



# INTERNATIONAL WATERS EXPERIENCE NOTES

<http://www.iwlearn.net/experience>

2008-019

## Fostering Transboundary Cooperation Through Regional Dialogue Processes



**Abstract:** With 90% of the territory of Southeastern Europe (SEE) countries falling within shared water basins, the effective management of transboundary water bodies is of particular importance for the region. Such a fragmented situation means that international legal frameworks and cooperation arrangements need to be worked out to ensure protection and sustainable use of these transboundary water resource systems. This Note examines whether and how a regional dialogue process can leverage such outcomes. It examines whether experience-sharing and consensus building lead towards the types of confidence-building measures needed to foster trust or highlight shared benefits. The intervention specifically included the fostering of a regional community of practice engaged through a series of roundtables and capacity building workshops. Operationally, six types of activities constituted the formal aspects of this regional dialogue process (a Coordination Group, Roundtable Dialogues, Capacity Building Materials, Targeted Workshops, Information Management and Partnership Building) The Athens-Petersberg Process, through a suite of different types of activities, leveraged some key outcomes, especially in the period 2004 to 2008. The series of activities under the Athens-Petersberg Process demonstrates that such technical level dialogues and exchange of experience improve understanding and communication and offer the basis for the initiation of cooperation processes among stakeholders; they may also offer real political outcomes. The Athens-Petersberg Process is demonstrating that water can indeed be a catalyst for cooperation. Replication rests on financing, incremental progress, shared benefits/joint visions, keeping partners and stakeholders focused and sustained investment.

**Mish Hamid**  
**[mish@iwlearn.org](mailto:mish@iwlearn.org)**  
**GEF IW:LEARN**

# Fostering Transboundary Cooperation Through Regional Dialogue Processes

Experience of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) sponsored

## “Strengthening Global Capacity to Sustain Transboundary Waters: The International Waters Learning Exchange and Resource Network (GEF IW:LEARN), Operational Phase” (UNDP-UNEP/GEF Project)

GEFID: 1893

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

GEF IW:LEARN consists of two projects, one UNDP- and one UNEP-implemented, which focus on strengthening transboundary water resources management (TWRM) by facilitating structured learning and information sharing among stakeholders of GEF IW projects. In pursuit of this global objective, IW:LEARN’s website provides easy access to relevant information and knowledge-sharing resources, and IW:LEARN also assists GEF IW projects in improving their information base, replication efficiency, transparency, stakeholder ownership and sustainability of benefits.

GEF IW:LEARN’s stakeholders include the GEF International Waters project portfolio, their partners and stakeholders as well as cooperative initiatives around shared water bodies that are not supported by the GEF. At local, regional and global scales, GEF IW stakeholders adapt and apply learning, information, skills and tools obtained through IW:LEARN and other means to advance and sustain ongoing project benefits in their respective transboundary waters regions.

UNDP serves as lead implementing agency for structured learning activities (with oversight provided by a World Bank Learning Coordinator), global stocktaking meetings, and stakeholder engagement activities in this GEF project. UNEP serves as lead Implementing Agency for the GEF IW information management system and services to GEF IW projects. These joint projects are implemented in close programmatic cooperation with the GEF International Waters Task Force, and are administered by a Steering Committee comprised of GEF IW leads from the GEF Secretariat, UNDP, UNEP and the World Bank.

UNOPS serves as GEF IW:LEARN’s executing agency (EA).

In order to best leverage the core competencies of each implementing agency (UNDP, UNEP and World Bank) GEF IW:LEARN aims to synthesize and disseminate practical experiences and findings of GEF IW projects, GEF agencies’ broader water programs, and related initiatives and to foster peer-to-peer learning communities across the GEF IW community. To strengthen networking with wider global communities of expertise, and to sustain the benefits of knowledge-sharing beyond the current GEF IW:LEARN cycle, the project has contracted partnerships with IUCN’s Water & Nature Initiative and Global Marine Program, UNESCO-IHP and IGRAC, LakeNet, the Global Water Partnership-Mediterranean, the University of Rhode Island, the Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation and UNECE, World Fish Center, InWEnt, the Global Environment and Technology Foundation, the Environmental Law Institute, Eco-Africa and the Gender & Water Alliance.

