary Rivers Management was held in the Room 26 of Kokh Vahdat State Complex, on Monday, May 30<sup>th</sup>, from 15h00 to 17h30, under the presidency of Mr. Jean François Donzier, Director General of OIEau and General Secretary of INBO and Mr. He was assisted by Mr. Diawara Cheickna, UNDP Water and Environment adviser, as Moderator.

The theme of the session was “SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF TRANSBOUNDARY WATERS: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE”

The list of the participants is attached.

In his introductory speech, the Chairman of the session presented the International Network of River Basin Organisations (INBO), its goals and principles, and also the implementation of the European Commission’s Water Framework Directive. He highlighted the implementation of this directive as an example of moving from principles to real implementation with a tight time table and result based assessment for which the contracting countries will be accountable in year 2015.

He recalled that 263 rivers or lakes and hundreds of other watersheds are shared among two or more countries around the world. In 15% of the countries worldwide, more than 50% of the water comes from upstream countries. More than 48% of the world population will live in highly degraded river basins in 2025.

Therefore water will become a scarcer and increasingly valuable resource in the near future, mainly because of this distribution and also because of its overuse and pollution. Disputes about its allocation will often contribute to regional tensions and conflicts.

The only existing alternative for the riparian countries seems to be regional cooperation, dialog and commitment to integrated water management principles at basin level.

The diversity of existing river and lake commissions with different legal and institutional frameworks as well as different scopes of cooperation was reflected in the wide range of experience in joint planning and management of shared water resources presented by the participants on Danube, Rhine, Irtysh, Mekong, Niger, Senegal and Nile rivers, depending on the particular river’s physical characteristics, history of its management, the local history and culture, and finally on the commitment of riparian states to dialog and cooperation.

These experiences range from programs which have adopted a fully integrated management approach implying water, infrastructure and environment management to those which have a special focus on particular elements of the water sector such as water supply, regional water quality control, power generation or flood control, the impacts of global climate changes on water resources, information harmonisation and transparent sharing, among other objectives.

Many commissions or river basin organisations have started with basin wide studies and water and environment management as initial steps. Some of them moved step by step toward a larger and a more complex program to fully address the sustainable integrated river basin management issues.

The participants stressed that in most cases, the “shared vision” and cooperation between riparian states was challenging and required long and painful discussions. It remains the prerequisite though to a better management of water and environment resources, and allows greater benefits of riparian states from the river basin resources, for the following raisons:

- Resources mobilisation for the regional infrastructure program and river basin management becomes easier in a peaceful environment and with the confidence and support from donors and private sector;
- Upstream-Down stream disputes can better be anticipated or avoided;
- Frequent high level meetings provide opportunities to solves disputes and crises beyond the water issues;

- Networking the riparian states' research institutions and data providers improves the environment management, water conservation.
- Risks and hazards preparedness and impacts mitigation are also improved if addressed at the regional level.

The participant insisted on the principle to manage environment and water resources at the river basin level. It was also stressed that cooperation could start with two or more riparian states and extended step by step to all of them.

The example of Senegal River was considered to be rare and interesting in at least two particular points: - the joint ownership, joint financing and joint management of infrastructures and – The cost and benefit sharing instead of sharing just the water resources;

The legal framework of Senegal River Development Organisation also provides for “the principle of the contracting states' prior approval of all projects which are likely to modify in a noticeable way the characteristics of the river” which makes “dialog and negotiations” the only alternative for the riparian states.

The case studies of Danube, Nile and Niger Rivers, Mekong River, issues in international rivers and water management throughout the world indicates that The time spent to reach the first agreement is saved for similar discussions in the future.

The environmental and social disaster in the Aral Sea basin was also exposed and considered to be a convincing example that a high cost has always to be ultimately paid for non cooperation, mistrust and non coordinated management of a trans-boundary basin, and that separate solution is not only expensive but also unsustainable in the long term for any of the riparian countries.

Although the participants recognize that the case of the Aral Sea Basin is at least as complex and difficult as the examples exposed, the principles remain the same and the riparian countries need to find the way to better addressing such regional issues as:

- Water saving and quality conservation, efficient agricultural, irrigation policies and techniques;
- Expanding competition for water with new emerging and potential users arrival;
- Major environmental and social threats ( Aral sea, Lake Sarez, Floods )

The countries must also confirm their commitment to Regional cooperation by ratifying the relevant international and regional conventions and agreements such as:

- The UN convention on non-navigational use of the international watersheds;
- The UNECE Conventions on Transboundary Rivers and related agreements;

They may also take advantage from the relevant European initiatives on water management.

In many examples of building regional cooperation in a river basin, the role of the UN, UNDP and other International Organizations has been recognized to be extremely important in coordinating and facilitating the dialog among riparian states and in providing financial support and expertise gained throughout the world.

But the commitment of riparian state to dialog and mutual compromises remains a crucial precondition to the whole process of building a successful cooperation in transboundary river basin management.

The participants express there sincere thanks to the Government of Tajikistan and to the Organizing Committee for having invited them to attend this international Conference on Transboundary Water Management and for the hospitality extended to them.

**Dushanbe May 30, 2005**