

Approaches, methods and experiences of stakeholders' information and consultation in the preparation of River Basin Management Plans

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Abstract:

The first institution that systematically stimulated information and consultation process within the preparation of the first river basin management plans in Slovenia was the Institute for Water of the Republic of Slovenia with expert assistance of the Geological Survey of the Republic of Slovenia and additionally of company Consensus, specialized consultancy for communication and public participation. Although appointed to prepare background documents on expert level, the involved institutions planned and started the consultation process based on principles of holistic approach as laid down in the Water Framework Directive also. The paper exposes a wide range of challenges that institutions had to face when planning the process. It emphasizes the capacity building process among two expert institutions as the first, necessary phase for planning and performing any kind of information and consultation activities. The paper also presents the consultation process and description of consultation activities in 2007 with outputs and findings that served as the background to continue and improve the process in the following years.

Keywords:

capacity building, consultation, information, public, river basin management plan, stakeholders

BACKGROUND

In accordance with Directive 2000/60/EC (Water Framework Directive, hereinafter called WFD), the EU member states were obliged to prepare the interim report on significant water management issues, recognized in the river basins until the end of 2007. As a part of the EU integration process, Slovenia adopted the national Water Act (2002), which incorporates the principles and requirements of the WFD for the content and the process to develop river basin management plans. The Water Act also defines the roles and responsibilities of different institutions in the preparation of river basin management plan. It defines the Ministry for the Environment and Spatial Planning as the competent authority while the Institute for Water of the Republic of Slovenia (hereinafter called IzVRS) is appointed a leading expert institution to develop content proposals on the expert level as a basis to fulfil the legislative obligations from the Water Act.

An essential part of integrated water management approach is information and consultation with stakeholders that ensures better quality of the water planning process itself as well as the consistent content and coherent process. According to the Water Act, IzVRS as a leading expert institution is not obliged to develop formal information and consultation process with stakeholders. But providing sufficient content and proposal on expert level without any consultation with stakeholders would not meet the principles and goals of integrated water management in later stages. Therefore, the involved institutions launched the process of stakeholders' consultation on the expert level in 2007 with the purpose to further upgrade and develop it in 2008 and 2009.

CHALLENGES TO LAUNCH THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

Although launched on the expert level, IzVRS was the first institution that systematically stimulated the information and consultation process within the preparation of the first river basin management plans in Slovenia. Planning the information and consultation process on the expert level was important as institutions had to face many obstacles and challenges. They can be divided into three main groups:

a. Experiences in information and consultation process:

- In Slovenia, experiences in information, consultation and active involvement, that is, participation of stakeholders from the perspective of integrated water management approach, had been limited so far. The experiences existed for small-scale catchments (e.g. Kokra River, Dragonja River, Kolpa River) and specific focuses on environmental issues (e.g. the need to solve a well-identified problem or accidental pollution or over-abstraction).
- The lack of experiences in systematic and continued information and consultation, not only in water management but also in natural resources management (e.g. Natura 2000), meant a lack of participative culture and a lack of dialogue on sustainable management issues among stakeholders and general public. There had been no specific information or education by which the stakeholders or the general public had been taught about their possible and active role in providing information and knowledge to water management issues.
- Non-engaged stakeholders and non-informed general public needed more intensive background information to raise awareness and knowledge about their role in the process and the content to be discussed.

b. Content of water management and river basin management plan:

- Water management issues were traditionally divided into more specialist fields of work which did not involve an integrated, common, holistic approach and they were occasionally met in infrequent projects. Considering the water management issues in Slovenia, more attention was given to floods and flood prevention topics as well as water use than to the environmental water management issues.
- Surface water and groundwater had been studied separately by different expert institutions.
- An integrated water management approach was not considered nor performed by other expert fields that are not a part of water management but, on the other hand, can cause several impacts to water quality, such as: use of water resources, agriculture, energy, transportation, industry, fishery, etc. No special input to stakeholders as well as general public had been given, like what topics, themes and methodologies are to be prepared and discussed during the preparation of river basin management plans.

