

# The Drin Coordinated Action: Towards an Integrated Transboundary Water Resources Management<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The Drin River is a complex transboundary water system and a strategic developmental resource for its riparian states. Though bilateral and sub-basin cooperation has been in place for quite some time, a basin-wide effort towards sustainable management was initiated only in 2008. The riparians, the national and regional stakeholders, and the international development community are engaged in that evolving process. Good practices from the region and beyond have provided and continue to provide valid background for building consensus among riparians and stakeholders through participatory processes, and for long-term planning to tackle interdependent development objectives. While continuing to build a knowledge base and advancing the policy instruments, the time is ripe for advancing joint institutional structures and launching implementation in response to agreed principles and priorities. This article describes the ingredients of progress towards today's achievements. It aims not only to tell the developing Drin story, but to provide lessons learned that could inspire replication elsewhere.

## Introduction

Transboundary water resources are equally important for the economic, social and environmental well-being of communities in all riparian states. The Mediterranean is, by definition, a transboundary region. Particularly in South Eastern Europe (SEE), 90 percent of the waters fall within transboundary basins and more than 50 percent of these basins are shared by three or more riparians. In addition, there are more than 50 transboundary aquifers and many of them are interlinked with surface water bodies.

Despite their importance, transboundary waters have been used for centuries in a rather *ad hoc* way without proper management planning. The current modes of development, production, consumption and changes in demography, in combination with increasing climate variability and changes, exert additional pressures on water resources and increase their vulnerability as well as the interdependencies among users, frequently threatening the harmonious relationships among sectors as well as among countries. These factors, along with issues related to the sovereignty of states, makes cooperative management of transboundary waters challenging.

The Global Water Partnership (GWP) is one of the international organizations advocating that “surface and underground water do not respect political boundaries. This means that states must cooperate to manage water” (GWP Strategy 2009-2013, 2009). International law is among the tools for facilitating

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter adheres to the UN rules regarding the use of names as well as the international status of countries and/or other areas etc. The use of names, maps or other statements in this chapter in no way reflects any position of the authors in this domain.

<sup>2</sup> The views expressed in the article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

such cooperation (Wouters 2013). However, in many cases, initiation of cooperation and negotiation of international legal instruments that will detail the means and modes of cooperation is a very difficult and complex process.

Given the difficulties and challenges, the identification or creation of a “window of opportunity” for generating the enabling environment for cooperative arrangements is crucial. A combination of bottom-up, top-down, and traditional *ad hoc* arrangements can be used in this regard. This combined approach has been applied in the case of the Drin River.

Strengthened transboundary cooperation in the Drin Basin is one of the key outcomes of the ‘Regional Dialogue on Transboundary Water Resources Management in South Eastern Europe’, that has been carried out since 2005 to promote sustainable management of transboundary basins and shared water bodies. The Regional Dialogue aims to catalyse action in the field of transboundary water resources management (TWRM) by debating and showcasing the benefits of cooperation. The activities under the Regional Dialogue (assessments, international roundtables, capacity building workshops, study tours, etc) have been used to enable stakeholders to identify solutions that can be applied in their respective basins. The participation of the Drin stakeholders in these events was a catalyst for the initiation of the Drin Dialogue at the end of 2008. Both Dialogues were initiated under the Petersberg Phase II / Athens Declaration Process and were implemented in synergy with the GEF IWLEARN Programme.<sup>3</sup> The UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention)<sup>4</sup> with three of the riparians as parties (Albania, Greece and recently Montenegro) provides the broadly accepted interpretation of international water law in the region.

#### **BOX 1 UNECE Water Convention**

The presently global Convention obliges parties to prevent, control and reduce transboundary impact, use transboundary waters in a reasonable and equitable way and ensure their sustainable management. Parties bordering the same transboundary waters shall cooperate by entering into specific agreements and establishing joint bodies preferably on the level of an entire basin.

The EU Water Framework Directive<sup>5</sup> further provides an important political framework, while the Mediterranean Component of the EU Water Initiative<sup>6</sup> (MED EUWI) offers a policy framework for developing activities.

#### **BOX 2 The Joint Athens Declaration-Petersberg II Process**

Initiated in 1998, the “Petersberg Process” focuses on cooperation over the management of transboundary waters. The Petersberg Process – Phase II aims to provide support to translate into action the current developments and opportunities for future cooperation on transboundary rivers, lakes and groundwater management in the SEE. It is supported by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, and the World Bank.