The GEF IW:LEARN project was involved with four regional dialogue processes, whose purpose was to convene, financially and technically support GEF IW projects participation (and integration) in activities to foster transboundary cooperation across projects and national partners within a given region or sub-region. The four dialogue processes took place in the Caribbean, Pan-Africa, Europe-Central Asia, as well as in Southeastern Europe. GEF IW:LEARN also provided participant financing and other support to other global dialogues (like the Global Oceans Forum and the Commission on Sustainable Development). This note examines the project’s involvement and leadership with a regional dialogue process in Southeastern Europe from 2004 to 2008.

## THE EXPERIENCE

### *Issue*

With 90% of the territory of Southeastern Europe (SEE) countries falling within shared water basins, the effective management of transboundary water bodies is of particular importance for the region. There are thirteen (13) major transboundary rivers, four (4) shared lakes as well as more than fifty (50) transboundary aquifers in the region. More than 50% of the transboundary basins are shared by three (3) or more riparian countries. Such a fragmented situation means that international legal frameworks and cooperation arrangements need to be worked out to ensure protection and sustainable use of these transboundary water resource systems.

The SEE region is also characterized by additional challenges to cooperation. Parts of the region witnessed hostilities to various degrees in the 1990's, both within today's countries and between them. Violence was worst among and within the countries that emerged from the breakup of Yugoslavia. On top of that, systems of government have been radically changed and market-based economics introduced. These significant systemic challenges resulted to some extent, in less capacity to manage water resources. These days, the principal driver in the region is accession to the European Union. Some states are already in the Union (Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania), others are candidates and others are preparing stabilization & association agreements. Strikingly, almost all countries in the region are voluntarily adopting the EU Water Framework Directive, which sets water quality standards and mandates integrated water resource management (IWRM) in all shared basins. The systemic challenges, high goals and weaker capacity suggest a need for efforts to mitigate them.

### *Addressing the Issue*

Viewing water as a catalyst for cooperation, the German government and World Bank launched the *Petersberg Process* in 1998, to provide support to translate into action then current developments and opportunities for future cooperation on transboundary river, lake and groundwater management in SEE. The Greek

government and World Bank launched the *Athens Declaration Process* in 2003, introducing a framework for cooperation on capacity building and knowledge sharing on Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) and the development of IWRM plans for transboundary basins in southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean, modeled on the 2002 Johannesburg targets. The two processes progressively came together in order to generate synergies and maximize the outcomes for the benefit of the SEE region. The Global Water Partnership – Mediterranean (GWP-Med) is the technical facilitator of collaborative activities. Starting in 2005, with technical and administrative assistance provided by the GWP-Med, the GEF, through IW:LEARN, started co-financing a number of initiatives and activities in the South Eastern European region under the rubric of the Athens-Petersberg Process. GEF IW:LEARN provided both coordination as well as direct meeting support to the process, which convened stakeholders of transboundary waters in the region in different types of dialogue process activities. Together, the German Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the World Bank, GWP-Med and the GEF formed the “Core Partners”.

The GEF intervention specifically included the fostering of a regional community of practice engaged through a series of roundtables and capacity building workshops. The collaborative activity also envisioned the creation of a Transboundary Waters Information Exchange Network for Southeastern Europe ([www.watersee.net](http://www.watersee.net)), a website to support the community. The overall goal of these activities was to foster cross-fertilization between competent organizations and key people working with basin commissions and joint water management bodies in southeastern Europe, and to also create a forum for the introduction of new approaches and experiences from outside the region.