c. Institutional/organizational cooperation:

- Responsibilities and obligations for surface water have been appointed to IzVRS while groundwater was appointed to the Geological Survey of the Republic of Slovenia (hereinafter called GeoZS). No systematic data, information or knowledge transfer among institutions has been established so far.
- Although the basic focus and responsibilities among the institutions was clear, they had to start cooperating intensively in 2007 with the purpose to prepare the single information and consultation process for surface water and groundwater in five river basins (see subchapter River Basin Districts and river basins).

The experiences gathered in other EU Member States that started planning the information and consultation process some years or even a decade ago, provided a solid background for

planning the process of consultation with stakeholders on the expert level in Slovenia. But each country's experiences and lessons derive from the unique combination of democratic arrangements, water policy, water management institutional arrangements, and cultural background. In addition, the level of awareness, level of information and knowledge significantly determine the planning of the consultation process which results in specific activities, performed for and with selected stakeholders. Due to the social, cultural and natural specifics of Slovenia, as well as its hydrographic network and river basins, a specific and adjusted process on the expert level in Slovenia was launched on which human resources and time shortage also had an important impact to its planning and performance.

River Basin Districts and river basins

According to the Water Act, the Slovenian territory is divided in two River Basin Districts containing five river basins:

- the Danube River Basin District subdivided into the Sava, Drava and Mura river basins, covering approx. 80 percent of the Slovenian territory, and
- the Adriatic Sea River Basin District subdivided into the Soča River Basin and the Adriatic river basin, covering approx. 20 percent of the Slovenian territory.

Even though the national territory is rather small in comparison to other EU Member States, especially the Danube River Basin District is hydrologically, geographically and culturally highly heterogeneous, The Slovenian territory cannot be treated in one part from the perspective of stakeholders. Thus, the whole Slovenian territory has been divided into eight areas with the purpose to perform effective consultation with stakeholders: for each of the five river basins, where the Sava river basin has been divided into four Sava river subbasin areas.

STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH TO STAKEHOLDERS' CONSULTATION

The consultations process and activities on water management could not be stimulated among stakeholders with no information background on water management planning and the preparation of river basin management plans, as it was the case at the beginning of 2007 in Slovenia. To cross the limits of single-sector approach, start addressing increasingly complex issues and face the above mentioned challenges, institutions planned a step-by-step approach to stakeholders' consultation that consisted of seven basic phases:

Phase 1: Initial capacity building among two expert institutions and planning the consultation process;

Phase 2: Information supply for stakeholders in the consultation process;

Phase 3: Consultation with stakeholders on expert level;

Phase 4: Improving capacity building;

Phase 5: Improving of the content on expert level;

