

Short Report on Lessons Learned on NARBO Training Workshop

River Basin Management and Organizations, Sri Lanka

24th April to 29th April 2005

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The Objective

The objective of this workshop was to share the experiences and information among the South Asian River Basin Management Organizations and providing an environment for discussion the issues, constraints and objectives of RBM. As the river basin management is a fairly new development strategy in most countries, it is a timely need to develop a better understanding among the officers involved in this sector.

The Introduction and Official Opening Ceremony

This was held in the afternoon of 24th April and some could not participate because of the traveling problems. This session gave us a brief outline of what to be expected and the background and expectations about the organizers, resource persons and participants. It was interesting to see that everybody's main expectation was to share the knowledge among them and learn from each other's experience.

The opening ceremony gave the participants the opportunity to get to know each other well and learn about a little bit of Sri Lankan culture like lighting the traditional oil lamp, followed by a nice dinner. Most of the participants were dressed in their national dress.

A general overview of river basin management

This lecture was delivered by Mr. Charles L Abernethy, a Senior Engineer having a vast experience in water resources development and management. This greatly addressed the issues we are presently facing in Sri Lanka in trying to develop its own policy. There is no "correct" or "best" way in river basin management. But some principles could be identified that can be used as guidelines to suit the needs of the specific river basin.

In a river basin, there are many other organizations that are providing services to the public and the community. They don't need another mode of management and would feel threatened by it. Getting their cooperation is the main challenge faced by the most river basin organizations. This is one of the main issues we have to deal with in the Kala Oya river basin.

River Basin Management cannot be introduced swiftly with one legislative act. This is a very useful advice to the river basin I am involved, as we all are expecting to solve all the problems we face with this legislative authority. It takes a long time and a series of agreements. So the water act, of everybody is so scared, should be very flexible and if anybody wants to change it, it can be updated and modified to suit the needs of the stakeholders. The public should be made aware of this and the formulation of water policy can be accelerated, if they are made aware about this flexibility.

The main objectives of the river basin management include,

- Protection of the water resources
- Managing the demands of water so that they do not exceed the available supplies
- Facilitating socio-economic and demographic changes that the society needs
- Protecting the rights of all people to an adequate share of water at a tolerable level of cost
- Protecting the state of environment

Although each river can have unique objectives, the above are common to all Sri Lankan rivers. But in the Kala Oya River Basin there are lots of tanks (some are working, some are abandoned) which can be improved to store water and be used to recharge groundwater. They are structured in a cascade system and will be very efficient in water resource development within the basin.

Case Studies

To get a better understanding of the other “successful” basins, the case studies were very helpful. The Toyogawa canal in Japan was really interesting and gave us an opportunity to think how advanced a river basin can be when developed.

The other case studies presented by Dr. Samad were very useful because it compares 5 different situations and warns us about the situation when a river becomes “closed”. The importance of River Basin Management and National water policy can be seen clearly from his case study to overcome the future problems. The absence of clearly defined water rights is a problem we already face. The water resource management institutions within the Kala Oya river basin also do not change fast enough to adapt to changing needs and that causes many conflicts in RBM activities.

Maha Oya River Basin

The study of Maha Oya river basin gave us the opportunity to study a river on a planner’s point of view which is a very importance experience. The field visit and the presentations held afterwards were very useful and it gave us an opportunity to think in all the directions, i.e. institutional, organizational and environmental point of view.

The experiences we had during the field visit showed us that we should not collect information based on single source but they should be cross checked and verified before coming to a conclusion. What we could see from the surface is not the real scenario.

The group work was a good opportunity for the participants to get to know each other very well and to share the ideas among them. It is very interesting to see that in some instances they have a completely different perspective on what we are used to see in a problem. The presentations made by the stakeholders gave us a good thought for how serious the conflicting issues can be in the River Basin Management. There are no correct or incorrect answers to most of the issues.

Conclusion

The river basin management cannot be imposed on a river basin with a single legislative act. It is a step wise approach and will take time and needs to be adjusted from time to time.

The supply of water has not changed much with the time. But the demand has increased and quality has decreased rapidly during past years. Therefore, the issues of demand and the quality are the problems to be addressed. The problem of River Basin Management in our country is mainly the resistance from public and water service providers.

The knowledge I gained from this workshop will be very beneficial for me in my carrier in Kala Oya river basin. It helped us to view the problem constraints and objectives in a different perspective.

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