

# Direction And Experience In Water Sector Apex Body Development<sup>1</sup>

## A. Introduction

As part of the reform and strengthening of their water sectors, a number of Asian countries have implemented apex bodies to advise government and improve the coordination between the various water-related sectors and ministries. These apex bodies may be known as councils, committees, commissions or other names. Vietnam and Sri Lanka have National Water Resources Councils, Thailand has a National Water Resources Committee, Lao PDR has a Water Resources Coordinating Committee. India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines have national councils or boards and Nepal has a water and energy commission. We will hear more about these bodies later in this meeting. Many other countries around the world have, or had in the past, various water, natural resource or environmental apex bodies. In some cases these have focused on coordination between ministries and in other cases they have focused more on consultation and input from stakeholders and the public into the government decision-making process for the water sector. In some places large states or provinces have established apex bodies covering water issues within their geographic areas. In many cases river basin organizations have been established to coordinate water resource planning and management within river basins – often for basins which cross state or provincial boundaries or for international basins. For example, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand have national apex bodies and river basin organizations. Cambodia is considering the formation of a basin organization for the Tonle Sap basin, its main tributary to the Mekong. All of these countries also participate as members of the Mekong River Commission and have national committees which facilitate in this participation.

The distinctive nature of national apex bodies is that they are established by and report to a single government and they are (or should be) **apex** bodies – in other words they are at a high level with respect to ministries. Their focus is therefore primarily inter-ministry and inter-sectoral, not inter-basin or inter-jurisdictional. Since they are at a high level in government they should also be well placed to have a significant impact on the development of policies, strategies and legislation. If they are well designed and active they can influence the national debate on, and direction of, water management activities. Therefore apex bodies can be an important part of the water sector, whether or not domestic or international basin organizations exist.

The results of apex body formation and performance have been mixed so far. Many of the participants at this meeting have experience working with apex bodies in their home countries. Some of these organizations have been fairly successful in raising awareness and acceptance on integrated water resources management, improving dialogue between ministries and with other stakeholders, and some development of policies, strategies and legislation. In some cases the results have not been very encouraging. Some apex bodies have promoted discussion but have produced few tangible outputs and outcomes. As a result little has changed in terms of legislation or institutional arrangements.

One of the reasons for this meeting is to encourage sharing of this experience, frank discussion of lessons learned, and consideration of how to proceed to strengthen and support the further

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development of apex bodies. There may be many questions in the minds of participants at this meeting:

- a. How does the experience in my country compare with other countries which are establishing apex bodies? Is my country on the right path?
- b. Are there guidelines for establishing and strengthening apex bodies, recognizing that each country has different conditions and needs?
- c. Could a network of apex bodies help to provide support for these bodies and their secretariats?<sup>2</sup> Could it help to provide government-to-government communication, cooperation and information exchange? How would such a network be set up and how would it function?

I have been involved to some degree with five apex bodies in the past 15 years and would like to offer some observations and recommendations based on this personal experience. This paper is not systematically researched or based on a large sample of cases; it is based on my own observations and conclusions and does not necessarily reflect the views of ADB or the apex bodies I have worked with. My conclusions may therefore differ from those organizations and from the country reports which will be given later in the meeting. The comments and recommendations are intended to stimulate discussion at this meeting and, hopefully, to lead to better understanding, design and strengthening of apex bodies in the water resources sector.

## **B. What is the Purpose of Apex Bodies?**

ADB's "Water for All" policy has a number of important elements which can help to define the purpose and role of apex bodies. The first element of the policy is to "**Promote a national focus on water sector reform**", which includes development of effective national water policies, laws and institutional arrangements and capacity. The Bank's second policy element is to "**Foster the integrated management of water resources**" covering such things as water resource assessments, planning, investment and other management functions. The third policy element is to "**Improve and expand the delivery of water services.**" Let's look at how these relate to the purpose and role of water sector apex bodies, which ADB says "can oversee the policy formulation and sector reform process."