The “Athens Declaration” Process concerning Shared Water, Shared Future and Shared Knowledge was initiated in 2003. It provides a framework for a long-term process to support cooperative activities for

<sup>3</sup> <http://iwlearn.net/>

<sup>4</sup> [www.unece.org/env/water/](http://www.unece.org/env/water/)

<sup>5</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-framework/index\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-framework/index_en.html)

<sup>6</sup> <http://medeuwi.ypeka.gr/>

the integrated management of shared water resources in the SEE and Mediterranean regions. It is jointly supported by the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the World Bank.

The two processes progressively came together in order to generate synergies and maximize the outcomes for the benefit of the SEE region. Activities within the process are primarily supported by the governments of Germany and Greece and the World Bank. Global Water Partnership-Mediterranean provides technical and administrative support.

For more information, see:

[www.twrm-med.net/southeastern-europe/southeastern-europe/regional-dialogue/framework/petersberg-phase-ii-athens-declaration-process](http://www.twrm-med.net/southeastern-europe/southeastern-europe/regional-dialogue/framework/petersberg-phase-ii-athens-declaration-process) .

### **The Drin River Basin**

The Drin Basin extends through a large part of the Western Balkans. It consists of several sub-basins, the uppermost of which is that of the Prespa Lakes, while the lowest is that of the Buna/Bojana River, adjacent to the Adriatic Sea. The Drin River is the “connecting agent” of the Drin Basin, linking tributary rivers, lakes, aquifers, and other aquatic habitats into a complex, single ecosystem of major importance.

#### *Box 3: The Drin Basin*

- Total surface area: 19,582 km<sup>2</sup>
- Transboundary water bodies: Drin and Buna/Bojana Rivers, Lakes Prespa, Ohrid and Skadar/Shkoder<sup>1</sup>
- Areas in Lake Prespa, Lake Skadar/Shkoder and Buna/Bojana River sub-basins are protected under the Ramsar Convention as Wetlands of International Importance
- The lakes and Buna/Bojana Delta have a high rate of endemism
- Hydropower plants installed in Albanian Drin produce 85 percent of hydropower in Albania and represent 70 percent of the total hydro and thermal installed capacity in the country
- Overall, there are 44 dams in Albania ( for energy production and 40 for irrigation purposes) with a capacity that varies from 70 10<sup>3</sup> m<sup>3</sup> up to 2.7 10<sup>6</sup> m<sup>3</sup>. Two additional large dams on the Black Drin in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia were built with hydroelectric power generation as their main purpose.

The Prespa Lakes sub-basin comprises two lakes; the Micro Prespa, shared by Greece and Albania, and the Macro Prespa, shared by Albania, Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Water flows through underground karst channels from the Prespa sub-basin to Lake Ohrid. Shared by Albania and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Lake Ohrid is the largest lake in terms of water volume in SEE. The only surface outflow of Lake Ohrid, the Black Drin, flows north through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and enters Albania. Here it meets the White Drin, which originates in Kosovo – to form the Drin River. Flowing westward through Albania, the Drin joins the Buna/Bojana River 1 km downstream of the outlet of Lake Skadar/Shkoder, near the city of Shkodra. Shared by Albania and Montenegro, Lake Skadar/Shkoder is the largest lake in terms of surface area in SEE. The Buna/Bojana River drains Lake Skadar/Shkoder sub-basin and flows into the Adriatic Sea; its final tract (23 km) forms the Albania-Montenegro border (Fig. 1).

