



## No 1. Decentralisation of Water Decision Making



Why Decentralise? Because water and sanitation service provision and water resources management takes place in unique, complex socio-economic contexts and solutions need to be realistic. Successful implementation of water reform requires that all stakeholders involved, especially the end users, can have their say in decision-making processes. The competing interests of different actors must be addressed for decisions reached to be viable and robust for the long-term. Top-down decision making can be perceived as being imposed upon local actors and make policies difficult to implement effectively. Further, local actors often know the challenges they face best. Decentralisation, dialoguing, participation and partnerships are therefore critical to build awareness, acceptance and support for a reform process to move forward.

### **River Basin Committees: A Building Block for IWRM**

Decentralisation and participation are examples of political processes that have important implications for how water is managed. Most components of ongoing water reform, however, are not water specific solutions but are part of broader governance reform agendas within countries. Specific to wa-

ter governance, however, is the integration of physical and administrative boundaries nested at different scales in order to improve coordination in water decision-making, such as in river basin management. This is being done in a wide range of countries, such as Kenya, Kazakhstan, South Africa, Australia, Brazil and several member countries of the European Union.

### **Enabling Improved Process**

Increasingly, state centric governance approaches are evolving towards more multi-stakeholder approaches. This is shifting the role of government and opening new important avenues for civil society and the private sector to participate in decision-making processes. Many stakeholders, particularly water user associations, NGOs and local communities often lack the funds, institutional capacity and membership to contribute significantly to the management of local water resources. Enabling them to effectively participate in water resource management is critical. Building this capacity and well functioning governance structures can involve focus on process orientation, formal and informal institutions, inter-organisational relations and coordination, bottom-up management, expansion of voluntary exchange and self-governance and market based mechanisms.

### How it Works: Lessons from Kazakhstan

There is no blue print for effective policy and process in water governance. Every case faces varied challenges. WGF provides support to assist nations in their efforts to establish decision-making processes that will work for them. In cooperation with UNDP-Kazakhstan, WGF supported stakeholder participation in water resources management decision-making in Kazakhstan through the establishment of eight River Basin Councils. The review and analysis of the range of interests of different actors involved helped increase participation and improve the platform for more productive communication. The experiences gained show that improvements are linked to increased plurality in governance and institutions. The improved relations between government, civil society and private sector enabled open discussions and cooperation.



In the course of creating the River Basin Councils in Kazakhstan, the following two basic tenets drawn from experience in other countries proved to be fully applicable:

- River Basin Councils tend to evolve into the best working arrangement within a few years of their establishment. Therefore it is not necessary to have a set-in-stone River Basin Council structure that is expected to be perfect from the start. To be functional it must be allowed to take its own shape.
- It is not necessary for all River Basin Councils to have the same structure or the same number or type of membership. The size, shape and structure of River Basin Councils depend on the needs of the river basin and the ideas of the participants and members of the River Basin Council.

Country experiences show:

- Increased plurality in governance and institutional frameworks means that more actors have to work together in coordinated ways.
- Relationships between actors are critical: success hinges on the ability to develop mutual trust between actors.
- When governments and their agencies are committed and playing active roles to promote increased partnerships, improved participation and providing an enabling environment, they increase the chances of achieving successful outcomes.
- Successful reform in water stands a better chance if it is part of a country's broader development agenda.

#### Learn More:

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