### *Integrated Water Resources Management*

Integrated water resource management (IWRM) is a generally accepted body of policy, principles and procedures which is gradually being introduced in many countries. ADB defines IWRM as

"a process to improve the planning, conservation, development, and management of water, forest, land, and aquatic resources in a river basin context, to maximize economic benefits and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital environmental systems. IWRM addresses quantity and quality concerns for surface and groundwater, and opportunities for conjunctive use. It is typical for IWRM to be undertaken in a river basin context because river basins or, in some cases, groundwater basins, form the natural unit to manage water resources."<sup>3</sup>

The Global Water Partnership defines IWRM as "a process which promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources, in order to maximize the resultant economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The term "secretariat" is used in this paper, although these groups may also be known as "offices" or by other names.

<sup>3</sup> "Water for All", 2001, p. 19

<sup>4</sup> "Integrated Water Resources Management" TAC Background Paper No. 4, 2000, p.22

It is important to focus here on some of the ways in which IWRM differs from the more traditional approach to water resource development.

**Inter-sectoral** IWRM implies integration and coordination across water-using sectors. It is not tied to or driven by one particular type of use or one group of stakeholders. In most countries, irrigation accounts for a great majority of water diversion and consumption. Water management in the past therefore tended to be dominated by irrigation interests and agencies, although hydropower has often been a powerful sector. Its storage works are usually in upstream locations, giving it a natural advantage in controlling downstream flows. IWRM should be a neutral approach in which the needs and issues of all sectors – irrigation, hydropower and others – are understood and dealt with in a transparent manner, recognizing overall government priorities.

**Multi-resource** IWRM involves integration across various aspects of water resources and linkages with other resources. It therefore has to examine surface and groundwater, water quality and water quantity, and relationships between water, land and land use. Issues such as catchment management and protection of water sources are therefore important.

**Basin-based** IWRM also implies integration and coordination within river basins and groundwater areas. It is therefore not restricted to administrative areas such as provinces or states but involves cooperation between them to resolve upstream / downstream issues. It also involves joint water management arrangements for international rivers.

**Structural and non-structural** IWRM involves a balanced consideration of both structural measures for water resource development and non-structural measures for water management, such as improved water allocation, improved water use efficiency, financial and economic aspects, capacity building, institutional development, community participation and other forms of water resource management.

**Governance** IWRM involves new principles of governance, including decentralization, transparency, stakeholder participation, improved financial and economic aspects, gender, separation of incompatible administrative functions, and others. It also involves a greater emphasis on broader policy and planning activities, including more strategic approaches and attention to goals such as poverty reduction, social equity and environmental factors.

Introducing these aspects of IWRM involves major changes in the way water is managed. First, IWRM involves a more explicit focus on water as a valuable resource, needing to be managed in an optimal way for the benefit of society as a whole, both now and in the future. Water is no longer seen as a plentiful resource which everyone can exploit as they wish. Governments can no longer solve all the water sector needs simply by investing in more infrastructure development. The older, sectoral, subsidized and structurally-dominated approach to water management is deeply embedded in legislation, policies, agency mandates, budgets, attitudes and opinions, the knowledge and skills of water professionals, political factors and many other institutional arrangements and procedures. However, in most cases the old approach to water resource management simply doesn't work very well. New policies and legislation are needed, as are new approaches to information management, public awareness, planning, regulation and project approval.

In many cases these necessary changes go along with public administration and financial reform which governments are demanding. The water sector has to do, and show that it is doing, a better job in meeting national goals and objectives and addressing a wide range of issues which cut across ministries, sectors and levels of government. The challenge that we all face in our respective countries is how to promote this reform, both in individual ministries, agencies and provinces / states, and also in better horizontal and vertical coordination.

