**First Regional Environment Forum for Basin Organizations in Latin America**

Panama City, 15 - 16 December 2015

***Towards Sustainable Freshwater Governance in Latin America***

The First Regional Environment Forum for Basin Organizations of Latin America held in Panama City on 15 - 16 December 2015, followed up the resolutions of the First International Environment Forum for Basin Organizations, held from 26 - 28 November 2014, in Nairobi, Kenya.

This first regional forum was organized by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), with the support of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Latin American Network of Basin Organizations (Lanbo), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Andean Development Corporation (CAF) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), in order to support, facilitate and continue the process of strengthening sustainable governance of freshwater resources and generate inputs that promote public policies for freshwater management, in light of the next session of the United Nations Environment Assembly and the Second International Forum of Basin Organizations on Environment.

The Forum was held in a region that has 31% of the freshwater resources of the world, but it is also highly vulnerable and faces crises and governance challenges. 80% of its population lives in cities, 30 million of its inhabitants lack access to safe water and 110 million live deprived of safe sanitation.

The Forum participants, representatives of ministries and basin organizations, regional and national institutions involved in water management, NGOs and intergovernmental agencies, shared information, presented experiences and lessons learned, and reflected on the challenges facing Latin America for sustainable management of their freshwater resources.

The debates were organized into five topics: 1. Role of basin organizations to achieve sustainable development goals and international water agreements; 2. Water quality and ecosystem health; 3. Nexus water-food-energy and adaptation to climate change; 4. regulatory frameworks to support the management of freshwater resources, including sustainable financial mechanisms; 5. Good governance through examples in Latin America.

The main contributions, conclusions and recommendations of the participants of the Forum on each of these issues are summarized below:

**1. Role of basin organizations to achieve sustainable development goals (SDG) and international water agreements.**

The integrated approach is one of the main characteristics of the SDGs, and should encourage basin organizations to identify and strengthen the relationships between objectives defined in the relevant international agreements, Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) and Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as to integrate environmental and water resources agendas.

To overcome the fragmented situation, the ecosystem approach to adaptation, the human rights approach and attention to vulnerable populations, environmental education and effective community participation, constitute management strategies that should be implemented in the basins.

It is mandatory to act proactively rather than reactively, data collection and systematization of hydro meteorological information is key as well as implementing economic instruments that provide sustainability and permanence to the actions taken.

A window of opportunity for basin organizations is to establish links with international agreements such as the Basel, Rotterdam, Stockholm and Minamata, and include in their agendas the INDCs and REDD+ projects to be established as local implementing agencies, which would generate a potential new source of resources.

There are successful examples in the region on specific regulatory frameworks for basin organizations and management of transboundary basins.

It is necessary to meet standards of transparency and accountability to ensure the participation of all sectors involved in freshwater resources management, especially establishing mechanisms of monitoring and control.

**2. Water quality and ecosystem health**

The link between the basin and the sea should be made visible in the definition and implementation of policies, so in terms of the SDG means integrating the goals 6 and 14.

Incorporation of scientific data on the planning of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), as well as on the Transforming Environments Atlas which shows the progress of the agricultural frontier and strategies such as the declaration of Regional Public Good, creation of buffer zones and protected areas, water quality monitoring stations, inter-institutional coordination and research at the basin level, are useful tools for watershed management.

Ecosystem conservation is critical for basins management as well as establishing a sound regulatory framework, information systems and monitoring water quality, and intersectoral coordination strategies.

The management of hydraulic resources require specific data on the causes and impacts on water flow required by ecosystems; overfishing and invasive species; the consequences of de-connectivity of ecosystems; altering the hydrological cycle associated with manifestations of climate change, groundwater salinization, acidification and nutrient overload and natural disasters.

Fracking activity (shale gas) represents a new threat to the basins of the region, therefore the demand for water in the process as the superposition of arid areas with high potential for shale and little water.

There are successful examples in the region of use of tools for watershed management and monetary and non-monetary valuation of ecosystems; implementation of payment on environmental services, the Ecosystem Based Adaptation (EBA) on protected mountain areas and watershed restoration projects.

**3. Nexus water-food-energy and adaptation to climate change**

There are separate challenges in all three sectors: water, energy and food, and also manifestations of climate change on the hydrological cycle. Moreover, the impact on the inhabitant’s health and in crops being associated with the increase of plagues and illnesses and the uncertainty in the agricultural calendar. Basin organizations are facing shortages and abundance of the resource, managing deficits and surpluses.

