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AWIS : Towards an African Water Information System for better regional integration of knowledge on local water management

Date de mise en ligne : Monday 2 June 2008

- International Office for Water - Cooperation - International actions - Information and documentation systems -

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Although there is an important quantity of information in the African water sectors, it is not very accessible for lack of an organized management system.

In Africa, the water and sanitation sector should be able to:

- * allow the communities to make better decisions, regarding the problems which affect them, to meet their needs;
- * facilitate the capacity building of the stakeholders of the sector;
- * improve the institutional frameworks at local and national levels.

In order to meet these needs, a group of partners of the North and South (OMVS, CREPA, PS-Water, WEDC and IOWater) proposed a feasibility study for an African Water Documentation and Information System (AWIS) to benefit from a joint financing from the European Water Facility for Africa and the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

A genuine tool for supporting decision-making for sustainable water resources management, AWIS aims to promote and facilitate the provision of information and knowledge on water in Africa via a Pan-African Web portal, which relies on associated local partners.

The process uses a two-step approach: first of all, developing and providing a mechanism for the exchange of knowledge and information (based on existing systems such as EMWIS in the Mediterranean region), then working on the stakeholders' capacity building by creating an African network gathering the organizations producing information (Basin Organizations, resources management centers, documentation centers, NGOs, etc). AWIS will be developed and tested during three years in about ten African pilot sectors, in the French-, English- and Portuguese-speaking countries. The AWIS process will then be extended to all Africa.

AWIS activities will aim at facilitating:

the sharing of experience and access to the existing information on know-how in the African water sector;

the translation of key documents coming from the French-, Portuguese- and English-speaking countries to allow its use by a larger public;

the dissemination of research results to the end-users, whatever the scale (regional, national, basin) of this research work. Better dialogue between stakeholders and researchers will be looked for, as well as a better integration of research results to meet the needs and requests coming from people in the field.

From an operational viewpoint, the team involved in the AWIS process will identify the existing African organizations which wish and can become sub-regional AWIS Centers (Focal Points).

The AWIS process does not aim at replacing the existing information management centers, but, on the contrary, at developing them and facilitating access to the information they manage.

AWIS, a participative process

In addition to the 5 partners, initiators of the project coordinated by OMVS, the African local partners will be involved in a Euro-African coordination committee to validate the tool feasibility during the preparatory phase. A conference, organized in Paris, will complete the feasibility phase, gathering about fifty participants coming from African organizations, wishing to get involved in the AWIS process, and other prospective users and donors.

Throughout the process, AWIS will closely work with the local stakeholders to identify their needs for capacity building and to find solutions (human resources, organization, equipment, etc.), especially during decentralized meetings.

AWIS is not only a technological tool but can also organize and direct a network of African and non-African partners,

producers and users of water information (drinking water supply, sanitation, water resources management).

The first meetings of AWIS steering committee were held in Paris at IOWater in April 2007 and in October 2007 in Dakar at OMVS head office.