## *Improving Water Service Delivery*

In addition to introducing and strengthening IWRM, water services need to be improved in areas such as irrigation and drainage, rural and urban water supply and sanitation and others. The ADB policy provides principles in this area. Governments need to change their role and focus from that of service-provider to that of regulator. ADB's policy indicates that the Bank will provide support for "autonomous and accountable service providers, private sector participation, and public-private partnerships, emphasizing equity in access to water for the poor and underserved."<sup>5</sup>

What is the role of apex bodies with respect to water service delivery? This is not a simple question to answer, since apex bodies are, or should be, set up as neutral bodies that are not tied to one sector or ministry. They are therefore not likely to be deeply involved in the "internal" affairs of individual ministries or their agencies. However, apex bodies have a responsibility to advise governments on broad, cross-cutting issues which affect water service delivery. For example, they will need to look at major topics such as water use efficiency, financial sustainability and environmental protection and should therefore help to ensure that there are adequate policies, strategies and legislation in these areas and, at least to some extent, to ensure that water service providers are following these.

Another important question has to do with the role of the apex body with respect to regulation of water service delivery. Regulation in the water sector can include such things as project approval, issuing licenses for water use or wastewater discharge, budget review and other financial regulation, ensuring that water service standards are established and met, water quality and public health regulation and other forms of inspection and enforcement. It is recommended below that apex bodies should be involved in policy, strategy, legislation and institutional development regarding water service delivery, particularly where these involve common issues and policies for a number of water-using sectors. They should not, however, take on a full regulatory role; such a role should be assigned to bodies which are specially designed for that function.

### **C. Recommendations**

I would like to propose some recommendations and discussion points which may help to guide the development of water resource apex bodies and water resource management ministries and departments which are also required.

- 1. Purpose** *The major purpose of water resource apex bodies should be to strengthen integrated water resources management and water service delivery through advice to government on cross-cutting policy and institutional issues.*

As mentioned, the introduction of IWRM requires a major reform and reorientation in water resource management. New policies and legislation are required at the national level as a basis for a new approach by individual ministries, agencies, provinces and other local governments and many other stakeholders. Awareness needs to be created and details on the specific functions and procedures for water-related agencies need to be worked out.

In order for an apex body to take on this leadership role, it needs (i) a clear definition of its responsibilities, (ii) high level government support, and (iii) internal leadership – a "champion," one or more people who can influence the focus and agenda of the apex body and help to guide its relationship with major ministries. Donors or other external support agencies can help to provide this guidance and middle-level staff can also influence the development of an apex body, but the influence of both of these groups in developing a "vision" for IWRM and committed leadership is always somewhat limited.

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<sup>5</sup> "Water for All", 2001, p. 15

Apex bodies also require a period of time for establishment and strengthening. Their role and identity needs to be developed in a progressive way, step-by-step, as they increase their ability to advise government and demonstrate their value to government. It is best for the apex body not to try to do too much; it should seek to develop some moderate objectives and to show that it can successfully achieve them. Other agencies will be more positive and supportive if they recognize that the apex body is not directly threatening them but can, instead, prepare useful recommendations to resolve important water management issues. Most governments are interested in public sector and financial reform, which is usually very compatible with IWRM and can be promoted by apex bodies.

As mentioned, the main role of apex bodies should be to advise government on the implementation of integrated water resource management and improvement of water service delivery. In order to do this, the apex body may need to have some ongoing responsibility to monitor and evaluate the implementation of its recommendations after they have been approved by government. For example, if the apex body develops a water sector strategy, it will likely have a responsibility to monitor the way in which the strategy is implemented and to advise government regularly on progress and adjustments that may be needed.

Apex bodies should, however, be careful to **avoid** taking on an operational role regarding water resource management or water service delivery functions. They can and should advise government on improving the way in which these functions are carried out, but the apex body should not duplicate the role which existing “line” ministries or local governments play in these areas. Apex bodies are normally set up as committees, not as operational entities. Their strength is in developing policy, strategies and legislation based on IWRM principles and inter-agency and public consultation and their functions should reflect that strength. They should not try to duplicate or take over the existing planning and operational mandate of agencies in water-using sectors.