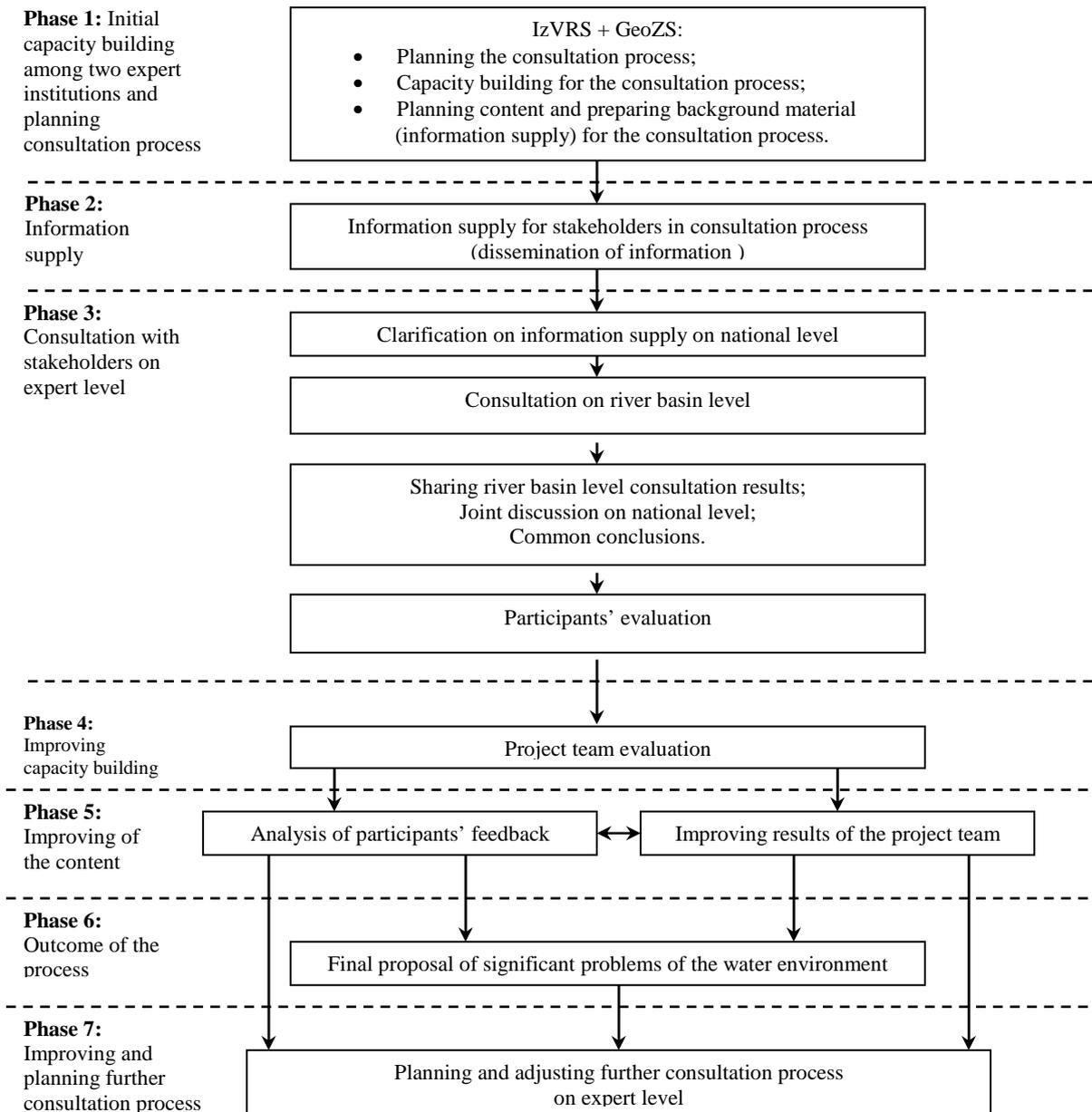
Phase 6: Outcome of the process;

Phase 7: Improving and planning further consultation process;

(see Figure 1: Information and consultation process in the preparation of River Basin Management Plans in 2007).

Undoubtedly, phase 1 was the most important phase – additional ones were its improvement. Capacity building is usually one of the goals to be achieved in the consultation process, but in Slovenia the capacity building among two expert institutions was not a consequence of the process but, rather, it was its starting point.

