

The role of the WFD for River basin planning to achieve sustainable use of watercourses

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Work Group 1 and 3: Policy concepts and national regulations – a process of harmonisation and interdisciplinary collaboration on the way to facilitate communication of scientific results and decision making.

Participants

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- Dorothe Herpertz (BfG, D)
- Agnieszka Holda (TuTech, Poland)
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- Peter Norskov Kristensen (Nordjyllands Amt, DK)
- Carolin Peters (TUHH, D)
- Heinrich Reincke (Senate Chancellery Hamburg, D)
- **Marc Rijnfeld (TNO, NL), Facilitator**

Before we began

Originally, a 3rd work group had been planned for this meeting, working on the integration of quality data for a multicriteria decision tool. Questions here would have been how to present data in a way helpful for decision makers, and what would be the requirements with regard to scientific evidence for decision makers and managers. Because this topic had a strong link to communication aspects and interaction between researchers, managers and decision makers, we chose to combine these two work groups into one, which was facilitated by Marc Rijnfeld from TNO in the Netherlands. Susanne Heise took over the role of a rapporteur in this workshop.

The Discussion

Describing the problem

The workshop started with an exchange of experience with decision making and challenges with regard to the Water Framework Directive (WFD) in different countries. It became quickly clear, that difficulties connected to the compliance with the WFD were perceived differently in different countries.

In Germany, the main challenge with regard to the implementation of the WFD was seen in the communication between the Federal States, especially between the new and the old ones. The problem was identified as having cultural as well as personal roots, which became apparent already in the language of people differentiating between “we” and “them”. Bi-national contacts with the Czech Republic on the other side were considered as minor.

In Denmark, the national authorities were said to be working together well, developing criteria and guidelines for the implementation of the WFD and communicating these aims to the

public. It was the attitude of the politicians, not to oppose the farmer lobby during the own election period, that was regarded by the Danish representative as the main obstacle. It was stated that despite a rapprochement between those authorities that work on the implementation of the WFD and farmers, the attitude on the political level did not change. It was rather claimed, that too ambitious objectives should be avoided.

From Russia, where the WFD does not have to be implemented, it was stated, that environmental issues are currently of secondary priority, while economic aspects are much more important.

In Finland and Sweden, no problems between different stakeholders were expected during the implementation phase, even though at this early stage, no predictions were volunteered.

Analysing the problem

the challenges in the implementation were identified as such

- Different time scales of responsibilities for people involved in the implementation (e.g. politicians 4 years, environmentalists tend to think on a longer time axis)
- personal/cultural conflicts: the inter-human communication does not work because of prejudices, personal reservations, distrust
- missing interests: if there is no reason for people to become involved in a decision making process or to gain by being dedicated to the aims, communication becomes more difficult and the willingness to cooperate and work out compromises is low.

The problem about perception of environmental risks:

Marc Rijnfeld presented a study performed by Slob et al. in which risk perceptions of stakeholders were assigned to three different archetypes: The guardians, the controllers and the users. Every type has a different attitude towards risk. Of special importance with regard to communication is the understanding, that these archetypes tend to use a different vocabulary and what may be weighted as highly convincing by some, may be the "blind spot" of others (e.g. talking about costs of best available techniques, when addressing an environmentalists or a public servant responsible for the municipal budget).

Communication problems may thus provoke personal antipathy and reduce the chance to find solutions. Finding a common language was therefore regarded as being of uttermost importance, going along with gaining confidence and trust.

To assign objective facilitators in meetings of different stakeholder groups was seen of having the potential to help with communication and to prevent misunderstandings and personal confrontations. It was mentioned, however, that the attitude towards such an approach would probably be met differently in different countries: While e.g. the Netherlands have a long history as a communication-oriented society, for Germany it was assumed, that a layman as a facilitator in a group that comes together to make decisions would probably not be respected but seen as an intruder.

In Sweden, an example was given, in which extensive communication between different groups of stakeholders resulted in a common agreement on environmental issues. Another example was the successful Elbschlick-Forum in Germany, which was founded when the public demanded to be integrated in a decision making process about disposal sites in Lower-Saxony.

These examples raised another important issue in risk communication, which states that people tend to accept higher risks when feeling to be in control. This is another argument for involving the public in decision making processes in order to base decisions on public support and in order to increase the public's perception of its own responsibility for the environment.

Another example for this came from Denmark, where the planning of a highway in the country at first provoked a NIMBY reaction (not-in-my-back-yard). Stakeholders were then offered to use a publicly available computer model to experience by themselves the difficulties and various options with advantages and disadvantages, and to participate on that basis in the decision making process, which led to a successful outcome.

Decision making on environmental issues, such as the options for achieving the goals of the WFD which have to be implemented by 2009, always has to take into account various interests and objectives. The question was shortly raised whether a sustainable solution is possible at all, when one of these objectives is weighted above the other one.

Many examples show that a lot of times the economic objective gets a lot of credit and the first question is often: who is going to pay for any measures or solutions. When local institutions can't afford these measures the options are often blocked.

Funds are most of the time limited, and one possibility and with regard to the WFD almost a necessity is, to assign common funds to those areas, where they can improve the situation along the river basin best.

As was stated in the group, this requires, at least in those countries where national conflicts impede the implementation of the WFD, an institution with authority along the whole river basin – cross-national or even international - and with the power of prioritizing sites and assigning money for management measures. This could be done by reorganizing existing international commissions, but may also need new decision making and implementing structures. This “top-down” would have to be met by a “bottom-up” approach, in which the public is integrated into the planning and where the site-specific conditions at the prioritized areas are taking into account as a second step.

To find solutions on environmental issues, that are acceptable to all interest groups that are involved in the decision making process, it requires a long planning and communication phase and the willingness of those involved to agree also to those solutions, which would not necessarily have been preferred without the interaction with other people.

For example a management option could be to raise target values as an economical necessity. This may not be the favoured approach after a scientific risk assessment but may be acceptable to the public if it saves jobs in that area. When discussing this openly, the compromise that may be acceptable to all parties could be a cooperation (and financial support) for a long term approach to identify and realize methods that aim at the establishment of even lower target values then before on the long run.

Conclusions

- The challenges in countries with regard to the implementation of the WFD differ in practice but have the common basis that it is usually about different interests and objectives.
- For some countries, a new institution with the responsibility for the river basin management and with the authority to force options onto areas and to assign supra-regional funds is regarded as helpful.
- between the stakeholders, a common language needs to be found to build up trust
- this may be facilitated by applying mediators that help in the discussions

- An involvement of citizens in decision making is necessary in order to gain public support for whatever measures are decided and to increase its perception of responsibility for taking decisions.
- Management options along a river basin should take the whole river basin into account and start by a description of the basin's characteristics (Conceptual basin model), followed by a site-prioritization with regard to the importance of specific sites for the quality of the basin, ending up in the final decision (based on the outcomes of the site prioritization and including economical, technical and societal aspects) on what options to apply where.
- All stakeholders involved in environmental decision making, comprising "normal citizens", scientists, decision makers and regulators need to adapt a thinking on a much longer time scale as before, as sustainable options are mostly neither the cheapest nor the easiest and need a lot of planning and communication in advance.