Roundtables and capacity-building workshops were planned and implemented in cooperation with key stakeholders in the SEE countries. The wide acceptance of this series of Athens-Petersberg activities for capacity building and exchanging of experience was reflected in the broad participation (both by country and by type of organization) of the target audience in all activities. More specifically, all events were

hosted and co-organized with either the relevant Ministries of the respective countries or with Joint Commissions (established by the riparian countries) of the shared water body on which the event was focused.

Operationally, six types of activities constituted the formal aspects of this regional dialogue process, and will be described in turn as well as some lessons that have been derived from each of these processes in terms of their impact, applicability and replicability. The enormous amount of informal interventions will not be described as such, but they form a critical part of the overall effort, i.e. the track-two diplomacy and behind-the-scenes interventions made by the Core Partners to support desired outcomes.

**Coordination Group.** Various interventions by multiple international organizations required a coordinating body. The reality is that regional dialogues require considerable political and financial investment, even in favorable circumstances, to realize outcomes. Despite the obvious political/financial benefits of having multiple actors with individual strengths involved in such a process, strategic planning, streamlined decision-making and joint action are needed in order to realize those benefits. In some cases, a lead actor is chosen to meet this requirement, but in the case of the Athens-Petersberg Process the Core Partners opted to form a Coordination Group (CG). The CG was launched in 2005 and operated through regular face-to-face meetings, as well as through teleconference meetings sponsored by the German government, occurring at least quarterly and as necessary in preparation for events. Representatives of national institutions competent for water resources management and civil society, joint commissions for the management of shared water bodies as well as international institutions and organizations, donor countries and NGO's active in SEE were also invited to the face-to-face meetings to jointly plan events. In effect, they became the actual designers, contributors and beneficiaries of the regional dialogue activities. Their participation in the coordination meetings assisted in building ownership and achieving openness and transparency in the planning and management of the dialogue process.

**Roundtable Dialogues.** These events constituted the signature activities of the Athens-Petersberg Process from 2004-2008. In total,

some six roundtables were designed and carried out. Each roundtable involved about sixty to seventy participants covering broad sets of SEE stakeholders as well as international experts. The Process provided travel support to participants from the region. Each roundtable lasted approximately three days, including a half-day side trip for site or technical visits. The site visit was usually scheduled early in the roundtable to promote bonding and a spirit of learning exchange. Meeting content included presentations of external experience (both similar case studies and topical presentations by experts) in transboundary water management, as well as presentations of cases from within the region to promote exchange. Meetings were also often built around thematic tracks, such as Stakeholder Engagement or IWRM, through which discussion could be promoted and conclusions reached. Dinners and other social events were also included in the program to further foster interaction among participants. The ultimate objective of the roundtables was, by convening stakeholders from different basins facing comparable IWRM challenges, to promote the exchange of practical experience and contribute to the building of their capacity. In effect, the roundtables also helped to build more bridges between participants in a region which suffered active conflict in the recent past.

**Capacity Building Materials.** Part of a dialogue process includes informed discussion. GWP-Med and expert partners prepared some eight major documents over the course of the project including, inter alia, assessments of shared water resources (groundwater, lakes), financial aspects of water supply and sanitation, and managerial actions. These materials provided the background and framework for discussions at Athens-Petersberg Process events, raised awareness and facilitated the preparation of follow on activities. They also formed the basis of shorter technical notes circulated prior to meetings. The documents played a major role in defining issues and formulating common awareness of key issues in the region. The documents, as well as the reports of the different events constitute a pool of updated information and assembled knowledge, including policy recommendations, and are freely accessible through the website: <http://www.watersee.net>.

**Targeted Workshops.** In an example of adaptive management, the core group responded to stakeholder requests for small-

sized, focused workshops. Roundtable participant evaluations were nearly unanimous on the need for increased training on specific issues such as stakeholder engagement, lake basin IWRM, water and climate change and other topics. The first two of these targeted workshops occurred in the first part of 2008, two more in the latter part of 2008, and at least two more planned for 2009. The initial GEF IW:LEARN funding leveraged four times this cofinancing in additional funding. The workshops represent a maturing of the Athens-Petersberg Process in the sense that stakeholders across national boundaries are seeking joint training exercises and that the Process itself is moving beyond convening stakeholders to providing targeted services to them.