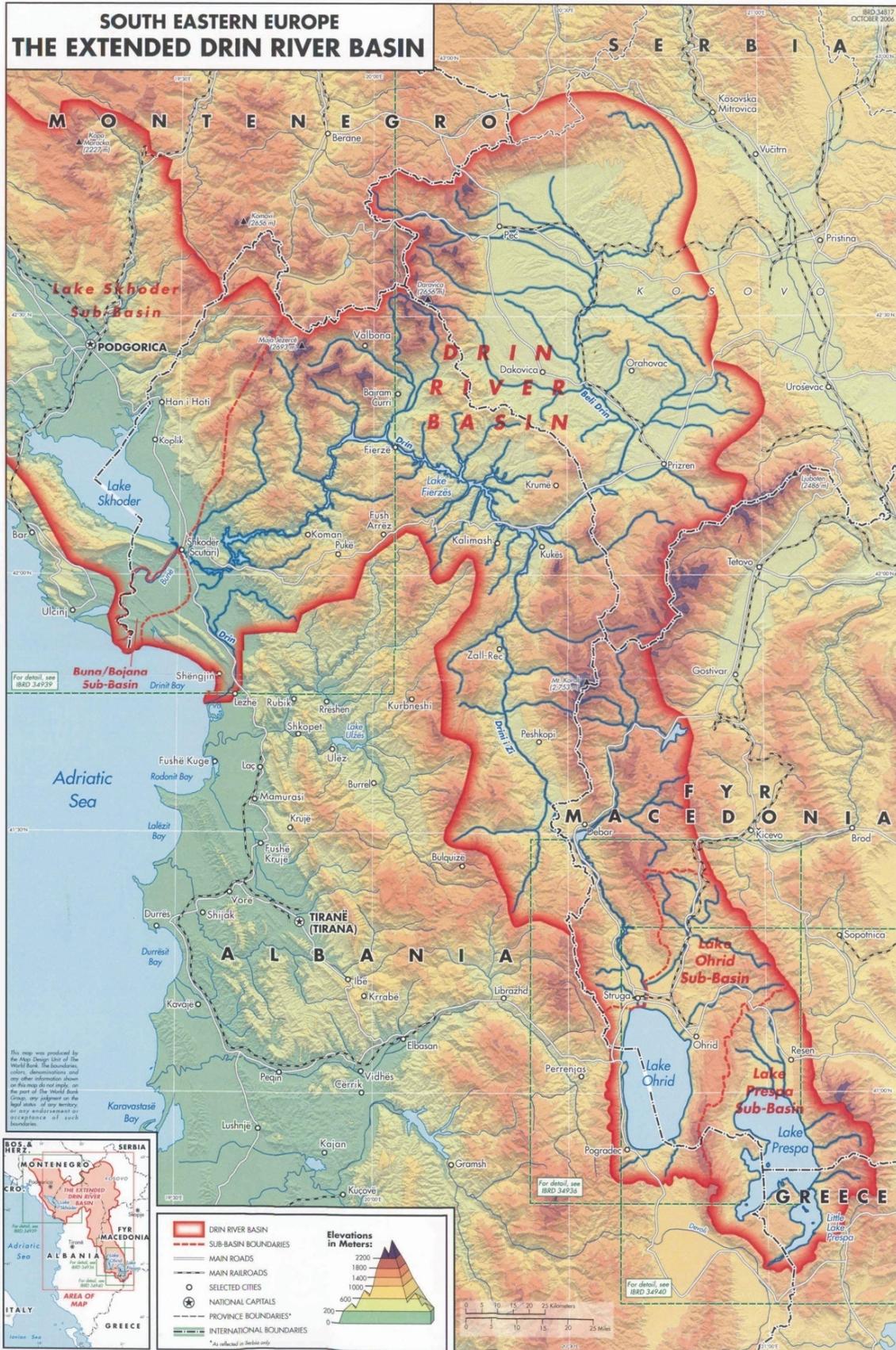


FIGURE 1: THE “EXTENDED” DRIN BASIN (PREPARED BY THE WORLD BANK GROUP, OCTOBER 2006)

The Drin transboundary system offers an excellent example of interdependencies between different human uses (agriculture, hydropower generation, industry, fisheries, tourism, urban settlements, etc.) as well as among uses and ecosystems, in four major inter-connected inland water bodies and a receiving sea.

Until recently, management was practiced mainly at a national level and was not sustainable. Limitations in institutional settings, governance provisions and capacities as well as in financial resources for infrastructure and management itself were the main reasons for this failure.

Despite these difficulties, legally binding agreements on water resources and ecosystem management cooperation were established between riparians to each of the three international lakes in the Drin system. However, a framework for coordinated action at the Drin Basin level remained absent.

In November 2008, key national stakeholders and international partners initiated a discussion to develop cooperation between the Drin basin riparians. Guided by the riparians, a structured multi-stakeholder process unfolded, facilitated by international organizations and supported by donor countries and multilateral agencies. The result was the creation of trust, the establishment of a community of practice and the development of a shared vision for the Drin Basin. Going forward, the challenge for riparians – with the engagement of national stakeholders and the assistance of the international community – is to translate the agreed shared vision into action and establish an official framework for cooperation for the sustainable use of water resources.

