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Workshop B

Using Ramsar's guidelines for water allocation to wetlands in the transboundary Dniester river basin

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Wetlands and forests play a role as regulators of water regimes and as habitats, which support a specific flora and fauna, and a waterfowl. Their role is especially important on territories, where area of natural habitats is minimised but agricultural and industrial landscapes and human settlements occupy very significant part of territory. The incorporation of wetlands and biodiversity issues into river basin management and integration of these issues into water management and territory development looks as a priority for promotion of sustainable development approaches into national policy of such highly populated countries as Moldova and Ukraine.

At present, the application of principle of integration of land use, biodiversity conservation and water basin management is in its initial stage in both Moldova and Ukraine, the countries which share the Dniester River – a transboundary watercourse with a length of 1252 km and a catchment area of 72,100 km^2, populated with about 7 million people. The length of the Dniester basin is about 700 km, its width 103 km. Dniester has about 15,000 tributaries, mostly with a length up to 10 km.

Intensive agriculture of the Soviet period was followed by land privatization, when arable land was divided in numerous small pieces (less than 1 ha in Moldova and somewhat bigger in Ukraine), usually without taking into account landscape relief and risks of erosion. The forested area was diminished twice during the last century.

Two dams constructed in that time seriously changed the river hydrology and functioning of wetlands in the middle flow and in the estuary. The last 14 years also demonstrated that being in State property, nature protection areas seriously suffered from logging of trees, illegal grazing, poaching, etc. But the economic, social and environmental arguments are in favour of the application of a reasonable policy towards water and related resources management in the Dniester river basin.

Correct land-use planning, landscape management, and formulation of water demands with respect to sufficient water allocation for wetlands are closely connected issues. The forecasted climate changes in the middle and lower Dniester areas will lead to serious water deficits [1] and actions to prevent or minimize desertification and related processes damaging wetlands are strongly needed. The water demandfr om the Dniester has already significantly lowered during last decades. It is evident that wetlands of this area will suffer seriously without special measures adopted and applied. On the other side, the under-

standing of the economic and environmental role of wetlands and related ecosystems is still weak, both among the population and the decision makers in the region. Without a clearly proclaimed responsible policy of both states it will lead to weakening of the wetlands role as natural filters and as a result – further organic pollution of the Black Sea and further losses of biodiversity (currently, the Dniester plays an important role as a biological corridor of the Pan-European Ecological Network). The water quality and quantity is the issue of key importance both for the estuary wetlands and for the Ukrainian city of Odesa, the potable water supply of which fully depends on the Dniester river.

There is a number of reasons of why water allocation for wetlands is still a very secondary issue in national policies of Moldova and Ukraine.

Until now, the water resources and wetlands in both states are the responsibility of national state water agencies, while general environmental policy and natural resources management is an obligation of environmental ministries. Regrettably, under these circumstances, wetlands have not been given the priority they deserve based on the important functions they perform in contributing to the maintenance of healthy and productive river systems.

At present, the only initial steps by both riparian states are to establish more sustainable water policies. Up to now, these steps were almost not coordinated at the transboundary level. Actions at national level developed by different governmental agencies are not well coordinated. Meanwhile, international documents and programmes provide good opportunities to adopt modern approaches to save natural resources, landscapes, habitats and biodiversity in the region, also as a guarantee of sustainability for economic growth, protection of human health, and preservation of cultural values in both states.

One of the key actions in this respect is the creation of legal, institutional and practical measures to prevent further wetland degradation, and to establish permanent and efficient legal and institutional mechanisms to manage river basin ecosystems and resources in a sustainable way. The simplest way of how this could be reached is establishing a joint multi-stakeholder Moldovan-Ukrainian River Commission in the framework of a Dniester River Convention with a permanently functioning secretariat and inter-related working bodies to cover different issues of river basin management.

Meanwhile, the current situation of the national policies in both states can be characterized by the need to establish further priorities for water allocation for: potable water supply and sanitation, hydro-energy, use for industry, and irrigation.

A lower priority is water allocation for fisheries. At present, the water needs of ecosystems are not taken at all into consideration when allocating water in practice, and only fish spawning needs are arguments used to allocate water in spring and early summer to the estuary ecosystems. Meanwhile, the hydrological regime created by the Dnestrovskaya hydropower station plays a key role in allocating water to the three Ramsar sites in the Lower Dniester region [2].