**Information Management.** Some activity needs to occur in the space between face-to-face meetings to support and maintain the confidence-building and information sharing process. Moreover, a user-interactive and content-rich electronic platform can provide a useful service to foster a community of practice. The Transboundary Waters and Information Exchange Network for Southeastern Europe (TWIEN-SEE) aimed to strengthen networking and communication between decision makers and experts and assist in information and experience sharing on relevant issues (<http://www.watersee.net>). The platform was primarily used to organize and disseminate background and preparatory materials and to communicate outcomes of the main Athens-Petersberg activities. Three facilitated electronic dialogues were linked with related events and aimed to enable continued exchange of views among the participants of the roundtables and workshops.

**Partnership Building.** A less overt, but critical part of a regional dialogue process lies in the building of partnerships. In the case of Athens-Petersberg, this was exemplified by Core Partner outreach not just to other international organizations, but also key institutions at the national and local levels. As mentioned previously, the CG sought to ensure the presence of all types of project stakeholders at face-to-face meetings and trainings. Overtures were successfully made to key regional actors UNECE and UNESCO. Perhaps most importantly, all face-to-face events were hosted by the given country's relevant ministry with the water portfolio. Key regional NGO's including the

Regional Environment Center, World Wildlife Foundation and others were also involved in order to fulfill the Process's objectives through inclusion and deeper collective action, but especially to develop the type of partnerships that would sustain such action.

## RESULTS AND LEARNING

The Athens-Petersberg Process leveraged some key outcomes, especially in the period 2004 to 2008.

The Process contributed concretely to building capacity of a large range of SEE stakeholders at the regional, national and local levels regarding TWRM, through cross-fertilization of knowledge and experiences and introduction of new elements and lessons learned from outside the region. At Process Roundtables, stakeholders communicated their aspirations and views on challenges and necessary responses regarding TWRM in their countries and identified cooperation opportunities.

The Athens-Petersberg Process achieved communication of information about key TWRM issues to the political leadership of national competent institutions, and hence contributed in raising political will and commitment to action. Signifying this, there were increasing numbers of high level officials from competent authorities over the period 2004-2008. The actual participation and engagement in discussions of Ministers, Deputy Ministers and State Secretaries of the riparian countries in the Slovenian (2007) and Sofia (2008) Roundtables is of particular note. The Process also facilitated the acknowledgement of critical issues that traditionally were not high on the agenda, such as shared groundwater management and the integrated management of freshwater bodies and the coastal environment.

Hosting activities in a number of key shared water bodies in SEE (Lake Ohrid, Sava River, Nestos River) provided opportunities to participants for first-hand experiences and better understanding of challenges and on-going activities in the basins. As an example, the Ohrid roundtable allowed local stakeholders from three countries –riparian to the extended Drin River Basin that includes the Prespa, Ohrid, and Shkoder Lakes and the Drin River- to understand the implications of water resources management in this extended hydrological and

ecological system and the need for cooperation and integration. The Ohrid Roundtable (October 2006) maybe considered as the first step in a process towards the creation of a vision among stakeholders for the integrated management of the extended Drin River Basin system. This constitutes a valid basis for future cooperation that, in addition, further drew the attention of the international community. Efforts for the planning of TWRM activities in the Drin Basin have been initiated in cooperation with the competent authorities of the riparian countries, UNECE and donor countries such as Germany.

At the Zagreb Roundtable (November 2006) the Athens-Petersberg Process also greatly contributed in the initiation of the discussion among the riparian countries which are parties to the Sava River Basin Agreement (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia) for the multi-purpose use of the Basin. That roundtable also assisted in the better management of the Sava River Basin mainly through the infusion of experience from shared basins outside SEE. It also provided the ground for the initiation of a dialogue between the Slovenian and Croatian Public Water Companies for the multipurpose use of Sava River Basin resources (e.g. hydropower generation, navigation, etc.).