#### ***BOX 4: Drin Basin – Baseline situation***

Parts of the Drin Basin are quite developed whereas others are virtually undisturbed. The primary is the main economic sector; agriculture and livestock raising are the most important activities. Timber exploitation is locally important. Fishing is a significant source of income for population groups around the three lakes. Gravel extraction is one of the environmentally detrimental activities in the area though it is not extensively practiced. Copper and chromium ore are still extracted in the Albanian part of the Drin basin. Several other forms of heavy industry exist in parts of the watersheds of Lakes Prespa, Ohrid and Skadar/Shkoder. The Drin River is important for energy/hydroelectricity production. There are plans for the construction of some additional dams in the riparians. The importance of tourism varies across basin. It is significant around Lake Ohrid and there are plans for tourism development in other parts of the Drin Basin. With the exception of Greece, the riparians that are transitioning from centralized to market economies have comparable levels of economic development. The reform process is driven mainly by the prospect of EU accession (Faloutsos et al. 2014).

## **Developing a Shared Vision – Establishing Cooperation**

### ***The Drin Dialogue***

Following initial steps taken in 2008, a multi-stakeholder process for the establishment of a shared vision for the sustainable management of the Drin Basin, the Drin Dialogue, was formally launched on 1 December 2009, in Podgorica, Montenegro. The dialogue was led by the competent Ministries of Albania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Kosovo and Montenegro. The Drin Dialogue was completed after two years, on 30 November 2011, when the five Drin River riparians signed a 'Memorandum of Understanding for the Management of the Extended Transboundary Drin River Basin'. It was a structured, sophisticated, step-by-step process, facilitated by UNECE and GWP-Med. It comprised targeted assessment and a number of consultation meetings at national and

transboundary levels. Competent ministries, national agencies, users, academics, the private sector, international institutions and donor counties worked together to ensure all parties acquired the necessary ownership of the required actions to enhance cooperation and solutions for the sustainable management of the basin.

A situation analysis was prepared to inform the discussions. This enabled the identification of the main transboundary issues and their cause that exist among the policies and the management instruments. The riparians validated the outcomes of the situation analysis, which were then presented to the stakeholders for discussion and feedback.

The process was guided by a Steering Committee (SC) that comprised of representatives of all Drin riparians, mostly meeting back-to-back with the dialogue’s consultation meetings. This facilitated the establishment of the necessary political constituency. The dialogue was ultimately governed at the political level; the political leadership of the ministries appointed the SC members and participated in the consultation meetings. Importantly, the dialogue outcomes were not pre-defined; the riparians were free to negotiate or even withdraw from the dialogue.

As an intermediate outcome, a ‘Ministerial Declaration on the Management of the Extended Drin Basin’ was agreed in Ohrid, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, on 18 April 2011, providing further political impetus to the process. This enabled the elaboration of a shared vision with high political backing, which was included in the signed Memorandum of Understanding (Fig. 2).

