



The Current Column
of 23 March 2009
on the occasion of the
World Water Day

**Safeguarding and sustainably using
worldwide water resources: What is
called for are political will and
custom-made solutions!**

By Marianne Alker and Dr. Matthias Krause,
German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik



Safeguarding and sustainably using worldwide water resources: What is called for are political will and custom-made solutions!

Bonn, 23 March 2009. Three quarters of the drinking water the Düsseldorf public water utility supplies to its customers stems from seepage water from the Rhine which is pumped from wells located close to the river's banks. The reason why this is unproblematic is that today the Rhine – the most important transport route to the North Sea and at the same time the source of the drinking water consumed by 20 million people – is one of Europe's cleanest transboundary rivers.

That was not always the case. The rescue of the Rhine on the basis of joint efforts undertaken by the riparian countries is one of the most prominent examples of successful transboundary water resources management. In the 1950s the quality of the Rhine's water, and with it the quality of the water in the coastal regions of the North Sea, was so bad that the riparian countries saw a need to create the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine and to adopt two conventions committing them to take counter-measures. They proved successful, and today rare fish species are again found there that had already been thought extinct.

Regrettably, though, this case is more the exception than the rule. The United Nations report presented at the World Water Forum last week in Istanbul contains an urgent warning about the scope of the problems concerned: Water shortage and competition for this vital resource are intensifying throughout the world. Water crises are expected to occur with increasing frequency in the developing countries in particular. The trend will be further reinforced by climate change, with growing numbers of droughts and floods contributing to further exacerbating the man-made degradation of water catchment areas. This in turn will make it increasingly difficult to provide means of relief for the roughly one billion people in the world who are without access to drinking water as well as to safeguard the water and land resources needed for food production. Better water resources management is therefore urgently called for in every region of the world.

But what, precisely, is it that makes for good water resources management? Expert circles are largely in agreement on the principles. These have been set down in the concept of "Integrated Water Resources Management" (IWRM). The fundamental principle on which IWRM is based is that water and the resources associated with it – e.g. land, agricultural crops, and biodiversity – need to be managed in a coordinated manner to ensure that justice is done to the various economic, social, and environmental aspects involved. IWRM is conceived as a set of ongoing efforts to reach an efficient, equitable, and environmentally sustainable water resources management. The focus here should always be on the whole of a water catchment area, for experience shows that efforts undertaken on the lower course of a river can easily be thwarted by faulty measures taken along its upper reaches.

Even though the experts may be largely in agreement on the concept itself, that does not necessarily mean that IWRM is actually practiced. There being no blueprint for the IWRM process, politicians, government authorities, and non-state institutions and water users are inevitably faced with major challenges when it comes to deciding when, by whom, and in what combination and sequence it makes sense to implement relevant measures. The IWRM concept consists of a set of general principles that need to be adapted to the specific natural and – above all – institutional givens encountered on the ground. There is no reason to believe that the solution found for the Rhine would come anywhere near working for the Mekong.



One special challenge facing efforts to implement IWRM is the need it presupposes to coordinate a large number of actors within a water catchment area. As a rule, these actors have different – and in part wholly contrary – water needs, and they tend to differ as well in terms of the institutional and economic possibilities available to them to provide contributions of their own to water resources management. Furthermore, many of the relevant actors, members of different communities, administrative units, or ethnic groups, may be widely dispersed or not organised and may lack the smoothly operating communications channels and methods of cooperation they need for the purpose. When it comes to the management of transboundary water resources these problems are for the most part further magnified by the existence of different national jurisdictions. However, if the case is more favourable in nature, cooperation on divided water resources may serve to improve the relations between the riparian countries concerned. Alongside the institutional, economic, and social conditions involved, the natural hydrological and hydrogeological factors that characterise a water catchment area are of great significance. Creating a reliable basis for management decisions poses huge challenges in terms of data collection and analysis. Often enough, joint data-collection efforts prove to be the first step on the road to joint management. This can be observed in the encouraging example of growing cooperation on transboundary groundwater resources.

The complexity of the challenges involved must not be allowed to serve as an excuse for doing nothing or waiting for “substantiated scientific evidence.” This in any case often serves only to conceal a lack of problem conscious and political will or to cover up the existence of contrary interests. The good news is that we do find, even in developing countries with considerably weaker institutions, examples of water users working together in common organisations to ensure that the economic, environmental, and social needs of a water catchments area are in fact given due consideration. One such example is the cooperation among people and institutions along the Komati River in South Africa, Swaziland, and Mozambique. It shows that even small steps taken in accordance with the institutional, financial, and natural-spatial capacities available may lead to better water management, greater social cohesion, and improvement of the living conditions of the population concerned.

So it's time to roll up our sleeves and get to work! Political will and creativity are what is needed more than all else to come up with the individual solutions required.



By Marianne Alker and Dr. Matthias Krause,
German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE).