

Water Policy in the Mediterranean: An Overview

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Water is a vital resource with significant economic and political challenges and implications in the Mediterranean region. The principal water management challenges in this region result from a prevalent state of water shortage in arid and semiarid regions and the degradation of groundwater and surface water quality, as well as imbalances between availability and demand. In the last decade, global water warming is intensifying the pressure on water resources. Water shortage and water-related disasters are linked to global problems such as wide climate variability and decrease in water flows, combined with population growth, economic development and international trade. Water production security also depends on energy and food policies.

Water resource management in the South and East Mediterranean countries has until recently been characterised by an essentially supply-driven approach financed by public subsidies for diverse uses of surface water, where each water-using sector has behaved independently and has taken responsibility for its own decision-making. The predominance of traditional practices in hydraulic management in the Mediterranean regions in which water is considered merely a production resource has handed over water management to civil engineering. With the increase of water demand, environmental problems have emerged, such as deterioration of water quality and a reduction in the supply of heavily exploited aquifers. Various problems related to a growing urbanization have contributed to the decline in water quality as an inefficient wastewater treatment, poor or non-existent solid waste management and inefficient pollution control. Finally, institutional structures have been mainly concerned with cost recovery, which generally does not include environmental costs nor considers the sustainability of aquifers. An inadequate cost recovery inevitably entails budgets incapable of financing a satisfactory quality of service delivery in irrigation, water supply and sanitation.

Aware of the fundamental importance of sustainable water management in Mediterranean countries, regional cooperation and information exchange have always been considered fundamental. The international community has responded with a number of proposals.

The 1st Mediterranean Water Conference, organised by the European Commission, was held in May 1990 in Algiers. At this conference, the Ministers responsible for water management stressed in the Al-

giers Declaration the importance of an efficient and common strategy for water management in order to achieve sustainable growth.

Two years later in 1992, Italy, supported by the European Commission, organised the 2nd Mediterranean Water Conference in Rome. As a result, the twelve Mediterranean countries taking part in this Conference drew up *The Mediterranean Water Charter*, where they undertook to implement measures concerning water planning and management, based on regional, international and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

In November 1995, a Euro-Mediterranean Conference was organised in Barcelona where the EU member states and representatives of the non-Community Mediterranean countries established in the Barcelona Declaration a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, which involved a variety of sectors in an articulated and extensive working programme. The Barcelona Declaration contained a chapter specifically devoted to a new water culture in relation to water issues and recalled those principles laid down in the Rome Charter, also providing instruments for a more rational management of water.

In November 1996, France organised in Marseilles the 1st Euro-Mediterranean Conference on Local Water Management, where the Ministers responsible drew up the Marseilles Declaration stressing the importance of sustainable water use and identified policy options to increase human rights to water and sanitation. Moreover, the ten participating countries decided on the need to set up an information processing system with the use of an advanced communication technology where information could be easily transferred over the network. This project, called EMWIS, was approved at the Naples Conference in December 1997 by the 27 Directors General for Water. This high-speed communication network connected to Internet provides a strategic tool for exchanging information and knowledge in the water sector between and within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership countries and represents the first concrete cooperation for exchanging information on know-how in water management between policy-makers and different operators involved in water related issues within four priority areas: documentation, training, research, institutions and data handling.

The Short and Medium Term Priority Environmental Action Programme (MAP) adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on the Environment, in Helsinki in November 1997, and the 3rd Euro-Mediterranean Foreign Ministerial Conference, held in Stuttgart in April 1999, emphasised the foremost importance of integrated water resources management facilitating a cooperative sustainable development of water among Euro-Mediterranean countries. Algeria and Italy organised the 2nd Euro-Mediterranean Conference on Local Water Management in Turin on 18th and 19th October 1999 in order to enforce and further the European policy resolutions made in the previous Conferences. The Turin Ministerial Conference focused on the importance of identifying the challenges and problems arising with the changes in water demand as a consequence of structural changes in production patterns as the Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area evolved and developed. Particular attention was given to the overall implications involved in water management and the need to adapt environmental sustainability to socio-economic needs.

After years of intense collaboration among the Euro-Mediterranean Partners, major importance has been attributed to water as a factor essential for all socio-economic development. At the same time, however, economic growth can easily entail an increase of non-sustainable development, which inevitably leads to environmental and social instability and involves huge costs for future generations. Countries within the Mediterranean area, aware of these significant drawbacks, are now actively reviewing their policies and legislations, addressing their priorities and practices towards an Integrated Water Resources Management Approach (IWRM) and promoting and implementing their water demand management policies.

Progress based on implementation of water governance reforms is documented in most Mediterranean countries. Notwithstanding, a greater effort is needed in approaching a more sustainable governance at a local, national and transboundary level inspired by IWRM principles and practices. Many Mediterranean countries are still suffering from a lack of effective operational strategies: authority responsibility relationships are fragmented; law enforcement and policy implementation are weak; technology is backward; management and implementation capabilities are inefficient and inadequate to face water challenges. Moreover, financial constraints limit the implementation of policies. Although the IWRM provides a framework of principles and efficient practices for water governance, there is no “one-solution-for-all” at a national level. This is mostly due to the peculiarities of each country, the number of sectors involved, the complex managing and balancing of diverse needs and individual and general interests in competition with one another. The situation is even more difficult to deal with when it involves an effective management of shared water resources since it often involves national sovereignties. In other words, water is an issue involving different socio-economic contexts. The Mediterranean basin is an interesting forefront to observe how developed and undeveloped economies interact dynamically within the water context. In theory, Northern Mediterranean countries have agreed to shift from their traditional *supply-side strategies* which require large scale infrastructures to demand-side strategies aiming at water saving, efficiency improvements and the introduction of new technologies. This change of policy, the Water Framework Directive, which has been carried out within the EU, is considered one of the most advanced examples of environmental legislation in the world. The Directive aims to tackle the crisis by adopting an ecosystemic approach; introducing new criteria for an economic rationality in water management governed by the cost recovery principle; opening water management activities to citizen participation; promoting a sustainable and equitable management of transboundary river basins.

Southern and Eastern countries, in contrast, are still torn between old and new water policies, between the need to control an excessive and uncontrolled exploitation of surface water and groundwater and the difficulty of promoting an efficient water resources allocation by imposing a reduction of the quantity of water allocated to the agricultural sector.

Regardless of the achievements made by the various countries, it is important to encourage a really effective and efficient Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. A step forward has been made in order to achieve this objective. During the 3rd Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Water (Jordan, December

2008), the Environment Ministers for the Euro-Mediterranean countries agreed that it was necessary to define a long-term Water Strategy for the Mediterranean (WSM). The WSM aims to provide a common policy framework for achieving integrated water resources management in the Mediterranean region, fostering effective cooperation between Euro-Mediterranean partners within the overall context of sustainable development. It aims to contribute to poverty eradication, peacekeeping, progress in human development and gender equality, safeguarding public health, and avoiding social exclusion within the region. The main objective of the water strategy in the Mediterranean region is to create a common basis for the development of Plans and Programmes, whereby it is possible to reach the established objectives. The 4th Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Water, which will take place in Barcelona from 12th to 14th April 2010, is the framework chosen for approval of a water strategy for the Mediterranean region.