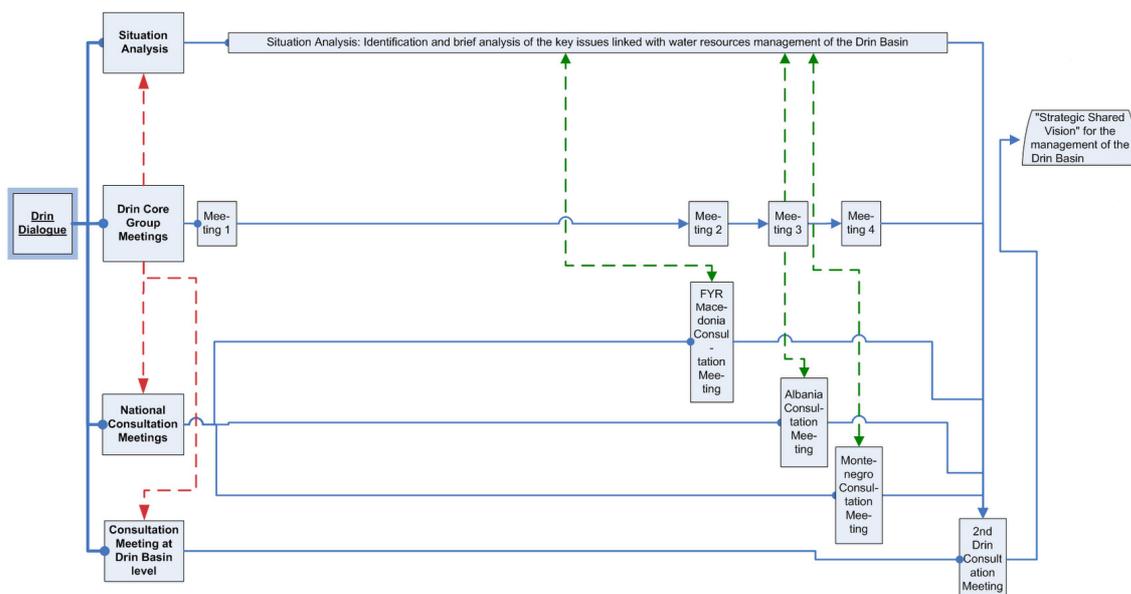


FIGURE 2. SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF THE DRIN DIALOGUE PROCESS

### **The Drin Memorandum of Understanding**

The key political outcome of the Drin Dialogue was the signing of the ‘Memorandum of Understanding for the Management of the Extended Transboundary Drin Basin’ (Drin MoU, Tirana, 25 November 2011) by the ministers responsible for the management of water and the environment of the riparians.

It was chosen by the riparians to develop the Drin MoU for signing by the main water agencies instead of initiating negotiations on an intergovernmental agreement. For while negotiations and the ratification of intergovernmental agreements can take many years, this approach made it possible to productively use the window of opportunity provided by a strong political willingness to develop

cooperation. As is reflected below, the Drin MoU also included elements such as the institutional structure for cooperation usually found in agreements, which so far has made its application action oriented.

The main objective of the Drin MoU was the attainment of the shared vision. The Drin riparians committed to “promote joint action for the coordinated integrated management of the shared water resources in the Drin Basin, as a means to safeguard and restore, to the extent possible, the ecosystems and the services they provide, and to promote sustainable development across the Drin Basin”.

The Drin MoU identifies short-, medium- and long-term actions to address problems identified as affecting sustainable development in the entire Drin Basin and in one or more of its sub-basins. The preparation of an Integrated Drin Basin Management Plan is the long-term objective. To achieve that, a process called the Drin Coordinated Action was put in place, succeeding the Drin Dialogue.

***Box 5: MoU for the Management of the Extended Transboundary Drin Basin - Common concerns for sustainable development of the Drin Basin (extracts)***

The signatory parties identify in this agreement concrete problems affecting sustainable development and agree to take action to address these.

“The Parties hereby should undertake concrete actions to address problems identified as affecting sustainable development in the entire Drin Basin or in one or more of the Sub-Basins:

- (i) Improving access to comprehensive data and adequate information to fully understand the current state of the environment and the water resources and the hydrologic system (including surface, underground and coastal waters) as well as ecosystems of the Drin Basin;
- (ii) Establish conditions for a sustainable use of water and other natural resources;
- (iii) Develop cooperation and measures to minimise flooding especially in the lower parts of the Drin Basin;
- (iv) Improve management and appropriate disposal of solid wastes;
- (v) Decrease nutrient pollution deriving from untreated or poorly treated wastewater discharges and unsustainable agricultural practices;
- (vi) Decrease pollution from hazardous substances such as heavy metals and pesticides;
- (vii) Minimise effects of hydro-morphologic interventions that alter the nature of the hydrologic system and the supported ecosystems, resulting in their deterioration.”

Source: [http://drincorda.org/the-memorandum-of-understanding-for-the-management-of-the-drin-basin/MoU\\_DrinStrategicSharedvision\\_Final.pdf](http://drincorda.org/the-memorandum-of-understanding-for-the-management-of-the-drin-basin/MoU_DrinStrategicSharedvision_Final.pdf)

### ***The Drin Coordinated Action***

While the process is on-going, a number of activities have already been implemented under the Drin Coordinated Action, responding to the Drin MoU which defines the steps and the conditions for its implementation.

