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Preface

The way water and politics interact is critical for decisions on and implementation of water reforms. Politics, defined here as the process through which relations of power are constituted, negotiated and reproduced, is indeed in the background of all public decisions and action. Although obvious to water practitioners, this political component has not received sufficient attention so far. On the contrary, the international discourse often exerts a strong depoliticising effect by focusing on neutral concepts, which avoid controversies being developed and properly addressed. That is why the World Water Council has initiated, in partnership with IUCN, a “Water and Politics” programme that aims to raise awareness of the importance of political issues in water reforms and to identify how politics can be a tool for the water community.

In the framework of this project, pilot activities have been launched in some countries or basins to identify the institutional and political power structures and to facilitate discussion between local technical and political people. Selected dialogue areas are located in Mexico (Costa de Chiapas), Tanzania/Kenya Pangani River Basin, Volta River in Ghana and Burkina Faso and the Mekong River Basin (Thailand, Cambodia, Laos).

To share the outcome of these activities and to receive input on further action, a workshop was organized on 26-27 February in Marseille, in partnership with IUCN and the Water Supply Group of Marseille, which hosted the event.

The objectives of the workshop were to help to further develop the project on Water and Politics by identifying priority areas to be investigated and priority action. Fifty participants from 21 countries and from a wide array of backgrounds discussed the following questions: (i) what can we learn from political science that can help our understanding of the implementation of water reforms? (ii) How could this knowledge be useful to those in charge of preparing these reforms? (iii) Which are the most critical issues that could benefit from this programme? (iv) What specific actions could be initiated by the Council in this field?

Water, which is essential for life and development, is present in most sectors such as energy, health, industry, etc and does not constitute a sector in itself. This makes water highly political and consequently, only elected officers have the legitimacy to take the important decisions related to its management. It is essential to take account of national and local political processes and power structures if effective local action for improved water use and service provision is to be obtained. Therefore it is necessary to facilitate the dialogues between the water community and politicians at all levels, but especially at the local one, to enhance the understanding on the one hand of the role of politics by the water community and on the other hand of the role of water in development by decision-makers.

The World Water Council included in its work programmes components on water and politics taking into account the suggestions of the workshop that there is a need for 1) enhancing mutual understanding and co-operation between water professionals and politicians and 2) for a better understanding of politics and power structures at the local level. In its programme on the strengthening and empowerment of local stakeholders, the Council has already committed itself to working on a better articulation between the water actors, the other sectors, the local authorities and the political world. The programme on water and politics is also linked to the overarching theme of the 4th World Water Forum “Local actions for a global challenge”.

More information to be followed on <http://www.worldwatercouncil.org>.

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