The Alberta Water Resources Commission (AWRC) in the province of Alberta, Canada, was not very well designed in terms of its overall objective. The AWRC was set up as a result of a certain amount of political and public dissatisfaction with the existing orientation of the Alberta Department of Environment. In the mid-1980s that Department was seen as fairly strongly oriented to irrigation and dam construction and (somewhat ironically) not sufficiently sensitive to environmental issues or a reasonable range of public opinion. The AWRC played a role in “independent” public consultation, research and inter-departmental coordination, although it did not have a clear legal basis or advisory relationship to government. As a result, the Commission operated over a period of approximately 10 years but was disbanded during a period of “downsizing” in the provincial bureaucracy. Its functions had already been taken over the Department of Environment (based on new legislation) and by other coordination committees within the provincial government.

During the period in which the AWRC operated its relationship with the Department of Environment was, at times, somewhat uneasy. The Commission was used by some stakeholders as a means of criticizing the Department and trying to establish an independent “channel” to government decision-making in the water sector. The Commission also became, at times, too focused on local operational issues and lost its focus on broader water resource policy.

The proposal to establish the Sri Lanka National Water Resources Council (SLNWRC) came out of a process of irrigation policy review and also through an ADB technical assistance project on institutional assessment in the water resources sector. There was a general recognition of gaps and weaknesses in the sector in terms of overall coordination and policy development. Water resource management functions were poorly defined and fragmented between somewhat rival agencies.

The SLNWRC was established as a an interim body, based only on a decision by the National Cabinet. The Council was intended to play a key role in the development of recommendations

for policy, legislation and permanent institutional co-ordination, reorganisation and strengthening. In order to do this the SLNWRC approved the following functions for itself under the terms of reference given by Cabinet:

- a. forward policy and legislative proposals to government for approval / action and advise government on water management and respond to requests from government,
- b. receive and respond to recommendations forwarded by government ministries and agencies and by the public,
- c. promote the co-ordination of water-related activities of donor agencies, and
- d. in general, promote the coordination of inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral issues relating to water resources management.

The formation of the SLNWRC was based in part on a public sector reform agenda of the Ministry of Finance and Planning and the secretariat of the Council was initially located in that Ministry's Department of National Planning. However it was later moved to other locations within water-related agencies during a series of government reorganizations.

The SLNWRC was able to maintain a neutral and balanced role during its early history. Despite somewhat limited support from the major water-related agencies, the Council was able to prepare a national water resource policy, a proposal for a permanent institutional arrangement and draft water resource law. The Council did not interfere in operational and single-sector issues and was able to keep its focus on issues which were both policy-oriented and practical.

The Council's institutional recommendations included the formation of "National Water Resources Authority" and river basin committees for planning and implementation of IWRM functions at the national and basin level. Although there has not been a lot of progress in implementing these recommendations, due primarily to political factors, they are still relevant. The SLNWRC's policy recommendations indicated a general approach to some of the major water sector issues, although they did not go far in terms of implementation details and requirements. The Council showed a good deal of interest in discussing and developing consensus on general water resource policy issues, but was not as successful in ensuring passage of legislation and implementation of its provisions.

The Vietnam National Water Resources Council (VNWRC) was formed in 2001 on the basis of provisions in the 1998 Law on Water Resources. Like the Sri Lanka Council, the VNWRC has a membership that represents a range of water-related ministries and sectors, although it does not have the same amount of non-government representation. The functions of the VNWRC, according to its implementing decree, are to advise the government on:

- a. strategies and policies on national water resources
- b. major river basin plans
- c. plans for major inter-basin diversions and other projects for protection, exploitation and utilization of water resources
- d. management, protection, exploitation and utilization of international water sources and settlement of any disputes, and
- e. resolution of conflicts regarding water resources between agencies at various levels of government.

Although the VNWRC was inactive for a period of time after it was established, it has now become more active and promises to be an effective body influencing water resource policy and legislation. The current priority of the Council is to prepare a National Water Resources Strategy which will help to coordinate activities in the water resources sector and to ensure that they are effective in meeting national goals. The Council has not yet addressed any difficult policy or institutional issues, although it may help to advise the government on setting up a more effective approach on integrated river basin management.

