

# **Launching the Network of Asian River Basin Organizations**

## ***Building Capacity for Tomorrow's Water Managers***

**Paper for the 1<sup>st</sup> NARBO General Meeting and Workshop**  
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### **Introduction**

ADB is pleased to support the 1<sup>st</sup> General Meeting and Workshop of the Network of Asian River Basin Organizations, or NARBO for short. The decision to initiate NARBO was taken during the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Water Forum in March 2003 in Japan, when ADB, the Water Resources Development Public Corporation of Japan (WARDEC, later reconstituted into the Japan Water Agency), and the ADB Institute joined hands in signing a letter of intent to establish NARBO.

An inception meeting for NARBO was held during the 1<sup>st</sup> Southeast Asia Water Forum in November 2003 in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where water agencies and RBO representatives from Southeast Asia endorsed the need for and approach for establishing NARBO.

The stark realities in our region are that one in three Asians does not have safe drinking water, and one in two does not have adequate sanitation facilities. The poor are hardest hit by water scarcity, pollution and floods. Ineffective water governance, and inadequate financing are keeping the poor from having access to safe water.

At ADB, we regard water as a resource and as a service. The sustainable management of water resources needs to go hand in hand with the efficient delivery of water services, including drinking water supply and sanitation, and irrigation and drainage. The needs of the poor require special focus in all water projects, in both resource management and in water services.

## **Why ADB Supports NARBO**

There are several good reasons for ADB to support NARBO.

First, integrated water resources management or IWRM is a corner stone of ADB's water policy "Water for All". We have recognized that river basin organizations are essential instruments to help plan and implement IWRM. Many of ADB's water projects are now undertaken in a river basin context and involve capacity building of existing or new RBOs, for example in Viet Nam, Laos, and the People's Republic of China.

Second, ADB is in the business of change in development. We are promoting and catalyzing good examples of how water can be managed better than in the past. Networking is a good opportunity for cost-effective learning based on the sharing of examples and good practices. Networking can also provide incentives for change by comparing performance against new standards or benchmarks.

## **The Challenge for River Basin Organizations**

The need for networking among RBOs is both great and urgent in view of the multitude of challenges faced in the region's river basins today. Who is going to see to it that stakeholders will be empowered in river basin planning and management? How will water allocation between uses and users be improved. How will conflicting interests be balanced and trade-offs decided? How will the water security of the poor be increased through water rights? How will further water project development take place in a sustainable manner and with public support? How will the water quality in rivers be improved? How will systems be introduced for better flood management? How will watersheds, wetlands, sensitive ecosystems, and fisheries resources be conserved? Who will ensure that sound traditional and modern local practices in water management are used in harmony? RBOs will need to play a key role in addressing many of these challenges.

Ultimately, water management and river basin management depends more on people than on water. It requires getting better organized, making better decisions, and implementing these decisions effectively. This is the main challenge for RBOs in making IWRM a reality.

## **RBO Experience in the Region**

Fortunately, there is already considerable experience in our region with RBOs, and therefore much opportunity to share information, experience, and lessons learned. Among others, Japan, Korea, the People's Republic of China, Indonesia, the Philippines, India, and Sri Lanka have invested in establishing RBOs since a long time. In other countries, like Thailand, Viet Nam, and Laos, RBOs were established very recently. And other countries, like Cambodia, are considering to establish one or more RBOs in the near future.

A range of modalities of RBOs have been adopted in the region, suggesting that one size doesn't fit all needs, and allowing much scope for comparison and exchange of experience. The types of RBOs range from committees to commissions, planning management boards, authorities, corporations, tribunals, and international basin commissions. Newer models include stakeholder forums, interprovincial working groups, and other local initiatives that contribute to IWRM.

The Jasa Tirta I river basin organization for the Brantas river in East Java, Indonesia, is a public corporation and has set an excellent example, being an RBO that has developed a vision and mandate and built up its capacity to carry it out effectively. This process has taken many years and the mandate has also evolved over time. It has received ISO certification in recognition of its achievements to set and maintain standards. Jasa Tirta I is now a model that is being replicated in other basins in Indonesia.

## **Common Requirements of RBOs**

While RBOs may differ significantly in their mandates and organizational form, they share some common requirements. They need a mandate and vision, and a legal basis and guidelines to operate. They need to represent stakeholders effectively. Leadership and clear policies are as important as motivated and capable staff. A range of technical and non-technical skills needs to be mastered. Financial viability is important through budget allocations and revenue generation. Finally, to realize the objective of IWRM to delegate water management to the lowest appropriate level, RBOs need to be entrusted with autonomy and influence in water planning and project decisions affecting the river basin, to develop them into credible and capable institutions.

