



CASE STUDY

Transboundary: The Drin Coordinated Action - Towards an Integrated Transboundary Water Resources Management

A multi-stakeholder process was initiated in 2008 for the establishment of a shared vision for the sustainable management of the Drin Basin. The Drin Dialogue was completed in 2011 and a Memorandum of Understanding was later signed by the five riparian nations and the Drin Action Plan was developed. This Case Study discusses the steps in this successful transboundary water management initiative.

Background

The Drin Basin extends through a large part of the Western Balkans. It consists of several sub-basins, the uppermost of which is that of the Prespa Lakes, while the lowest is that of the Buna/Bojana River, adjacent to the Adriatic Sea. The Drin River is the “connecting agent” of the Drin Basin, linking tributary rivers, lakes, aquifers, and other aquatic habitats into a complex, single ecosystem of major importance.

The Drin transboundary system offers an excellent example of interdependencies between different human uses (agriculture, hydropower generation, industry, fisheries, tourism, urban settlements, etc.) as well as among uses and ecosystems, in four major interconnected inland water bodies and a receiving sea.

Parts of the Drin Basin are quite developed whereas others are virtually undisturbed. The primary is the main economic sector; agriculture and livestock raising are the most important activities. Timber exploitation is locally important. Fishing is a significant source of income for population groups around the three lakes. Gravel extraction is one of the environmentally detrimental activities in the area though it is not extensively practiced. Copper and chromium ore are still extracted in the Albanian part of the Drin basin. Several other forms of heavy industry exist in parts of the watersheds of Lakes Prespa, Ohrid and Skadar/Shkoder. The Drin River is important for energy/hydroelectricity production. There are plans for the construction of some additional dams in the riparians. The importance of tourism varies across basin. It is significant around Lake Ohrid and there are plans for tourism development in other parts of the Drin Basin. With the exception of Greece, the riparians that are transitioning from centralized to market economies have comparable levels of economic development. The reform process is driven mainly by the prospect of EU accession (Faloutsos et al. 2014).

Until recently, management was practiced mainly at a national level and was not sustainable. Limitations in institutional settings, governance provisions and capacities as well as in financial resources for infrastructure and management itself were the main

reasons for this failure.

Despite these difficulties, legally binding agreements on water resources and ecosystem management cooperation were established between riparians to each of the three international lakes in the Drin system. However, a framework for coordinated action at the Drin Basin level remained absent.

Actions taken

The 'Regional Dialogue on Transboundary Water Resources Management in South Eastern Europe' has been carried out since 2005 to promote sustainable management of transboundary basins and shared water bodies. The Regional Dialogue aims to catalyse action in transboundary water resources management by debating and showcasing the benefits of cooperation. The activities under the Regional Dialogue have been used to enable stakeholders to identify solutions that can be applied in their respective basins. The participation of the Drin stakeholders in these events was a catalyst for the initiation of the Drin Dialogue at the end of 2008.

In November 2008, key national stakeholders and international partners initiated a discussion to develop cooperation between the Drin basin riparians. Guided by the riparians, a structured multi-stakeholder process unfolded, facilitated by international organizations and supported by donor countries and multilateral agencies. The result was the creation of trust, the establishment of a community of practice and the development of a shared vision for the Drin Basin. Going forward, the challenge for riparians – with the engagement of national stakeholders and the assistance of the international community – is to translate the agreed shared vision into action and establish an official framework for cooperation for the sustainable use of water resources.

Following initial steps taken in 2008, a multi-stakeholder process for the establishment of a shared vision for the sustainable management of the Drin Basin, the Drin Dialogue, was formally launched in 2009. The dialogue was led by the competent Ministries of Albania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Kosovo and Montenegro. The Drin Dialogue was completed after two years, when the five Drin River riparians signed a 'Memorandum of Understanding for the Management of the Extended Transboundary Drin River Basin'.

It was a structured, step-by-step process, facilitated by UNECE and GWP Mediterranean. It comprised targeted assessment and a number of consultation meetings at national and transboundary levels. Competent ministries, national agencies, users, academics, the private sector, international institutions and donors worked together to ensure all parties acquired the necessary ownership of the required actions to enhance cooperation and solutions for the sustainable management of the basin.

Outcomes

The key political outcome of the Drin Dialogue was the signing of the 'Memorandum of Understanding for the Management of the Extended Transboundary Drin Basin' (Drin MoU, Tirana, 25 November 2011) by the ministers responsible for the management of water and the environment of the riparians.

The Drin MoU identifies short-, medium- and long-term actions to address problems identified as affecting sustainable development in the entire Drin Basin and in one or more of its sub-basins. The preparation of an Integrated Drin Basin Management Plan is the long-term objective. To achieve that, a process called the Drin Coordinated Action was put in place, succeeding the Drin Dialogue.

While the process is on-going, a number of activities have already been implemented under the Drin Coordinated Action, responding to the Drin MoU which defines the steps and the conditions for its implementation.

The Drin Action Plan (DAP) was prepared to facilitate implementation of the Drin MoU and operationalize the Drin Coordinated Action. Resources for the full implementation of the DAP activities have been secured through the Global Environment Facility⁹ (GEF) which supports the project “Enabling Transboundary Cooperation and Integrated Water Resources Management in the Extended Drin River Basin” (GEF Drin project).

The documented enhancement of cooperation in the Drin Basin demonstrates the success of the approach practiced, i.e. working both top-down, using high-level meetings, and bottom-up, through stakeholder consultations at national and regional levels.

While continuing to build a knowledge base and advancing the policy instruments, the time is ripe for advancing joint institutional structures and launching implementation in response to agreed principles and priorities.

The ultimate goal of the ongoing work in the Drin Basin is to reach a point in the medium term where the scale of management is elevated from water bodies to the interconnected hydrological system of the Drin Basin. The primary aim is to move from the sharing of waters between states and conflicting uses to a proper application of international water law and the sharing of benefits between riparians and stakeholders, in a basin where all its parts are physically, culturally and historically interconnected.

Lessons Learned

Common understanding that nobody wins from the business-as-usual scenario is the basis for initiating cooperation including a wide recognition of existing challenges and the need for solutions. The enabling environment for action was catalysed and sustained by independent international institutions.

High-level political will and practical engagement of the administration is a must: the governments of the Drin riparians, represented at high level, were the key political drivers from the beginning and involving the competent ministries in all activities was key.

Multi-stakeholder consultation processes are essential tools for enhancing ownership and facilitating decision-making: the Drin Dialogue provided the opportunity to national institutions, joint commissions, local authorities, users, academics, civil society and the private sector at all levels to express their views.

An honest and step-by-step consensus-building process among riparians is necessary to establish a culture of cooperation and initial institutional mechanisms: due to no pre-

defined outcomes, the Drin riparians understood that there was no hidden agenda or threat to their interests.

A solid knowledge base and shared prioritization of issues are necessary for advancing consultation: the situation analysis provided the science-informed background to generate discussions within the Drin Dialogue and enabled consensus on the key issues and direction of managerial activities.

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Related IWRM Tools

Transboundary Organisations

Basin Organisations

Communities of Practice

Shared Vision Planning and Collaborative Modelling

Facilitation and Mediation