**2. Ministry Structure** *Water resource management units (departments, etc) at the national and local government levels should be established and strengthened, separate from water service delivery agencies.*

The subject of this meeting is “national water sector apex bodies”, but it is equally important to look at the structure of ministries and agencies in the sector and how these relate to, and support, the apex body. The typical institutional history in the water sector is that ministries in areas such as irrigation, water supply, power, fisheries, navigation and others develop water according to their own plans and priorities, possibly with some attention to impacts of their development on others. Also, because irrigation tends to be by far the largest user of water, the irrigation agencies tend to assume greater authority for management of water and other sectors may even look to irrigation for some kind of overall coordination.

The introduction of IWRM, however, means that water resources need to be seen as a unified resource for which planning and management are separate from individual sector services. This separation is often one of the hardest steps to take, since irrigation agencies see it as a threat to their power and possibly a threat to the water rights of farmers. Irrigation departments tend to have a large share of the water management expertise, information, budget and political support in the water sector, making it difficult to establish a new and independent water resource management department which can carry out the functions which it has been given. The apex body needs to find ways in which to cooperate with and win support from the irrigation sector and other water service ministries without being their servant. This separation of water resource manager / regulator from water users is critical. As some would say, “the goal keeper and the referee must not be the same person”.

Another important separation is between the apex body and the water resource management agency. An apex body is normally designed as a joint body representing many users (ministries and sectors), often with both government and non-government members. This is not the same as a government operational or “line” agency, which has a management structure, accountability and significant resources at its disposal. An apex body can act as a consultative group, overseeing and guiding policy and legislation development, reviewing plans and helping to resolve major disputes in the water sector. It cannot, however, carry out water resource management functions such as water resource assessment, management of national or river basin planning, water allocation among major users, regulation of water pollution, or similar state management functions. In Vietnam, for example, the VNWRC is legally responsible to “advise” government on a range of issues. It is **not** responsible for “state management functions” for water and other natural resources; these have been assigned to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE).

The recommendation should therefore be made to (i) establish and strengthen an apex body as the senior, coordination and advisory body in the water sector and (ii) establish and strengthen a water resource management department to carry out IWRM functions at the national level. The water resource management department may act as the secretariat of the apex body or it may support the apex body by preparing and coordinating input. However the two roles need to be recognized as separate and both of them need to be strengthened.

This issue was addressed in the early stages of the SLNWRC. The Council recommended to government to form a National Water Resources Authority which would be responsible for:

- a. Water resource management policy – formulation of policy proposals, coordination with catchment and environmental management
- b. River basin planning and other water resource planning – national, regional and long-term river basin planning and involvement in seasonal planning
- c. Coordination and collection of water-related data – including monitoring, evaluation and commissioning of research
- d. Water allocation – issuing of water entitlements to bulk and large water users, monitoring and enforcement

- e. Drought and flood management – advice on response to disasters
- f. Control of riverine activities – policy guidelines, advice and monitoring of implementation
- g. Public information and awareness – education and dissemination of information

The Sri Lanka experience is similar to some other countries which have formed an apex body first, then later created a water resources authority or ministry for water resource management. This may be a difficult process, since existing agencies with the skills, information and resources which such a new agency needs, may resist reorganization. However, it may be the best alternative to get some form of larger reorganization underway in the water sector.

Both Thailand and Vietnam have taken major steps in this direction. In both countries there is now a Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE). In Thailand the former Office of the National Water Resources Committee was moved from the Office of the Prime Minister into a Department of Water Resources in MoNRE. The initial step in Thailand did not bring the Royal Irrigation Department (RID), which is the largest and most powerful water service agency in the country, into MoNRE, and therefore maintained a separation between MoNRE and water service ministries. Thailand is, however, now considering bringing RID into MoNRE, although focusing it on regional operational functions rather than national policy development.