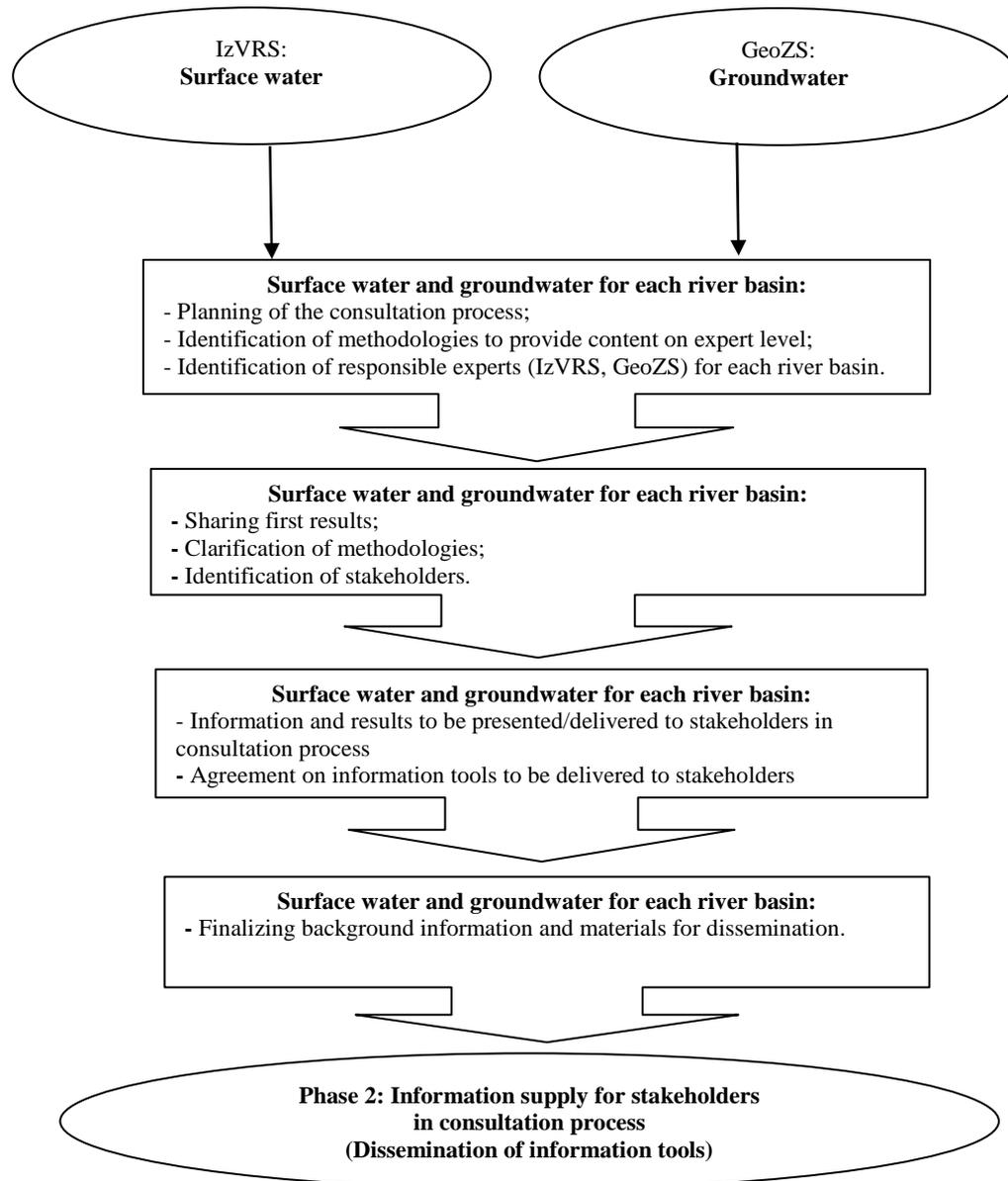
Figure 1: Information and consultation process in the preparation of River Basin Management Plans in 2007



Phase 1: Initial capacity building and planning consultation process

Initial capacity building between two expert institutions and planning consultation process (see Figure 2: Initial capacity building and planning of the process) was essential to provide sufficient and integrated information supply for each river basin and subbasin to be further discussed in the consultation process.

Figure 2: Initial capacity building and planning of the process



Capacity building was the first cooperation of its kind between two expert institutions in the field of water management in Slovenia with the purpose to improve data transfer, knowledge on surface and groundwater between experts as well as institutional processes. The capacity building and planning information and consultation process was supported by third party, a specialized consultancy for communication and public participation. The three most important goals of initial capacity building between involved institutions were:

- To identify the key points of methodology and results for surface water and for groundwater in a common way – as one integrated information to stakeholders;
- To overcome the differences in the approaches and methodologies that the institutions separately performed in their every-day expert work;
- To form a group of experts (project team) from both institutions and additionally pairs of responsible experts – covering topics for surface water and for groundwater in each river subbasin – to follow the information and consultation activities, results and stakeholders in the selected river subbasins, not only in the consultation process in 2007 but also in a long-term perspective.

