

# Foreword to the IWRM Conference Special Edition

## Integrated water resource management (IWRM): Lessons from implementation in developing countries<sup>#</sup>

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This special edition of Water SA consists of a selection of papers presented at the International Conference on Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) entitled: Lessons from Implementation in Developing Countries which took place from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> March 2008, in South Africa (The Cape Town International Convention Centre). This Conference was jointly organised by the Water Research Commission of South Africa, Department of Water Affairs and Forestry – UNESCO-IHP (International Hydrological Programme) Focal Point (South Africa), the Water Institute of Southern Africa, CapNet, IWMI, CIRAD, University of Pretoria, and GWP Southern Africa.

Through its two days of parallel sessions this Conference aimed to deal with strategic themes, viz. 'Water and Society', 'Water and the Economy', 'Water and the Environment' and 'Water for Growth and Development' to encourage round-table debates where the main focus areas were on **The Enabling Environment, Institutional Roles and Management Instruments**, that guided the knowledge sharing of outcomes which ultimately led to the sharing of experiences and debating the latest developments in the field.

The main objectives of the conference were to:

- Canvass the understanding of what IWRM actually means amongst participating countries
- Collect information on the level of preparedness in developing countries for the implementation of IWRM, such as a development of formal legal instruments on IWRM, financial allocations, training, capacity building and the required infrastructure for regional IWRM implementation
- Establish an understanding of the challenges facing the implementation of IWRM in developing countries
- Assess progress with the implementation of IWRM, with special focus on developing countries and to identify major remaining challenges.

This conference was of importance to South Africa marking 10 years into its new water law implementation. The significance is even greater when the region and the entire continent are facing challenges of escalating demands on water resources; global climate change causing current and foreseeable uncertainties, to state but a few. The discourse on water resource management has sufficiently moved in recent years from the conceptual into the practical implementation realms. Short-comings, limitations and unrealistic expectations poured in from the experiences in devel-

oping countries and the general feeling was that there is more substance worth sharing to enhance progress in implementation. The convergence of conclusions alludes to the fact that although the desired outcome might be similar, the approaches can vary tremendously. Whilst most countries in the world are endorsing IWRM as an instrument to cope with these challenges, it was felt that the time was suitable to take stock to assess progress and share lessons that can have bearings on future discourse in the region, continent or maybe in all the developing nations. From the conference inputs, it is felt that IWRM as a tool has stood the test of time and proved relevant in providing a framework which is flexible enough to accommodate all local variations; environmental, social, political and economic.

The conference was attended by more than 400 participants converging from about 30 countries around the world, most of whom are IWRM practitioners, members of academia, policy makers and students largely from developing countries. The former Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry Prof Kader Asmal, graced the conference and reminded the audience that 'reforming water law in South Africa was a process that needed due time and thought, and it took over three years for the National Water Act to come into law. It had the advantage of being able to assess policies and practices and outcomes elsewhere in the world; to engage with many top professionals and to give effect to the progressive vision of the new democracy'. He went on 'I hear talk of implementation fatigue, coupled with capacity constraints, in terms of integrated water resource management. We cannot doubt the political will and determination to succeed in this endeavour. Water resources have to be managed. If this is not done in an integrated manner, then it is obvious that water management will be undermined. Integrated management is indeed difficult. Co-operative governance is indeed difficult. We all know about the complexities of understanding social and opportunity costs, and cumulative and synergistic impacts. But most of humankind's failings have at their heart a failure to consider options holistically. It must of course be acknowledged that the commitment to implementation, and the critical investment in capacity building, will determine the extent to which policy becomes practice' (Asmal, 2008, Appendix).

The programme of the conference was designed to allow for the sharing of diverse views on IWRM as a framework from implementation examples, findings and lessons to share. A renowned water laureate, Prof Asit K. Biswas, was an invited speaker considered to be an opponent to IWRM. It is important to engage with such renowned specialists especially when they have access to many nations' political leaderships. Hence, it was important to engage with Prof Biswas on a debate to objectively identify the source of his concerns; is it the IWRM acronym, the IWRM proponents themselves or the IWRM concept and framework contents. Also invited to the conference was a GWP regional spokesperson, Mr Jean Boroto, as an IWRM proponent as well as other speakers bringing the practitioners' views

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