In Vietnam the water resource management functions and the support for the VNWRC were moved from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) into a Department of Water Resources Management in MoNRE. This new Department is working hard to support the VNWRC and to build up its legal base and capacity to carry out priority water resource management functions. At the provincial level Vietnam has formed Departments of Natural Resources and Environment (DoNREs). These are also at a very early stage of development and will need a good deal of assistance and time to build capacity and take on water resource management functions at the provincial level.

In conclusion, during the discussion of how to strengthen water resource apex bodies it is important to consider under which ministry or department their secretariats are located and how to build up the capacity of that department to support the apex body and to carry out many other water resource management functions.

### **3. Apex Body Design** *The location, chairmanship and membership as well as strategic approach and procedures of apex bodies should be carefully considered.*

There are a number of factors which affect the likely success of an apex body. Getting these right doesn't guarantee that it will be successful, but ignoring these factors will likely make it harder for the apex body to be effective:

**Reporting line and chairman** Apex bodies should report independently to government, not through the minister responsible for one of the sectoral line ministries. The apex body should be "above" the ministries which it is seeking to coordinate and should have a high level chairman and members. If the body is not "apex" and is seen as being part of, or reporting to one ministry, even a ministry with a water resource management mandate, it will be difficult for it to build respect and participation from other ministries. If one of the functions of the apex body is to advise government on the settlement of disputes it is particularly important that it should be separate from the ministries that may be part of the dispute.

The chairman of the apex body should ideally be a high level government official. Both the VNWRC and the Thai National Water Resources Committee (TNWRC) are chaired by Deputy Prime Ministers. This high level chairmanship adds to their status and authority. The SLWRC has taken a different approach – chairmanship is rotated among government members, who are Secretaries (somewhat equivalent to vice ministers), on an annual basis, giving each ministry an equal share in its leadership. Although this balance is good, the lack of



representation on the Council by a minister or higher level official may mean that communication to the political level is more difficult.

In addition to needing an effective and high-level chairman, an apex body needs a “champion”. This should be an influential person in government who has both authority and a commitment and vision for strengthening integrated water resource management through the apex body. This may, of course, be the chairman, but it may also be one or more of the other members of the apex body or even someone outside the apex body who can help to promote and guide it. The progress of the SLNWRC in its early stages was largely due to the efforts of a champion who was not the chairman of the Council but who helped to establish the Council and guide its agenda. In contrast, the AWRC did not have a effective chairmen or champions and was not well connected to the political decision-making process. As a result, although it was somewhat effective as an inter-ministry consultation mechanism, it was never able to take on a significant government advisory role.

**Membership** The membership of the apex body should be broad – including all the major ministries in the water sector. Membership should be at a senior level to ensure that the member understands the broader, policy-related issues which his / her ministry and the apex body face and also to ensure that the member can make clear statements and commitments on behalf of the ministry. In many cases this will be at the deputy or vice minister level.

In some cases apex bodies may consist of ministers. However, it is likely that a committee of ministers will find it very difficult to meet on a sufficiently regular basis. It may also be difficult for ministers to meet on a reasonably equal basis with other apex body members from outside government.

In most countries it is advisable to have non-government members of the apex body, likely selected on the basis of their representation of important stakeholder groups in the sector or on the basis of their technical expertise. There is an important balance, however, that should be considered. If the apex body includes a significant number of non-government members it may lose its authority and “official” nature and may be seen as a casual, consultation forum. If the apex body is intended to have serious discussion and negotiation on sensitive matters, then members who are senior government officials may want to have a more closed group or they may need to be able to meet without the non-government members at times. In that case, other forms of transparency and communication will be needed.