As capacity building was improving, the clarification of methodologies and constant sharing results of expert work was possible in the next steps. Capacity building also enabled planning the consultation process among which an identification of stakeholders was one of the most significant steps. Several stakeholders (organizations and individuals) from different expert areas were identified, such as: nature protection, agriculture, forestry, fishery, scientific institutions, energy, transportation, regional development, waste water treatment, etc. The identification of stakeholders was prepared for the national level and for each river basin and subbasin separately. The identification and selection of stakeholders was prepared with the purpose to gather stakeholders from many expert fields as a way toward a holistic approach. Along with stakeholder identification involved institutions continued the methodological work on the expert level and started planning concrete information tools to supply the selected stakeholders before the consultation activities were actually launched.

Phase 2: Information supply to stakeholders for further consultation process

The consultation process with selected stakeholders was launched in practice with information supply – dissemination of a wide range of information tools to selected stakeholders, including:

- Background information of preparation of 2009 River Basin Management Plan: presentation of European and national regulation, presentation of Water Framework Directive, River Basin Management Plans,
- Background information about the involved institutions and the role of stakeholders,
- Background information of methodologies, used in the preparation of the content on the expert level,
- Background information of each river basin and its characteristics, including maps of special protection areas,
- Presentation of data resources and methodology used to prepare the first results for surface water and for groundwater on the national level as well as on river subbasin levels,
- Presentation of first results of methodology for surface water and for groundwater on the national level,
- Presentation of first results of methodology for surface water and for groundwater for each river subbasin (and in comparison to the national level),
- General list of recognized problems in water environment as a starting point to consult about data, results and possible solutions (list to be upgraded and improved in the consultation with stakeholders),
- Proposed and planned follow-up activities.