During the Slovenia Roundtable (November 2007), a special high-level segment was organized where government representatives (ministers) of the Parties to the Framework Agreement on the Sava River Basin signed a protocol to support "...further development of cooperation in the field of shared groundwater in the SEE region and especially in the sustainable management of groundwater in the Sava River Basin where the institutional mechanism of cooperation is already established...". This represents a significant political outcome of the Athens-Petersberg Process. Also in Slovenia, the proposed UNDP-GEF Dinaric Karst Aquifer Project was presented to the representatives of the countries of focus (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro); discussions regarding its content, goals and possible impact in the region were facilitated, opening the way for its endorsement by the countries of focus. Some of the high-level representatives of these countries used this opportunity to state in public their intention to support the project proposal and more

importantly cooperation around this shared water system.

The Process has initiated a "bottom up" participatory approach for the management of the Nestos River Basin (shared by Bulgaria and Greece). This approach is complementary to the on-going "top down" approach initiated by Bulgaria and Greece. The Sofia Roundtable (April 2008) suggested the creation of a Transboundary Stakeholders Forum that will allow the communication and exchange of experience and information among stakeholders from Bulgaria and Greece. It was also the first time, that stakeholders from the two parts of the Basin met to discuss issues of common concern and express their aspirations regarding the management of the shared Basin. The continuation of this approach needs the close cooperation of and is subject to the will of the riparian countries and available financial resources.

The Athens-Petersberg Process also provided the basis for networking and the establishment of communication among TWRM practitioners in the SEE region. The website became a point for information and knowledge sharing. While it succeeded in setting the base for a community of practice that could be further developed, the inter-communication facilities provided through the website were never really used by the regional and local stakeholders for the exchange of information and knowledge despite the efforts undertaken. This was attributed to reticence among regional stakeholders to embrace the internet as a communications tool, however, increased hit counts indicated the website was increasingly utilized as an important dissemination and archiving tool. The idea of sustaining a web-based Community of Practice in SEE that would communicate on a steady basis on issues of TWRM will be has to be revisited. Nevertheless, the TWIENSEE was proven useful for the dissemination of the Process's outcomes and the information generated.

Further to the set objectives of the joint project, a much broader impact was achieved by enhancing synergies among key regional processes on TWRM in SEE. The Athens-Petersberg Process facilitated the coordination and succeeded in the creation of synergies among the project and Regional and International Initiatives (Petersberg Phase II /

Athens Declaration Process and UNECE Water Convention) as well as international projects (GEF Strategic Partnership for the Large Marine Ecosystems) towards the enhancement of TWRM in the SEE region.

## REPLICATION

**Financing.** For all the political interventions and in-kind support, there is a cash element to a regional dialogue process. For example, expenditures for the Slovenia roundtable, including travel support and meeting expenses, were approximately US\$25,000. The six initial roundtables under Athens-Petersberg cost about US\$71,000 in cash contributions (with significant in-kind support from the Core Partners). These figures don't demonstrate however, the increasing local financing that supported the roundtables, i.e. host-country support. All told, the six roundtables, two consultation meetings, one side event, eight capacity building documents, launch and maintenance of a website, three electronic dialogues, four coordination meetings and eighteen coordination teleconferences involved an investment of about US\$785,000 in cash and in-kind support. The lesson being that similar efforts would require similar amounts of money over the given time period.

**Incremental Progress.** One learns quickly that a dialogue process such as this evolves over time and doesn't always leverage obvious benefits in the short run. Improving understanding and changing political behavior involves being patient but consistent during what is a slow evolution. The obvious cost then becomes the patience of donors as well as the stakeholders in the process. One has to maintain interest through proper sequencing of events, as well as managing the space between meetings with frequent networking. Behavior during the meetings must reinforce the fact that these events are not just events for the sake of events. The process drivers must gently but firmly cajole stakeholders into delivering real outcomes. All of this must be balanced against the reality that is a regional dialogue process, and one must not press too hard before the ripe moments. Expectations for the outcomes of each event must not be set too high. A perfect illustration of this would be the Ministerial Declaration during the Slovenia roundtable. At the outset, limited objectives were laid out but quietly the core partners pushed the host

country leadership to pursue a more permanent outcome.

