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WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE:
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND MULTISECTORAL APPROACHES

# Research dialogue platforms in the context of institutional reform in the East African water sector

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*An important recommendation of SPLASH studies on enhancing the efficiency of water for development research is the involvement of research dialogue platforms. In these platforms researchers communicate in a structured manner with policy makers, practitioners and civil society representatives about demands-led research, and the dissemination of research findings. Unfolding reform processes in the East African water sector, which are based on IWRM and SWAP principles, create a new institutional landscape. The paper analyses implications of these institutional reforms for research dialogue platforms in Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. The paper recommends to: link research dialogue platforms to RBOs at sub- and supra-national level, which has scale and ownership advantages; and to develop the national research dialogue platform for bridging the gaps between researchers and RBOs at various administrative level and between the Ministries of Water Resources and of Science and Technology.*

## Introduction

SPLASH is the European Union Water Initiative European Research Area Network that aims at improving water research for poverty reduction and thereby to contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It contributes to that aim through the coordination of existing and the design of new collaborative research programs that are funded by EU member states, and the support of good research practices that speed up knowledge transfer from researchers to policy makers, practitioners and civil society organizations.

SPLASH studies identified research dialogue platforms as a good practice to orient research programs better to the demands of low-income groups, policy makers and practitioners. The role of these dialogue platforms should be to enhance the end-users' involvement in the management process. Thereby potential end users get more ownership of the research programs and this will enhance the uptake of its findings. Demand-led research programs and research dialogue platforms can enhance the political will to invest more in water for development research at local and supra-local level (www.splash-era.net).

Researchers in East Africa raised questions about the linkage and organization of research dialogue platforms during a SPLASH consultation in Kisumu Kenya (June 2008). Research stakeholders discussed organization and roles of research dialogue platforms at national and research program levels. This paper discuses the options for research dialogue platforms in the context of the institutional reform processes that are taking place in the East African water sector.

## Institutional reform processes in the East African water sector

East African countries have made serious efforts to put organizational principles of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and Sector Wide Approaches to Planning (SWAP) into practice. The IWRM and SWAP approaches need strong leadership of the national water administration and therefore institutional reforms of the constitutional, organizational and operation function are needed. One reform initiative is bringing water resources management and water service provision under one ministry to reduce coordination constraints. A related reform process is that the water administration at national level focus on

the constitutional function (to set rules, to establish institutions and to formulate policies), and delegates organizational ( to develop strategies and to organize its implementation in coordinated manner) and operational responsibilities (to carry out strategies) to its lower management levels. IWRM principles require a delegation of the organizational function to river basin organizations (RBOs). SWAP principles require a decentralization of the operational function to the lowest management level so that participatory approaches and innovative partnerships can be supported at local level.

The constitutional function for water resources management and water service provision is under one ministry in all East African countries. The Ministries of Water Resources (MWRs) are responsible for the development of national policies and regulatory framework and the organizational and operational functions are increasingly delegated to the lower management levels. Sudan and Ethiopia have a federal administrative structure and the state governments are responsible for managing the water resources within the state boundaries, and the national governments for water resources that cross the state and national boundaries. The other three countries have a centralized administrative structure, and the national ministries have been responsible for managing the water resources.

In all five East African countries the introduction of the IWRM paradigm has resulted into decentralization efforts for the organizational function. Countries that have tributaries of the Nile River on their territories (Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania) are piloting RBOs. Countries that largely depend on the Nile River for water resources supply, have maintained the organizational function at national level (Uganda) and at state level (Sudan). However, the MWRs in both countries are testing the IWRM principles in respectively the Lake Victory Basin, and the Planning Directorate, which is organized for tributaries of the Nile River.

**Table 1. Institutional reform processes in the East African water sector**

| | **Decentralization organizational function** | **Decentralization operational function** | **River basin organizations** | **Policy dialogue platforms** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ethiopia | State and river-basin level | State and local government authority | Two RBOs established | Federal, state and river basin levels |
| Kenya | WRMA regional offices river-basin level | Water service providers at sub-river basin level | Six RBOs established | National, river basin and catchment's levels |
| Sudan | State level | State level | Planning Directorate TOs at river basin level | Federal level and Blue Nile tributary |
| Tanzania | River-basin level | Local government authorities | Eight RBOs established | National, river basin and district levels |
| Uganda | National level | Local government authorities | One RBO tested | National and district levels |

The SWAP approach oriented the decentralization of the operational function to the lowest administrative level and to public-private-voluntary sector partnerships. Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda have piloted the SWAP approach in East Africa and delegated the operational function to the water offices of the local government authorities. In all five East African countries voluntary water users organizations are promoted that share in the management responsibilities of water services infrastructure at local level.