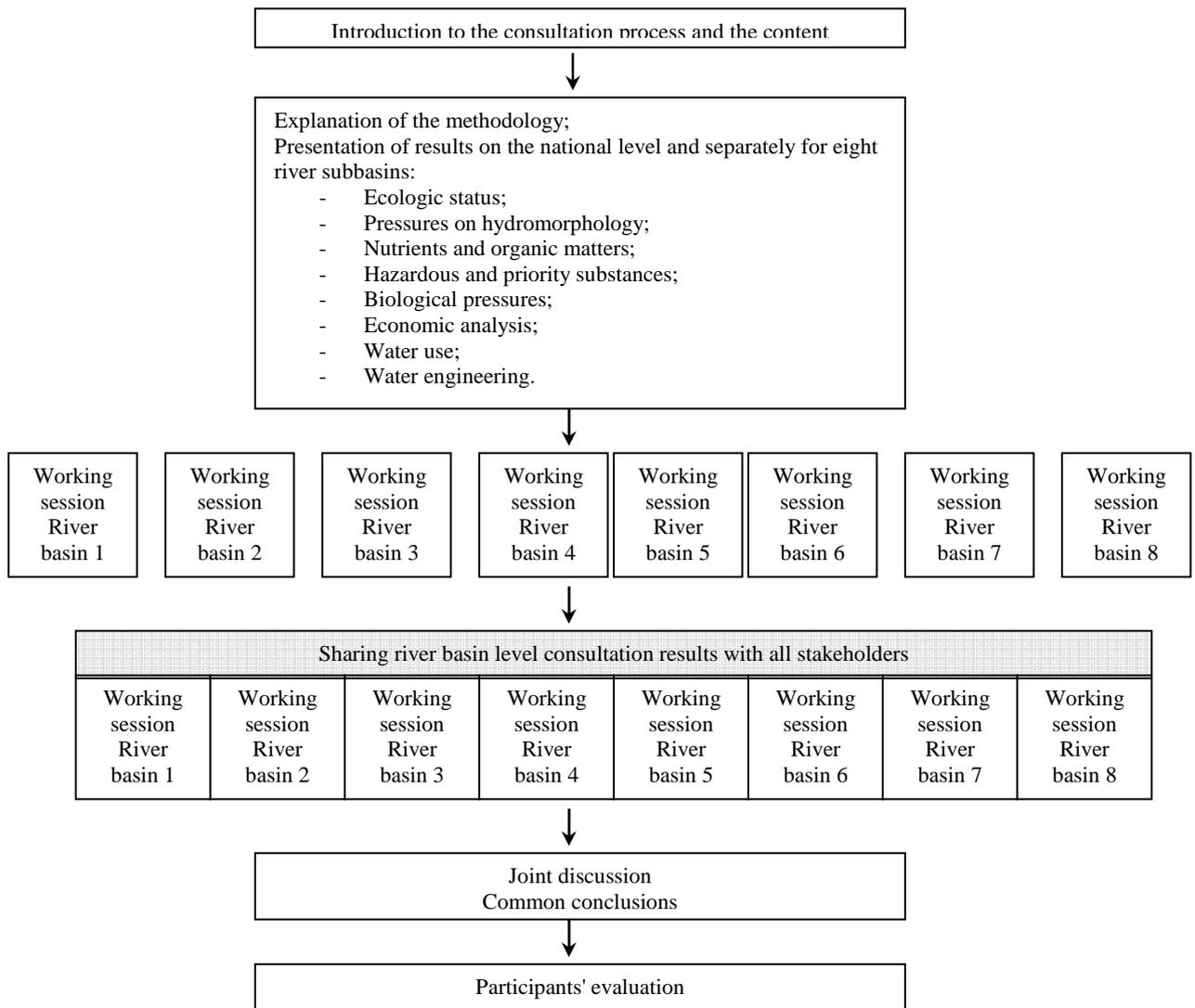
Each stakeholder was delivered information tools for the national level and for the river subbasin that was identified in. In case any stakeholder expressed interest for information for other river sub-basins, the selected material was addressed to the stakeholder as well.

Phase 3: Consultation with stakeholders on the expert level

The main consultation activity on the expert level in the 2007 was a workshop entitled 'Problematics of the Water Environment of River Basins in Slovenia'. It was structured as a process, not as a single tool (see Figure 3: Consultation with stakeholders on the expert level). The first part was a joint presentation and session on methodology and results on the national level, presented by experts from involved institutions. The second part was interactive and it consisted of eight working sessions in which all the results were specifically introduced and discussed with the stakeholders from agriculture, industry, forestry, nature protection, scientific institutions etc. on each river basin and subbasin. The stakeholders had a very active

role as they had to prepare a prioritization of the pre-selected problems in each river basin, determine the causes and propose possible solutions. After the working sessions, a presentation of each working session was done among all participants.

Figure 3: Consultation with stakeholders on the expert level



Parallel consultation activity, performed even before the workshop, was a one to one field visit of the whole team of project experts on the Soča river subbasin in order to get feedback on materials a priori prepared for the workshop with stakeholders. The project team examined the hydro power plants and riparian recreational activities as the main problems in the subbasin. In addition, intensive in-situation consultation with one of the most important groups of stakeholders was conducted. The outcome of this activity was incorporated in analyses of participants' feedback (see the subchapter Phases 4 and 5: Improving capacity building and content improving) but not analyzed in the context of the tool, since it had been performed only in one river sub-basin which did not enable adequate comparison with other river sub-basins.

A posteriori systematic evaluation of workshop among the participants was prepared on the content, structure and the organization in order to steer the stakeholders' information and

consultation in future developments of the water planning process. The participants expressed a positive attitude on the approach (from national to regional) and the method (including sufficient information supply before consultation).

