



Week 5: Governing and Managing Water Resources for Sustainable Development

Key points

- The pressures on water resources that more and more countries are experiencing will undoubtedly increase by 2030.
- Insufficient access to water resources is often not driven by water scarcity, but by ineffective and fragmented institutions, management systems and investments and insufficient human capacities.
- The ability of countries to allocate water for domestic, agricultural, industrial and environmental needs, depends upon better management of water resources and more efficient use of water for productive purposes.

Insufficient access to water resources – a governance challenge

Water resources are critical to socio-economic development and for maintaining healthy ecosystems, which in turn play a valuable role in terms of recycling and purifying available water supplies. We need water for basic life and to cater for production of food, energy, industrial goods, tourism and other income generating activities. In many parts of the world the livelihoods of the poorest are directly linked to water resources, such as for fishing, farming, household supply, navigation, small scale industry and livestock care.

The proper governance and management of water resources underpin how societies socially and economically can optimize the available natural water flows, including surface water and groundwater, to satisfy competing needs between both users and uses, in light of achieving growth, poverty reduction and equity.

The pressures on and pollution of water resources that more and more countries are experiencing will undoubtedly increase by 2030. Higher rates of urbanization will mean a growing demand for drinking water and industrial use with consequent higher waste disposal and treatment. Feeding a world of eight billion people will require more water for food. The demands for energy will more than double, with hydropower called upon to make a far greater contribution than today. And to add to these challenges, the impact of climate change will threaten economies and put further strain on the environmental flows required to maintain aquatic ecosystems.

Insufficient access to water resources is often not primarily driven by water scarcity, but by ineffective and fragmented institutions, management systems and investments and insufficient human capacities. These water governance and capacity development shortcomings are accentuated by climate change impacts and uncertainties of both present and future water supply availability.



The governance and decision-making on water resources tend to be complex and dispersed across many development sectors and institutions and is characterized by a number of factors which increases the risks of discrimination, unequal access to water resources and services and corrupt behavior. For instance, large-scale infrastructure development, combined with situations of services and/or power monopolies result in high risks of corruption or other power abuses. The risks are magnified in systems with opaque governance systems and lax law and regulation enforcement. The application of human rights based approaches (HRBA) and measures of improved transparency, accountability, participation and integrity are critical governance components to address issues of corruption, discrimination and other water inequalities.

What can be done at a country level to improve governance and management of water resources?

The ability of countries to address the mounting challenges and make more water available for domestic, agricultural, industrial and environmental needs depends upon better management of water resources and more efficient use of water for productive purposes. Fundamental to this is integrated planning and management across competing uses and users to make sure that everyone gets a fair share and no one gets left behind.

Water decision-makers and managers at all levels face increasing challenges to satisfy increasing, often conflicting water demands between stakeholders, with mounting uncertainties of how much water that will be available in the future. Improved governance of water resources remain at the heart of the struggle for sustainable human development, growth and poverty reduction.

The UN-Water Status Report on The Application of Integrated Approaches to Water Resources Management for the Rio+20 conference, based on feedback from more than 130 countries, shows that efforts over the past 20 years to improve governance of water resources have been significant, but this clearly remains an on-going process for most countries. Institutional reforms have been undertaken in many countries. Improvements have been done to the institutional framework, together with improved policies, laws and systems. This has led to better water resources management practices bringing important socio-economic benefits. The 30 country interview reports conducted for this report indicate however that institutional reform is slow, for example the majority of countries reported changes in their water policy, but translating policy and legal changes into implementation is often a slow process.

Another conclusion from the report is that capacity constraints are a common challenge for many countries. Sustainable management of water resources will not be achieved until the required capacity is available among the various actors responsible. Cross-sector coordination and mechanisms for stakeholder engagement are other areas that need to be strengthened in order to develop appropriate institutional arrangements.

Targeted support is necessary to continue to improve the institutional framework for water resources management with emphasis on the group of least developed countries. To ensure continued progress and positive outcomes in applying integrated approaches to water resources management, governments and external support agencies should learn from experience and increase their efforts - much remains to be done in terms of financing and implementing existing water resource plans.



Countries that have adopted integrated approaches to management report more advanced infrastructure development (such as dams, canals, reservoirs, treatment plants and delivery pipes), but further efforts are needed to ensure appropriate levels of coordination between actors and actions.

Questions

1. It has been said that the “global water crisis is in fact a crisis of governance,” do you think that this is true?
2. What are the challenges of managing water in your country and what can be done to improve the situation?
3. How can water resources management contribute to sustainable development in your country?
4. Do you think a sustainable development goal that explicitly considers water resources would be useful - how could it be monitored and reported?