

PUTTING IWRM INTO PRACTICE
A CASE STUDY OF THAILAND

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February 2004

Background

One of the Ministerial Declarations issued by the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 is for countries to have an integrated water resources management (IWRM) plan in place by 2005. Given that IWRM is defined as a process by the Global Water Partnership (GWP), it is necessary to properly interpret and contextualize the term “IWRM Plan”.

IWRM is actually a process for better management of water resources and encompasses governance, stakeholder participation, and balancing development for resource sustainability. There is no general blueprint that is suitable for each and every country. Rather, the IWRM process has to be adjusted according to the socioeconomic, political, and cultural conditions in each particular country. An IWRM plan can therefore be interpreted as preparing a road-map or action program to put IWRM into practice but not in the sense that it is a physical plan by itself.

Initiating the Implementation Process in Thailand

Recognizing the three basic components of IWRM, i.e., enabling environment, institutional roles, and management tools, Thailand started the process by building consensus among the various stakeholders including government officials, academes, private sector, various water user groups, and non-government organizations, by holding water dialogues, seminars and workshops since 1999. The main objective was to put the key elements of the three basic components into the national water resource management system, and thus institutionalize the IWRM into the government machinery.

The Various Steps

The National Water Vision was a product of a multistakeholder workshop in July 1999 and subsequently endorsed by the government as the National Water Vision in July 2000. This National Water Vision was translated into a nine-point water policy program through another multistakeholder meeting in March 2000, which was subsequently endorsed by the government as the National Water Policy in October 2000.

The government thereafter approved the proposal to establish river basin committees (RBCs) for the country's 25 major rivers, and provided the budget for the implementation of the proposal since 1999. At present, there are 14 RBCs in operation. Capacity building in IWRM and basin management were standard activities to strengthen the RBCs, at the same time the organizational structure and roles of the various sub-committees and working groups have evolved such that grassroots participation in the RBCs is now an integral part of the system.

A comprehensive and integrated water sector budgetary procedure was discussed and formulated through a series of high-level official and multistakeholder workshop with the aim to strengthen the role of RBCs in developing and approving RBC plans, and to group water resource management programs according to the national water policy. The government approved the proposed budgetary procedure in June 2002; the said procedure is currently being practiced.

Preparation of river basin plans was launched in 2001 with the aim to involve stakeholders in the preparation process. Consultants were engaged to work together with the various stakeholders including the grassroots level, to identify problems and needs and to formulate plans and projects with respect to the potential available water resources and other related resources such as land and forests, towards sustaining the ecosystem of the basin. This in particular is putting IWRM into practice at the river basin level. Two basin plans have been accomplished while a few more are in the process of preparation..

The government then launched an institutional reform which resulted in the consolidation of water-related agencies and the establishment of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment in October 2002. The Ministry was entrusted with regulatory functions for national water resources management while there still remain a few implementing agencies outside the Ministry.

Drafting of a national water law is currently being undertaken to review the various obsolete and fragmented water-related laws and to put in place a so-called “master law” for water resources. The drafting procedure again was laid down through a participatory process. A series of public meetings and workshops are being conducted to seek and understand the views of various stakeholders concerning a water law, before a final version is drafted and presented to the government,

Summary

A road-map or action programme to put IWRM into practice takes time. There is a need for a group of key players who can act as catalysts for changes, and who should be motivated and influential enough to obtain government endorsement of the road map and/or action programme. The critical factor is to be consistent in pursuing the IWRM objectives and have patience in pursuing the same.

IWRM can be implemented or institutionalized through a step by step process. There is no fixed procedure as to which should start first as long as the key elements under the three basic IWRM components are gradually put into place. In the preparation of river basin plans, the application of IWRM process is far more important than having a plan per se. Public awareness and multistakeholders participation is a must to ensure acceptance by public and the government.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that GWP through the Southeast Asia Technical Advisory Committee (SEATAC) played an important role as catalyst in providing both financial and technical support through the relatively long process undertaken.