## **Networking Opportunities and Approach**

The variety of experience available gives excellent opportunities for networking for NARBO. We foresee information exchange and capacity building through websites, staff exchange, training, study visits, advice, and also through joint projects for advocacy, guidelines, sourcebooks, benchmarking, and even ISO certification, following the excellent example of the Perum Jasa Tirta RBO for the Brantas river in Indonesia.

The approach for NARBO will be primarily to respond to RBO needs and requests and match these with available experience among the network members. The RBOs will be the core of the membership. The other members will contribute as facilitators, knowledge partners, financial supporters, advocates, and watch dogs.

Successful networks have to be selective and focus on their strengths. NARBO members will need to identify and group the needs of RBOs and match them with available knowledge resources for effective exchange of information and experience through the network. This has to be achieved in a manner that serves the interests of all RBO members, including the older, larger, and well-established RBOs and the younger, smaller, and recently established RBOs. Like all forms of collaboration, the success of networking depends on “what’s in it for me”, the question that all members and interested members should ask themselves. Making contributions to the network and drawing benefits from the network should have a balance. NARBO will therefore have to address a range of issues and networking needs, from RBO startup issues to challenges of more developed RBOs.

## **NARBO Partners**

Through JWA, Japan will contribute unique and valuable experience in water resources development and management accumulated over many decades, and share this with developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region. We are very pleased that JWA will become the anchor of NARBO and provide stability to the network through a longer-term commitment. KOWACO of Korea is likewise in an excellent position to support NARBO activities with Korean experience.

We are also pleased that the ADB Institute is joining NARBO, as an excellent resource center for policy advice, advocacy, training, and networking support.

We expect many other important knowledge partners to join NARBO, including the Mekong River Commission, the International Water Management Institute, IUCN, and many others. Financial supporters are also needed and ADB will endeavor to attract cofinancing support for selected NARBO activities from bilateral funding agencies, such as from the Netherlands, Australia, France, Denmark, Sweden, UK, and other countries.

### **What NARBO Should Not Do**

When starting a new initiative, it is as important to consider what should and should not be done. Let me highlight a few things that we at ADB think that NARBO should not do. We think that NARBO should not try to develop common policies or positions on IWRM issues. The conditions in the region vary widely, and different solutions will be needed in different countries and situations. These provide opportunities for learning. We encourage NARBO to focus on learning, but not on promoting single solutions or prescriptions to IWRM problems.

A variety of opinions on IWRM issues can be expected to be voiced among NARBO members, and if disagreements arise over how IWRM issues should be handled, this probably reflects the need for a diversity of solutions. Where decisions are needed for NARBO's functioning, we strongly recommend that these will be taken on a consensus basis, rather than through a voting mechanism. Split decisions are divisive and will alienate groups of members who are needed to make NARBO a success. NARBO should promote a beneficial exchange of experience and put aside for further consideration those issues where agreement is difficult to reach for the time being.

Also, we believe that NARBO should keep its organizational rules and procedures to a minimum and promote simplicity, transparency, and flexibility in its organization to effectively serve its members.

### **ADB Support to NARBO**

ADB is committed to support NARBO in connection with our water operations. We will draw on our Cooperation Fund for the Water Sector to support specific NARBO activities that meet the criteria of the Fund. For 2004, we have allocated \$150,000 to support NARBO start-up activities including the 1<sup>st</sup> NARBO General Meeting and Workshop. We expect that the members of NARBO will provide financial and in-kind contributions to the network very soon to enable it to become strong and sustainable in its operations.

In conclusion, I would like to underline the rationale and vision for NARBO and why ADB supports it. We believe that NARBO can contribute to a better future for water management in the Asia-Pacific region by changing the way we work, plan, make decisions, and implement them. Networking among RBOs can help a new generation of water managers make IWRM a reality in our region's river basins. Water management starts with changing people's minds. ADB is in the business of change for development for poverty reduction and sustainable economic development.

NARBO is about changing people and institutions. If we build capacity in the RBOs today, young people will have better incentives and skills to enjoy a career in RBOs for improved water management tomorrow.

ADB is pleased to start the NARBO initiative in collaboration with the Japan Water Agency and the ADB Institute, and I would also like to express our gratitude for the generous support provided to the ADB by the Governments of the Netherlands and Norway to the Cooperation Fund for the Water Sector and through extensive cofinancing of water projects and technical assistance. We hope that other agencies will also join NARBO as supporters very soon.

#### **In Closing: A Philosophical Note on IWRM**

We know that IWRM is a process, it is much like a river flowing. It is comprehensive, it involves all of us. We have much knowledge of water, but when it comes to IWRM we need to be open to learning, to have a beginner's mind. We need to learn to listen to our rivers. Rather than aiming to control and exploit water resources for society's needs, we should learn to listen to nature around us and understand how the river basin wants to be managed. IWRM involves action as well as non-action, according to timing and local needs. We are part of the river basins in which we live. What we decide today may affect the lives of our children and future generations.

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