**Communication** The amount and method of communication by the apex body with the public and stakeholders in the water sector is closely related to the issue of membership, since more diverse membership is one way in which the body can ensure transparency. Other means of communication include regular notification of the results of meetings, invitation to stakeholders to recommend issues for consideration, holding some meetings or hearings in public, and invitation of special guests to attend meetings at which relevant issues are being discussed. In addition, there are a wide range of consultation and participation activities which can and should be carried out by the secretariat of the apex body in order to include a variety of ministries, local governments and other stakeholders to be involved in the preparation of material for the consideration of the apex body. Again, a balance must be achieved, allowing the apex body to be open in its communication but also allowing it to avoid getting preoccupied with small issues which do not have a wider policy significance.

The SLNWRC had a practice of holding meetings in various parts of the country and including field trips and consultation with local officials on a somewhat regular basis. The VNWRC has provision in its organizational regulation to be able to invite “non-permanent” members to attend Council meetings. It has made the invitation of non-members to its meetings a regular practice and has even opened meetings to television and other news media. The VNWRC is also developing a communications plan for the support of its National Water Resources Strategy preparation.

**Relationship to ministries** The apex body needs to have a good relationship to various ministries. The issue of avoiding duplication of the functions of ministries was mentioned above. The apex body needs to be aware of the issues and needs of the sectors which the various ministries represent, and to deal with both water resource management and water service issues which affect these ministries, but it should also respect the normal communication and operational protocols within government.

The apex body will have a particularly close relationship with the major water resource management ministry, particularly if the secretariat of the apex body is located in there. However, it should try to avoid being seen as reporting to, or being part of, that ministry. The goal should be, instead, to cultivate a balanced relationship with all ministries and water-using sectors. Ideally, all the member ministries should use the apex body as a forum to bring forward their cross-cutting, policy-related issues. The secretariat of the apex body should help to cultivate this “multilateral” approach, recognizing that this will not be easy in a government culture in which ministries do not communicate easily on sensitive issues and where material for government decision is usually brought to an almost-completed level before it is shown to other ministries.

**Secretariat** Various models for establishment and organization of the secretariat exist. In some cases the secretariat consists of staff seconded from the various ministries (representing various sectors and disciplines) which are involved in the apex body. This approach presented some difficulties in the early stages of the SLNWRC where it was difficult to get capable staff on a reasonably full-time basis. In some cases the secretariat is kept small and representation from other ministries is arranged through the formation of working groups. In still other cases, the secretariat may be located in a water resource management department where there are a variety of skills and functions (particularly policy and planning-related) and consultation with other ministries may only take place through workshops. The risk in this approach is that the secretariat (and the apex body itself) may be seen as under the control of the single ministry where it is located and therefore of less interest and relevance to others.

The experience in Vietnam indicates that the secretariat (or office) of the apex body does not function very well if it is located under a sectoral line ministry (such as the agriculture ministry) and there is no special, distinct secretariat set up. With the move of the Office of the National Water Resources Council to a general resource and environmental management ministry (MoNRE) this limitation has been overcome.

In any case, there is likely to be a considerable amount of capacity building required to enable the secretariat to play its role effectively. It has been found that the success of the apex body depends to a considerable extent on the performance and outputs of the secretariat. This includes the quality of the technical work and in the care and attention in such things as forming the apex body’s work plan and agendas.

**4. Support needs** *During their early stages both apex bodies and water resource management agencies need to be technically supported. An international network of apex bodies may facilitate both coordinated technical assistance and peer support.*

As indicated above, apex bodies should advise governments on water resource management and water service delivery policies, legislation, plans and strategies. Their objective should be to introduce and strengthen an IWRM approach in the water sector and to strengthen water service delivery. In order to do this, the members of the apex body and leaders and staff of their secretariats need to have a vision and understanding of important areas such as:

- a. the condition of the national water sector and priority water resource policy needs, particularly those which cut across ministries,
- b. national goals and objectives,

- c. options for reforming and strengthening the water sector, particularly policy and institutional alternatives, and
- d. practical steps which can be taken to move the reform and strengthening process ahead.

The apex body will need its own strategic work plan which should identify the priorities which it will seek to address. It will also need to establish an overall strategy and policy framework in the water sector which will guide and coordinate the activities of the various ministries and agencies.