Phases 4 and 5: Improving capacity building and content improving

Involved institutions analyzed the participants' feedback on the results of the water environment in the river basins as well as on the methods of the consultation process itself. Stakeholders' consultation on the expert level showed some very important findings:

- Multi-stakeholder consultation in water management was very positively accepted by stakeholders;
- Different stakeholders from each river basin understood the need for a holistic approach and contributed to the content from the local (river basin) as well as national (river basin district) points of view;
- Stakeholders agreed that there is a lack of institutional cooperation and understanding of river basin management planning that has to be overcome in future processes;
- Stakeholders expressed a very positive attitude and willingness to cooperate in the further expert consultation process.

In the context of the findings, involved institutions analyzed the consultation activities from the perspective of capacity building. As the cooperation between two different institutions in one single process proved necessary, the concept should be improved in the future. It is important to keep the teams of responsible experts for surface water and groundwater in each river basin as joint content is prepared for the stakeholders. Also, capacity building should not be based only in relation to stakeholders but it should be developed internally, inside both institutions. That means that both institutions have to motivate their own experts to be a part of the process and also to promote it widely, also among the general public in the up-coming years.

Phase 6: Outcome of the process

Stakeholders' consultation in each river basin presented an important input for involved institutions to improve the final proposal of significant problems of the water environment that was delivered to the Ministry to the Environment and Spatial Planning as the competent authority. According to the consultation results and findings, the expert proposal was much more holistic and in terms of principles of integrated holistic river basin management planning. It also gave a good starting point to prepare the expert content further on.

Phase 7: Improving and planning further consultation process

According to the results and feedback of stakeholders, gained in the consultation process on the expert level in 2007, involved institutions could improve the process and activities in 2008 with the purpose to prepare expert proposal of cost-effective measures and expert proposal of 2009 River Basin Management Plans in Slovenia. The main approach based on the consultation process in five river basins will be continued in 2008 and 2009 as it is important to:

- Inform the stakeholders from each river basin that were consulted in 2007 and who expressed the preparedness to cooperate in the further process about the results in each river basin and the progress of the process;
- Raise awareness of the importance of water management on the river basin level and further on river basin districts level;

- Continue and improve the information and knowledge sharing among stakeholders from different expert fields in each river basins; and
- Manage stakeholders' expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

The methodology of consultation from the national to regional and local levels proved to be suitable in 2007. Therefore the so called "local" approach of consultation in each river basin will be even improved in 2008 and performed in much more detail. There will be no common consultation activities on the national level but several consultation activities in each river basin, focused to selected stakeholders from different expert fields to face the data, knowledge as well as experiences and further understanding of different issues. The outcomes of the consultation process will – at the end of 2008 – result in expert proposal of cost-effective measures and expert proposal of 2009 River Basin Management Plans and – in long-term – in the implementation of River Basin Management Plans.

To improve the consultation process in 2008, more attention will be given to information support which will consist on two levels:

- National level, in which information tools will be prepared with the purpose to raise awareness in general; they will be disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders in the consultation process as well as to other actors in the river basin management planning and its implementation; and
- River basin level, in which specific data will be prepared and presented to selected stakeholders with the purpose to perform an effective and coherent consultation process.

Even though EU members have agreed on a general framework to encourage stakeholders' consultation and long-term participation, practical details have not been determined. It is a common understanding that particularly the preparation of first river basin management plans in each EU member state will present a concept of "learning by doing". Experiences, gathered by two expert institutions in Slovenia, proved that this concept should not be treated as some kind of compromise but rather as the right way to consolidate experiences for further preparations of river basin management plans and their implementation. Even more, this concept is undoubtedly indispensable in each process where stakeholders' consultation and participation is necessary to achieve the environmental and sustainable goals as well as to improve social learning. This is one of the most important experiences of the consultation process so far performed on the expert level, which stimulated capacity building as well as the cooperation with stakeholders.

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