An institutional structure based on the Drin MoU was established in 2012. It includes:

- The **Meeting of the Parties**: according to Article 6 of the MoU “the Ministers responsible for the management of water resources and/or environment of the five Parties shall meet annually to review progress in the implementation of the present MoU and its provisions”. The first Meeting of the Parties (MoP) was held on 28 May 2013 in Tirana, Albania.

- The **Drin Core Group** (DCG). This body is given the mandate to coordinate actions for the implementation of the MoU. The DCG comprises representatives of the (i) competent ministries of the riparians, (ii) the (pre)existing joint structures<sup>7</sup>, (iii) UNECE, (iv) GWP-Med, and (v) the Mediterranean Information Office for Environment, Culture and Sustainable Development (MIO-ECSD) representing civil society. According to the MoU, “the decisions of the DCG will be taken by the representatives of the Parties (i.e. the Drin Riparians) on the basis of consensus”. There are two ordinary DCG meetings per year. The DCG Secretariat provides technical and administrative support to the DCG; GWP-Med serves by appointment of the Parties through the MoU as the Secretariat (Fig 3).
- Three **Expert Working Groups** (EWG) were established in 2012 to assist the DCG in its work:
  - Water Framework Directive implementation EWG.
  - Monitoring and Information exchange EWG.
  - Biodiversity and Ecosystem EWG

Their operation has been delayed due to a lack of adequate financing.

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<sup>7</sup> Prespa Park Coordination Committee; Lake Ohrid Watershed Committee; Skadar/Shkoder Lake Management Commission.