To enhance transboundary collaboration, the water ministers of nine countries that share the Nile River established the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) in 1999. The NBI is a partnership among the Nile riparian states that "seeks to develop the river in a cooperative manner, share substantial socioeconomic benefits, and promote regional peace and security". The NBI consists of three main programs: The Shared Vision Program (SVP) for creating avenues for dialogues and common vision for basin development, and the Eastern Nile Subsidiary Action Program (ENSAP) and the Nile Equatorial Lakes Subsidiary Action

Program (NELSAP) for investing in integrated water resources development of water resources in the two major Nile tributaries.

## Research dialogue platforms in the East African water sector

In all East African countries, the Ministries of Science and Technologies (MST) have established National Councils for Science and Technology (NCST). The councils' function is to govern government-funded science activities and their duties include the administration of research grants, maintenance of research registry and science information services, and setting research policy. The general pattern of research responsibilities is that the MWRs formulate the sect oral research and technology development policies and manages the applied research programs approaches and the MSTs care for coordination and consistency of policies and programs across the sectors.

The NCSTs do not have uniform dialogue platforms for research in the water sector. In Ethiopia the NCST has a water team that focuses on more basic research and the MWR has National Advisory Council that deals with applied research. In Kenya, Sudan and Tanzania the NCSTs have advisory committees that advise respectively on environment and natural resources, which cover also the water sector. In Uganda, the MWR Sect oral Working Groups on water and sanitation and environment act as national research dialogue platforms.

The MWRs in Ethiopia and Uganda are testing policy and research dialogue platforms for public water and sanitation services at district level. The Research Inspired Policy and Practice Learning Ethiopia (RIPPLE) project works on action research for water supply, sanitation and hygiene. The project aims at enhancing policy- and practice-oriented research capacities at district level and forms Learning and Practice Alliances (LPA) that functions as a research dialogue platform, in which officials of the relevant Regional Bureaus (Water, Health, and Finance) collaborate with knowledge institutes and NGOs. The MWR in Uganda established District Water and Sanitation and District Environmental Committees that aim for strengthening coordination and collaboration between the sectors (water, health and education) and stakeholders (public, private and voluntary sector organizations) covering also applied research.

**Table 2. Research dialogue platforms in the East African water sector**

| | National S&T dialogue platform | National research dialogue platforms for water sector | Sub-national research dialogue platform |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ethiopia | Ethiopian Science and Technology Commission | NCST Water Team and MWR National Advisory Council | Piloted at district level by MWR and applied at project level by NGOs |
| Kenya | National Council of Science and Technology | Advisory Committee on Environmental and Earth Sciences | RBOs in Lake Victoria Basin |
| Sudan | National Council on Science and Technology | | |
| Tanzania | Tanzania Commission on Science and Technology | R&D Advisory Committee on Natural Resources | RBOs in Lake Victoria Basin |
| Uganda | National Council on Science and Technology | Sectoral Working Groups | District Committees and RBO in Lake Victoria Basin |

The riparian RBOs in the Lake Victoria Basin collaborate in various supra-national programs that have research dialogues platforms. The Lake Victoria Environmental Management Program, the Lake Victoria Fisheries Organization, the Lake Victoria Regional Local Authorities Collaboration have programs covering one sub-basin of the Nile River Basin. The supra-national development programs have various sect oral research dialogue platforms in which policy makers and representatives of the public, civil society and private sector organizations from Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya are involved in the management of action research that develop recommendations for the improvements of water and environment management in the Lake Victoria Basin.

Lake Victoria Research Initiative (VicRes) is a supra-national window for supporting inter- and multi-disciplinary research in the Lake Victoria Basin. VicRes is connected to the East African Community, hosted by the Inter-University Council for East Africa, and recently started collaborating with the NBI. Both the NBI and the International Water Management Institute for East Africa have established research dialogue platforms for discussion the management of water for development research programs in East Africa and increasingly in the Nile River Basin.