**Shared Benefits and Joint Visions.** The fundamental prerequisite for shared benefits is the agreement on a Vision for the joint management of shared water resources. Examples from the Rhine, Danube and Sava River basins provide inspiration and valuable lessons. Replication is feasible. The elaboration of commonly agreed strategies at the basin level and the commitment of governments to work together for their promotion are of utmost importance. Stakeholders, in particular water managers and hydrologists often think in national terms. A joint vision embraces the basin-approach. The concept of shared benefits forms a critical foundation of transboundary water management, suggesting that cooperation over shared water resource can leverage win-win outcomes.

**Maintaining Focus.** One critical role for the Coordination Group involves maintaining partner and stakeholder focus on Process objectives and meeting agendas. Face-to-face meetings can sometimes become fora for grandstanding and invective on issues that are not germane to the integrated water resource management agenda. Meetings can become an opportunity to fight other battles. In such situations, experience from this case suggests that core partners/meeting hosts acknowledge the importance of issues raised. They must then calmly offer alternative fora to address the concerns in a transparent manner and then graciously request the intended issue be addressed. Such conflict management applies not just to actual meetings, but to the overall process, i.e. maintaining stakeholder energy on stated (but adaptable) objectives.

**Sustained Investment.** The dialogue process must be sustained through solid financing. An interruption of significant duration could dilute focus and leave room for other actors, both international and national to steer local actors in other directions, perhaps not addressing TWRM. The Core Partners have been able, to date, to leverage additional funds and achieve more for less with existing financing. The key is to anticipate funding gaps and spread funds evenly throughout extended time periods.

## SIGNIFICANCE

The series of activities under the Athens-Petersberg Process demonstrates that such technical level dialogues and exchange of experience improve understanding and communication and offer the basis for the initiation of cooperation processes among stakeholders; they may also offer real political outcomes. What began as a regional dialogue process on a specific issue resulted in a ministerial declaration to cooperate on groundwater management in a shared river basin. And that is only one outcome of a process that is still growing and maturing, as exemplified by developments in the Drin River Basin and also, potentially, in the Mestos-Nesta River Basin.

These activities under the Athens-Petersberg Process constituted the first time for SEE stakeholders to engage in a systematic and sustained process of dialogue and capacity building on TWRM in their region, in particular since the emergence of new states, post-conflict reconstruction, transition to market economies and regional EU integration processes began. The themes addressed were of broad nature (management of rivers, lakes and groundwater, adaptation to climate variability and change, balancing multi-purpose uses, stakeholders' participation) and each addressed a variety of TWRM aspects. This Process also provides an example of how coordinated action among external actors (international organizations and bilateral donors), with the endorsement of

regional and local key stakeholders in focus countries can result in concerted action at both the national and regional levels. The Athens-Petersberg Process is demonstrating that water can indeed be a catalyst for cooperation.

## REFERENCES

- ◆ The Transboundary Water Information Exchange Network has all reports and documents related to the Athens-Petersberg Process:  
<http://www.watersee.net>

## KEYWORDS

- ◆ Transboundary Cooperation
- ◆ Dialogue Process
- ◆ Confidence Building

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) **International Waters Experience Notes** series helps the transboundary water resources management (TWRM) community share its practical experiences to promote better TWRM. **Experiences** include successful practices, approaches, strategies, lessons, methodologies, etc., that emerge in the context of TWRM.

To obtain current *IW Experience Notes* or to contribute your own experience, please visit <http://www.iwlearn.net/experience> or email [info@iwlearn.net](mailto:info@iwlearn.net).