These are big objectives which will take time and effort to achieve. The apex body should take a step-by-step approach, setting small milestone objectives as it seeks to build up its capacity and the experience of other agencies in working together in various ways. The apex body will also need good leadership, based in some way on its chairperson, key ministers or other senior officials which can help to guide the apex body's approach. It is recognized that the existence of one or more "champions" – people who can play this influential and guiding role – is often a critical element in the success of the apex body. Unfortunately, such champions may be hard to find. An important question therefore is, "where can the leadership and vision to establish and guide an apex body be found"?

There is no easy answer nor one which will be correct for all countries. The process of setting up and strengthening a water sector apex body involves finding and using the best available leadership. This is essentially a national responsibility and is unique to each country. However, there are also some things which can facilitate this development. External support agencies such as ADB and other "knowledge partners" can play a key role in exposing government officials to the concept and need for an apex body. Technical assistance project and experienced advisors can help to support the institutional strengthening and capacity building process.

But beyond these it is likely that some type of networking can help new and emerging apex bodies and the related water resource management ministries and agencies. "Peer contact" – that is contact between officials from one apex body or water resource ministry and their counterparts in other countries – can be particularly useful and influential. Senior government officials may respect and respond more strongly to what their counterparts from other countries say and to direct observation of activities in other countries, than they do to consultants or donor representatives. Study tours, conferences and similar events can, if well designed, be quite important in creating this kind of peer contact. The results may include formal agreements and cooperation, but more often they are simply the lessons and vision which are gained from peer visits.

Networking of apex bodies and their secretariats and related ministries can also be useful to staff. Where these staff are responsible to carry out challenging tasks in areas such as policy development or the implementation of new IWRM functions, it can be very helpful to discuss issues with direct counterparts or to observe how a parallel agency approaches a task. Some types of "work-exchange" activities, in which trainees spend time in a parallel, operating agency in another country, may be a useful training modality. Exchange of information (reports, legislation, public awareness material, etc) can also be helpful. Many countries wish to study the experience and models from other countries, particularly those that have recently tackled similar issues and needs, and to adapt the lessons and models to their own situation.

Another possible benefit of networking between apex bodies could be more efficient delivery of capacity building assistance. Training could be delivered to mixed groups from various countries. It may also be possible to design new forms and modalities for technical assistance to meet common needs and issues across several countries, such as through ADB's "regional technical assistance" (RETA) projects.

Also, a network may provide a context in which performance standards and review for apex bodies can be further developed. Although there are issues here of national sovereignty and a lot of unique details that each country has to determine on its own, it would be useful to establish some common guidelines and standards for apex bodies and to conduct further needs assessment and design of support activities on this basis.

The present meeting is expected to help in identifying the status of water resource sector reform across countries, the common issues and needs which apex bodies face, how best to address these needs and what role a network of national water resource apex bodies might play. Later papers will deal with these issues in more detail and give further recommendations.

Although no apex body network currently exists in Asia, there has been a certain amount of contact between countries which are moving in the same direction in terms of sector reform. There have been conferences, forums and study tours on various themes under the sponsorship of ADB, UNESCAP, GWP / SEATAC, IWMI and others. Some institutional strengthening projects supporting apex bodies or river basin organizations have sponsored study tours both in the Asia region and elsewhere. The Working Group on Water Resource Management under ASEAN involves some cooperation between water resource management agencies. The new Network of Asian River Basin Organizations (NARBO) and the International Network of Basin Organizations (INBO) may be useful models for an apex body network. It would also be appropriate to consider whether a network would be useful and justified and, if it is, whether any of the existing international groups or networks could meet the need or could serve as an umbrella under which the apex body network could be located.

The results of this meeting will, no doubt, help to assess where Asian countries stand with respect to water sector reform and strengthening, particularly regarding institutional arrangements at the national level, what the experience and lessons on apex body formation have been, and what the future direction should be. I trust the meeting will serve as another step toward reforming and strengthening water sector performance across the region.