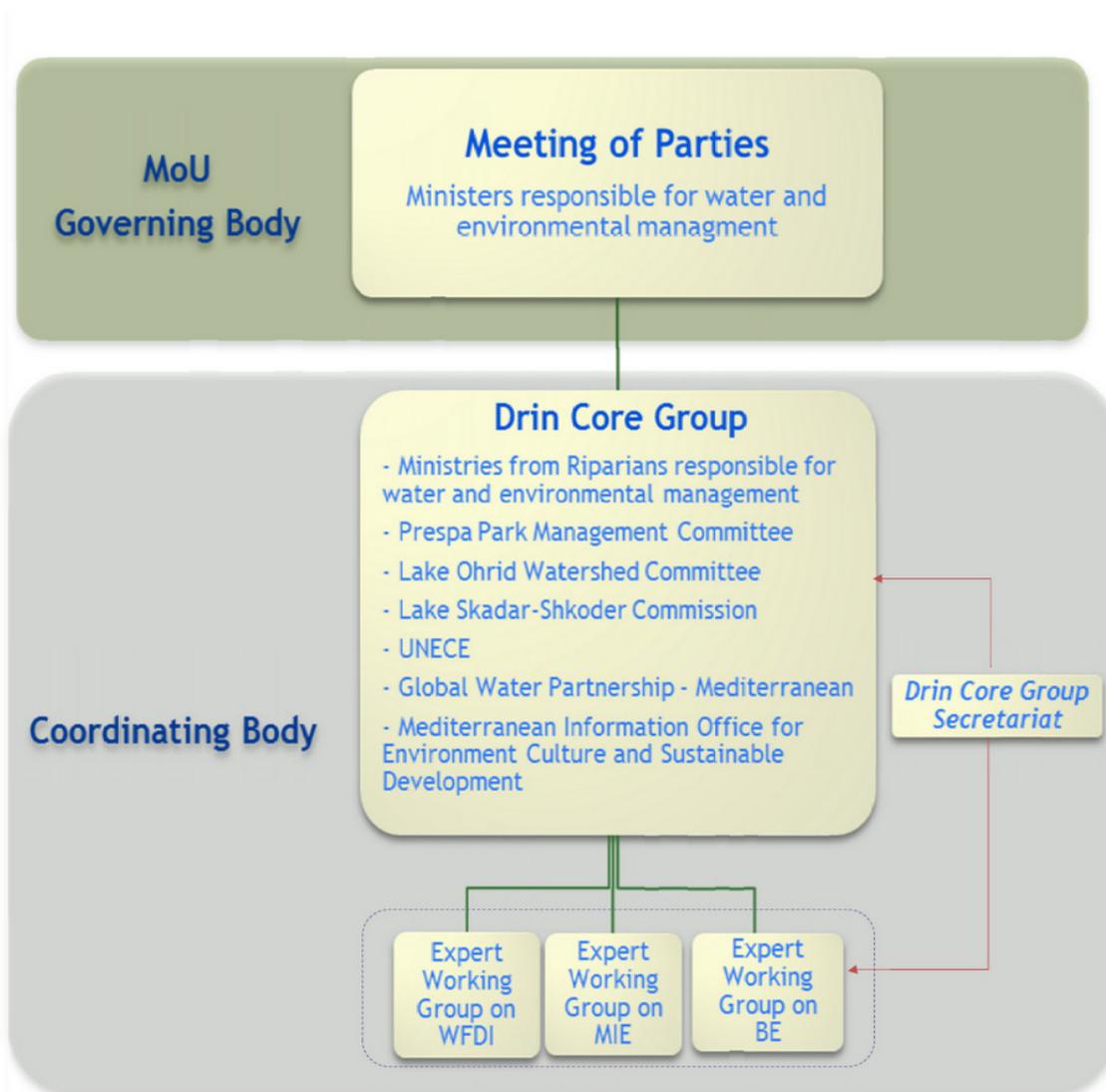


FIGURE 3 DRIN MOU BODIES - INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DRIN MOU (WWW.DRINCORDA.ORG)

### **The Drin Action Plan**

The Drin Action Plan<sup>8</sup> (DAP) was prepared to facilitate implementation of the Drin MoU and operationalize the Drin Coordinated Action. This is considered as an ‘evolving document’ and has been subject to updates and amendments in accordance with the decisions of the Meeting of the Parties to

<sup>8</sup> Approved by the 6<sup>th</sup> DCG meeting (Ohrid, 30 May 2012) and endorsed by the 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Parties (Ministerial meeting in Tirana, 28 May 2013). The project is structured around six actions:

1. Enhancement of coordination mechanisms among the parties.
2. Enhancement of the knowledge basis about the Drin Basin.
3. Improvement of information exchange through the establishment of a system for regular exchange of relevant information among the competent authorities of each party.
4. Enhancement of cooperation in the field of flood risk preparedness, management and mutual support.
5. Institutional strengthening in the field of integrated water resources management.
6. Promotion of public participation and stakeholders engagement.

More information as well as the Action Plan can be found at

<http://www.twrm-med.net/southeastern-europe/supported-processes-and-projects/drin-river-basin/the-action-plan-for-the-implementation-of-the-drin-mou>

the Drin MoU and the DCG. The DCG and its Secretariat guides the implementation of the DAP. The DAP is already being implemented using resources made available by various donors active in the basin.

### **Future Action**

Resources for the full implementation of the DAP activities have been secured through the Global Environment Facility<sup>9</sup> (GEF) which supports the project “Enabling Transboundary Cooperation and Integrated Water Resources Management in the Extended Drin River Basin” (GEF Drin project)<sup>10</sup>.

The GEF Drin project is aligned in content, aims, objectives and governance structure with the activities of the Drin Coordinated Action. The objective of the project is to promote joint management of the shared water resources of the transboundary Drin River Basin, including coordination mechanisms among the various sub-basin joint commissions and committees. It will assist in the operationalization of the institutional structure, rendering it capable of undertaking its coordinative and executive role. It will also further enhance scientific knowledge of the basin to assist the riparians to make informed decisions for selecting priority transboundary issues to be addressed through related management options. A set of agreed measures will be developed to form a Strategic Action Plan. The systematic involvement of stakeholders, including civil society, will be continued and enhanced. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the implementing agency and GWP, GWP-Med and UNECE are the executive partners of the GEF Drin project.

Greece is not eligible for financing, and neither was Kosovo at the time of the project preparation. Greece will use its own resources for financing activities in its part of the Drin Basin. With regards to Kosovo, the participation of representatives in the institutional structure of the Drin Coordinated Action has been secured; in addition, the DCG Secretariat (GWP-Med) and UNECE are actively exploring funding possibilities for extending activities to the White Drin Basin.

### **Conclusions and Lessons Learned**

The documented enhancement of cooperation in the Drin Basin demonstrates the success of the approach practiced, i.e. working both top-down, using high-level meetings, and bottom-up, through stakeholder consultations at national and regional levels. Though the process is ongoing, there are lessons that can be shared after six years of structured efforts:

- *The common understanding that nobody wins from the business-as-usual scenario is the basis for initiating cooperation:* there was a wide recognition of the existing challenges and the need for solutions related to Drin River Basin management. The enabling environment for action was catalysed and sustained by independent international institutions, which hold convening power and functioned as ‘trust brokers’. UNECE, GWP-Med, GEF, UNDP, Sweden, Germany, and more partners were engaged early on and had a discrete, but steady supporting role.