The high vulnerability of forests, ecosystems and water resources, requires the implementation of strategies like the creation of biological corridors, strengthening core areas, creating early warning systems, apply EbA at the basin, micro watershed and different habitats and ecosystems as it is associated with community co-benefits, soil conservation and GHG mitigation.

Protection of biodiversity and ecosystems is a key element to manage in a more comprehensive and coherent way, the water-food-energy nexus at the basin level. The generation of hydro meteorological information is relevant not only to the energy sector, but also for environment and agriculture, and alliances must be generated to share this information and advance on changes in the energy matrix in the region, incorporating solar energy and wind power to displace the thermal energy.

Climate change and the uncertainty associated with its effects need to develop capabilities and dynamic, flexible adaptation to allow decisions in changing scenarios, such as cases of ecosystems being influenced by glaciers.

**4. Regulatory frameworks to support the management of watershed organizations, including sustainable financial mechanisms**

Countries’ historical, social and political contexts are central to the definition of the institutional and legal framework for the operation of basin organizations, there is no single model.

Transboundary basin management brings particular challenges that obey their jurisdictional reach. In the region, a variety of situations including bi-national agencies, tri-national treaties and even involving eight countries that share a common basin; also shared by countries with different levels of development, with different regimes of the resource domain, and with different degrees of access to information and data, where vulnerability to climate change as a common denominator for the entire region.

In order to optimize the management of watersheds and prevent environmental conflicts associated with competition for the use of its resources, decisions must be based on dialogue, cooperation and technical and not political criteria. They must be established and implemented robust mechanisms for public participation and the development of strategic alliances. Capacity building of local stakeholders is key to the successful management of watersheds; it is also essential to establish a system of territorial information and create funds for specific projects.

Creating funds to manage specific projects and charging different fees depending on the activity that takes place should be considered as a way to achieve greater equity in the management of basins.

It is essential to improve the efficiency of irrigation and the use of appropriate technologies, as well as apply best production practices to become more efficient on the water use and improve the infiltration capacity among others.

**5. Good governance of resources in the field of watershed through examples in Latin America**

The institutions and the respect for the law are fundamental to the sustainability of the water basins in the region. Basin organizations are called to play an essential role in the design and implementation of appropriate tools to ensure compliance with the principles of good governance in the management of watersheds.

The defining elements of good governance can take as reference the 12 Water Governance Principles adopted by the OECD and the principles of the New Water Culture, among others. Achieving them depends on the context given on the significant differences on the services provided by the basin, the roles of stakeholders in the basin, the regulatory framework, skills, degree of consolidation of the rule of law, control efficacy of corruption and creating spaces and mechanisms of accountability.

We have to work on the recovery of ancestral practices, incorporating indigenous and peasant associations, technology transfer, modeling and use of hydro meteorological data and information to support planning for future activities and good governance; the need to maintain a permanent presence in the basin; the inclusion of new stakeholders such as tourism sector, migration, customs, public work, among others, and develop their capacity for self-management.

***LOOKING FORWARD***

As part of today's environmental challenges and the changing climate that affects the region, it is vital to identify the opportunities and challenges facing the basin organizations, their participation in the pursuit of the SDG and its link to global forums and global agreements with impact on water management in the region.

Based on the valuable results of the First International Forum, this first regional forum has enabled to deepen the exchange of information and knowledge on good practices and lessons learned in the management of river basins in the region, thereby strengthening the capacities of participants of the Forum at its functions related to the adoption and / or implementation of policies and management of water basins.

The Forum allowed the confirmation that there are valuable experiences in water basin management in the region, often achieved with the support of regional and international cooperation, which importance cannot be underestimated and should continue and be strengthened given the magnitude of the challenges faced. These experiences provide a solid foundation to learn and to identify opportunities for increased intra-regional cooperation and synergy in the work agendas of relevant agencies and regional and international organizations.

Welcoming the active participation and support of agencies and related organizations with the theme, the Forum highlighted the facilitation role of UNEP and made a call to continue and deepen the work in the region by organizing capacity building activities, providing technical assistance, and identification of south-south cooperation. For this, it is important to carry out, with the participation of all key actors-, a mapping of the needs and define priorities for action. The next Regional Forum will be held in the Caribbean, its results will consolidate the contributions of the Latin America and Caribbean region, looking forward to the Second International Environment Forum for Basin Organizations.