



APEX BODIES THE COORDINATING EYE BEHIND WATER SECTOR REFORMS

For a country to adopt successful and lasting nationwide reforms in the water sector, its government needs somebody with the expertise and vision to draw up a road map toward reform, then set the government on course and oversee that each effort successfully achieves its objective. That somebody is an apex body.

What is a National Water Sector Apex Body?

An apex body is a national organization that guides the water sector in reforms for both water services and resource management. An apex body can take on a variety of forms, such as a national water resource council, committee, commission, board, or authority, together with its supporting offices or secretariats. The mandate of a particular apex body varies across countries, but generally involve three main functions:

1. prepare an action agenda that is national in focus and addresses issues by formulating sound policies and laws, building institutional capacity, and managing all the information generated in the reform process;
2. guide the reform process so that the results are consistent with the agreed expectations; and
3. facilitate discussions on policy and investments with development partners, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

By its structure, an apex body is a collaboration of society. It is ideally a consortium of representatives from nearly every relevant sector and stakeholder group. Sri Lanka's apex body, the National Water Resources Council, involves members from government agencies, farmer groups, nongovernment organizations, academia, and gender and development specialists.

An apex body's structure and tasks will evolve over time to meet the needs of the reform process. Its capacity to regulate the water sector will also develop over time.

In Viet Nam, for example, the National Water Resource Council advises the Government before decisions are made regarding

- strategies and policies on national water resources;
- major river basin plans;
- plans for major inter-basin diversions;
- projects to protect, exploit, and use water resources and projects for flood control and overcome the adverse effects caused by water;
- management, protection, exploitation, and utilization of international water sources and settlement of any disputes; and
- resolution of conflicts regarding water resources between ministries and branches of provinces and cities directly under the central control.

ADB's support to apex bodies

One of the seven goals of the ADB's Water for All Policy is to help developing member countries (DMC) reform their water sectors, which calls for the support of apex bodies.

ADB helps start the reform process with a thorough assessment of a DMC's water sector, which lays the groundwork for the development of a national action agenda. To oversee that agenda, ADB helps to either establish or strengthen already existing water sector apex bodies. Some apex bodies prepare the national action agenda themselves or are assisted in its formulation.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic involved ADB in assessing its water sector in 1996. Two years later, that country's apex body, the Water Resources Coordinating Committee, was established in the Prime Minister's Office. It prepared a sector strategy and action plan, which the Government approved and is now being implemented with ADB's assistance.

Addressing needs for apex bodies to succeed

To get the job done, a water sector apex body needs to meet certain conditions. Past experience by ADB and DMCs show that an apex body needs

- to have a clear mandate that is accepted by other government agencies;
- to be separate from a ministry of water, which is not cross-sectoral;
- to set indicators to measure the success of the apex body's performance in directly improving the public's access to water.

Reforming a whole sector for an entire country is a challenging process for any government. Creating a water sector apex body is a proactive step a country can take to manage its reform process and to ensure reforms reach the targeted beneficiaries.

National apex bodies are not alone in this process. Annual regional meetings—the first of which convened in Hanoi, Viet Nam, in May 2004—provide a venue for training and information exchange. Currently, regional cooperation among apex bodies includes the following initiatives:

- pilot a benchmarking process to conduct a peer review of the performance of water apex bodies in the region;
- prepare guidelines and sourcebook; and
- develop training for peer reviewers.