NGOs in all five East African countries that are funding action research in the water for development sector are requesting the establishing dialogue platforms through which major stakeholders participate in the research. These action research activities are implemented as component of the participatory planning processes that NGOs piloted to resolve urgent problems of poor and vulnerable groups.

## Prospects for sub- and supra-national water research dialogue platforms in East Africa

The IWRM and SWAP principles that have led to small differences in the institutional reform processes between East African countries. Both principles require the concentration of the constitutional function in the national water administration, a delegation of the organizational function to sub-national RBOs, and a decentralization of the operational function to the lowest administrative level. Both principles need the development of an enabling policy environment that supports participatory approaches. The IWRM principles focus on the reorganization of the organizational function along the hydrological hierarchy of the river basin. The SWAP principles focus on a decentralization of the operational function of public service provision to the water offices at local level.

Innovative research dialogues are tested at district and river basin level in the national context and at river-basin level in the supra-national and sub-regional context. The RIPPLE program in Ethiopia is piloting research dialogue platforms at district level for practice-oriented research within a SWAP approach. In the Nile River Basin and especially in the Lake Victoria Basin research dialogue platforms are formed both a sub- and supra-national level. The dialogue platforms aim at complementing and aligning research programs and to bring policy makers, practitioners and civil society representatives together with researchers in action research that should lead to improved environmental practices. The international donor community is heavily involved in the design and funding of supra-national research programs that have multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms for its governance system.

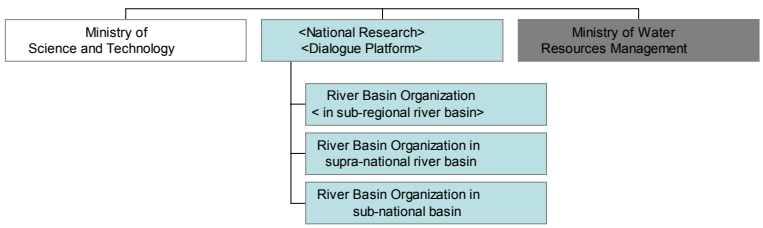



**Figure 1. NRDP bridging between IWRM organizations and ministries**

Linking the research dialogue platform to RBOs has advantages for representation and funding compared to district level. The legal frameworks of RBOs provide executive and legislative bodies that can interact with the managers of research programs in the river basin. In addition, RBOs can have a legal framework and a scale to charge a small research levy from the various categories of water users in the basin. A river basin research fund will make policy and practice-oriented research less dependent on foreign funding and enhance the sub-national ownership through the RBO legislative bodies. Research dialogue platforms at district or local level are important to adjust designs to the local context and enhance local ownership of sustainable and affordable drinking water and sanitation services in low-income areas. However, the district level misses the scale and legal advantages that RBOs have.

Various evaluations of research dialogue platforms show evidence of asymmetric relationships between representatives of the public, private and voluntary sector organizations. Brouwer (2005) and Huggins

(2008) observed that representatives of the public sector and researchers dominated the discussions in the dialogue platforms because the private and voluntary sector organizations are underrepresented and their rights poorly structured. During a SPLASH consultation meeting in East Africa, researchers from all East African countries confirmed that these asymmetric relationships prevail in the national policy and research dialogue platforms. Huggins (2008) proposes to enhance the influence of community-based organizations through the appointment of bridging institutions and/or through enhancing capacity of CBO representatives. Another recommendation would be the development of model statutes and internal regulations for research dialogue platforms at various management levels that specify the objective, representation principles of the sector organizations and the negotiation and discussion modalities.

The MWRs might consider adjusting the role and organization of national research dialogue platforms for the water sector to the new IWRM institutional landscape. The national research dialogue platforms can coordinate the research platforms at river basin level, develop a national policy for demand-led research in the water sector, and design legal frameworks for RBO research dialogue platforms and research funds. The national research platforms can also formulate recommendations and guidelines for representatives of RBO research dialogue platforms in supra-national and sub-regional policy and research dialogue platforms. National policy makers can use demand-lead research policies to develop and test technical and organizational modalities at field level. Lessons learned at local and river basin level can be translated quicker into an enabling policy environment that supports the IWRM and SWAP objectives. The national research dialogue platform can bridging the research communication gaps between the RBOs at sub-national, supra-national and regional level, and between the main stakeholders in the water sector and the National Council of Science and Technology.

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