

## *River Basin Councils – A Mechanism for Instituting IWRM in Kazakhstan*

Two key principles of Integrated Water Resources Management are those of managing water resources at the river basin level and the active involvement of water stakeholders in the management of water resources. Stakeholders can be included and represented in a number of ways but it is generally accepted that a River Basin Council or its equivalent is the most efficient organisation to act as the face of the water users.

Recognizing the need for administrative, public and water user participation in water resources management decision-making, the Government of Kazakhstan instituted River Basin Councils (RBCs) in the 2003 Water Code (Article 43). Prior to RBCs no forum existed in Kazakhstan to facilitate this important stakeholder aspect of water management.

Establishing the RBCs is a totally new concept in Kazakhstan. Indeed, there are very few sectors of society in which there is significant public or stakeholder participation. Organizations similar to RBCs, or at least with similar purposes, have been set up in various countries. In terms of the process of establishing them, however, there is no particular model that may be relied on from which to develop a process for Kazakhstan. Therefore, the process of establishing RBCs is taking a 'learn by doing' sort of approach.

In June 2004, UNDP, in collaboration with GWP, began work on preparing a National IWRM and WE Plan for Kazakhstan. Because of the important link between implementing IWRM and stakeholder participation, and with RBCs having been established in law only the previous year, a UNDP project on IWRM and WE Plan—financed by the Government of Norway—took the opportunity to assist the Government of Kazakhstan in establishing RBCs.

The early stages consisted of seminars and other forums to introduce the idea of RBCs and inform people of what they are, what they do and how they benefit water management. Stakeholder workshops were also held to determine the best way to establish RBCs.

Early work in forming RBCs identified the problem of ensuring representation by small and individual water users on the RBC. In 2006, with financial assistance from the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI), the project was able to enlarge and strengthen its stakeholder component. In particular, the project held a series of trainings and workshops for public associations and NGOs, working in the area of environmental protection and water resources management, to explain what the RBCs are and why have them, how they work in other countries, what roles and rights various stakeholder groups have and how identify representatives. Such workshops and trainings, conducted in four pilot basins, ensured more participation and representation of civil society groups on the RBCs thus solving a problem of significant bias toward RBCs being full of representatives of government, whether Oblast departments of ministries or of Akimats.

Altogether, twelve stakeholders workshops were conducted and six RBC meetings held in 2006.

### ***Challenges encountered and lessons learned***

At the beginning most stakeholders at a basin level—especially the staff of River Basin Organizations (RBOs)<sup>1</sup>—took a negative attitude to creating a river basin council. The first council was hard to push forward (even though establishment of RBCs is stipulated in the new Water Code). However, the project managed to overcome that bottleneck by showing the RBOs' staff how the mechanism works and what advantages such an open platform for discussion and decision making at a basin level may bring if skillfully managed.

In the course of creating RBCs in Kazakhstan, the following two basic tenets—drawn from experience in other countries—proved to be fully applicable to Kazakhstan:

- RBCs tend to evolve into the best working arrangement within a few years of their establishment. Therefore it is not necessary to have a set-in-stone RBC structure that is expected to be perfect from the start. To be functional it must be allowed to take its own shape.

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<sup>1</sup> Eight River Basin Organizations are under the national Committee for Water Resources

- It is unnecessary for all eight<sup>2</sup> RBCs to have the same structure or the same number or type of membership. The size, shape and structure of RBCs depend on the needs of the river basin and the ideas of the participants and members of the RBC.

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<sup>2</sup> This corresponds to the number of river basins in Kazakhstan