What has already been done?

Ukraine established river basin management departments, including one for the Dniester river, and drafted a programme of actions for the transboundary Dniester river, based on a basin approach at national level. The draft programme contains numerous references to the needs of ecosystem and discusses the necessity to create better relationships between the

Environment Ministry and the State Water Body on river basin management. The need to cooperate with Moldova on a transboundary level is also declared. Drafting and signing of a joint modern river basin agreement, providing mechanisms for coordinated actions is a promising long-term perspective [3].

In Moldova, an official view on water allocation for wetlands is not yet announced. The National Program Against Desertification (2000) still focuses on drainage and irrigation of salt soils in the Dniester floodlands. The National Concept for a Water Policy (2003) establishes as its main goals the rational use and conservation of water resources, the improvement of the water quality, the economic supply of potable water, and the restoration of aquatic ecosystems. The basic idea of the document is monopolizing the water policy and the management of international projects management by the state water management body. For each river basin a body, composed of the different stakeholders, should be established. However, the document does not set clear priorities how to the needs of natural ecosystems, including wetlands, can be preserved. The basis for cooperation with Ukraine, according to the document, should be pragmatism. The concept will be developed into a new Water Code.

The evaluation of biodiversity values in the lower Dniester river valley and providing Ramsar status to three wetlands of international importance (two in Ukraine and one in Moldova, in total 156,000 ha) are the practical actions realised by the two states to preserve wetlands. Both countries discuss since a long time the establishment of National Parks to protect the Dniester wetlands.

To achieve a better water allocation for the wetlands in the Dniester river basin, *it is necessary at least*:

On the legislative level

1. To make sure that the National Ramsar Committees of both states can influence the water allocation policy;
2. to introduce land-use and water planning and management mechanisms based on the river basin scale;
3. to incorporate the relevant Ramsar Guidelines into water policies of both states and in the appropriate bilateral documents;
4. to develop administrative water resource management units according to river catchment basins rather than political boundaries;
5. to establish economic mechanisms that can ensure the implementation of sustainable water use policies and the application of the 'polluter pays' principle;
6. to establish appropriate mechanisms to bring together all major groups involved in the management of the Dniester river basin, such as governments, municipalities, water regulatory bodies, academic institutions, industries, farmers, local communities, NGOs, etc., to contribute towards the management of the basin. A Water Forum as an advisory body for the River Commission can play such role.

On the institutional level

The creation of an effective inter-ministerial, inter-state body to manage the natural resources of the river, preferably in the framework of a river convention mechanism. Such a body should include specialist groups.

For this approach to be sustainable:

1. Participatory mechanism need to be established to solve conflicts of allocating water between competing users, including natural ecosystems, represented by the relevant ministries, local authorities and NGOs;
2. Education and awareness needs to be raised, as an effective tool for support of integrated river basin management among decision makers at different levels and the general public.

As a first measure, strongly needed, and to be used as a model for development of inter-state and cross-sector cooperation, solutions need to be found for the issue of spring water flows in the middle and lower Dniester wetlands, compatible with the needs for fish reproduction and with an adequate regime of functioning of both Dniester dams.

The assessment and demonstration of the economic values of the wetlands is a key issue to advocate for further policy and institutional measures for the Dniester river.

Because of intensive land-use for agriculture, human settlements and industry, only a limited number of potentially valuable wetland sites remain elsewhere than in the lower river section. One of them are the wetlands along the Dniester between Dnestrovskaya hydropower station and the village of Holosnita in Moldova. According to newest data [4], this site fulfils Ramsar criteria 2, 4 and 5 for Wetlands of International Importance.

A very evident stimulus for better water allocation is the establishment of National Parks in the lower Dniester area, currently inscribed in the governmental plans of Moldova and Ukraine. Future Park administrations will develop site management plans. Their implementation will need additional government attention to need of water allocation for this particular wetland ecosystem. National Parks will demonstrate the wetland values providing important goods and services.

A source of optimism is a first Dniester river basin project started with support of OSCE and UNECE. It will determine the priorities for transboundary cooperation and ways to improve the current situation through the development and improvement of inter-state river basin structures, establishment of a legal framework and the prioritization of the different needs (cf. *www.dniester.org*).

References

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