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<sup>9</sup> [www.thegef.org/](http://www.thegef.org/)

<sup>10</sup> The project proposal was approved by the GEF Council (Washington, 13-15 November 2012) and endorsed by the Drin Core Group. The GEF Drin project (\$4.5 million) is structured around five components:

- Component 1: Consolidating a common knowledge base
- Component 2: Building the foundation for multi-country cooperation
- Component 3: Institutional strengthening for Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM)
- Component 4: Demonstration of technologies and practices for IWRM and ecosystem management
- Component 5: Stakeholder Involvement, Gender Mainstreaming and Communication Strategies

- *High-level political will and practical engagement of the administration is a must:* the governments of the Drin riparians, represented at high level, were the key political drivers of the process from the time it was launched. At the same time, involving the competent ministries in all activities (assessments, consultations, capacity building, etc.) was of key importance for enhancing understanding, ownership and the ability to act within the public administration.
- *An honest and step-by-step consensus-building process among riparians is necessary:* as the process had no pre-defined outcomes, the Drin riparians understood that there was no hidden agenda or threat to their interests. A primary aim of the Drin Dialogue was to establish a culture of cooperation and initial institutional mechanisms; the riparians could also use these to further negotiate solutions with regard to conflicting interests.
- *Multi-stakeholder consultation processes are essential tools for enhancing ownership and facilitating decision-making:* stakeholders had a strong interest in contributing and the Drin Dialogue provided the opportunity to national institutions, joint commissions, local authorities, users, academics, civil society and the private sector at local, national and regional levels to express their views. Their vivid and consistent participation in the work and consultations demonstrated a shared and genuine wish to move forward.
- *A solid knowledge base and a shared prioritization of issues are necessary for advancing consultation and decision making:* the situation analysis provided the science-informed background to generate discussions within the Drin Dialogue and enabled consensus on the key issues and the direction of managerial activities.
- *Reinventing the wheel wastes effort, money and time:* To avoid duplication of efforts and save on resources, the existing structures, institutions and processes such as the joint commissions/committees of the international lakes, were fully embraced and engaged from the beginning of the process.
- *Seed funding can be enough to initiate a process and make progress:* over six years, the process was funded by very limited resources from the governments of Sweden and Germany, GWP-Med and UNECE. This shows that where there is a will there is a way. Of course, substantially more resources would be needed to apply what has been agreed on and further develop cooperation; steps towards securing these funds, including from the riparians, are coordinated.

These approaches have been efficient in the establishment of a shared vision for the management of the basin and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding by the competent ministers of the riparians. The content of the cooperation agenda was decided on and reflected in the Drin MoU. The MoU provided for political leadership by direct involvement of ministers through the annual Meeting of Parties and the establishment of a coordination body, the Drin Core Group, supported by a day-by-day Secretariat, and assisted technically by three Expert Working Groups.

The competent authorities will translate the cooperation agenda into actions on the basis of the actual needs, priorities and opportunities for cooperation and economic development. The riparians will further be provided – through the GEF Drin project – with tools that will enable them to negotiate and reach informed decisions with regards to the level and type of cooperation regarding such issues as: exchange of information and data; flood management; creation of an appropriate institutional structure based on what is already established through the Drin Coordinated Action etc.

The ultimate goal of the ongoing work in the Drin Basin is to reach a point in the medium term where the scale of management is elevated from water bodies to the interconnected hydrological system of

the Drin Basin. The primary aim is to move from the sharing of waters between states and conflicting uses to a proper application of international water law and the sharing of benefits between riparians and stakeholders, in a basin where all its parts are physically, culturally and historically interconnected.

In this regard, the ongoing Drin Coordinated Action provides a solid vehicle for the development of further political consensus and practical cooperation among the riparians. This is particularly important in an area that has, in the not so distant past, witnessed armed conflicts, and where a number of groups of different identity, origin and religion reside, but that encompasses a number of riparians that work hard towards political and economic stability. In this sense, the Drin process directly contributes to regional stability and security, something that is recognised by the riparians and the international community, and offers an example for the Mediterranean and beyond.

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