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EU4Environment
Water and Data in Eastern Partner Countries

EU4Environment in Eastern Partner Countries:
Water Resources and Environmental Data (ENI/2021/425-550)

MINUTES

DEVELOPMENT OF RIONI RIVER BASIN MANAGEMENT PLAN IN GEORGIA: CONSULTATION MEETING

Date of the meeting:
13 November 2023

Venue:
Hotel Tskaltubo Plaza
15 A Rustaveli str.,
Tskaltubo, 5400, Georgia

Time: 11:00 – 18:30

Background:

The consultation meeting was held within the framework of the project “Development of Enguri/Rioni River Basin Management Plans in Georgia” primary objective of this assignment is to produce the elements and prepare the draft of the River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) and its implementation dashboards for the Rioni and Enguri river basins in Georgia, covering 15,820 km² and 6,610 km² respectively. This aligns with the European Union Water Framework Directive (WFD) principles. The consultation meeting was held in order to familiarize the local and national stakeholders with the work conducted to date. The aim of the consultation was to:

- Present the preliminary results for development of the Rioni River Basin Management Plan - RBMP
- Discuss the main challenges in the river basin with the stakeholders
- Reaching an agreement on the main issues

Agenda:

The meeting was split into two sessions, the morning session served as an introduction to the work conducted to date in the process of developing the draft river basin management plan for Rioni Basin.

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Opening and Welcome Remarks:

The afternoon session focused on detailed overview of the work conducted, main findings and issues identified for the basin. During this session, the participants were split into two groups and discussed the main challenges facing the river basin, subsequently presenting the results of their discussion.



The morning session commenced with the formal opening and warm welcome from distinguished representatives, setting the tone for a day of collaborative discussion on the development of the Rioni River Basin Management Plan.

Opening remarks were delivered by David Gordeladze, the Advisor to State Representative in Imereti, who highlighted the importance of Rioni River Basin in the region as a whole, underscoring the importance of taking environmental considerations into account in the decision-making process. He expressed gratitude towards the EU4Environment Water and Data Programme for the continuing efforts for increasing environmental awareness and addressing the most pressing issues in the region. He further noted that the State Administration in Imereti is fully ready to collaborate with the ongoing project.

Mariam Makarova, Head of Water Division, MEPA Department of Environment and Climate Change extended a warm welcome to all participants, expressing gratitude for their presence at this crucial consultation meeting. She emphasized the significance of the collaborative efforts in developing the Rioni River Basin Management Plan to ensure the sustainable management of water resources in Georgia. Ms. Makarova highlighted the pivotal role of the Water Division in fostering environmental stewardship and underlined the importance of collective action to address challenges in the Rioni River Basin.

Yannick Pochon, the EU4Environment Water and Data Programme RBMP expert from the International Office of Water – OiEau, France, greeted the participants. He underscored the programme's commitment to supporting environmental initiatives and its collaboration with Georgia in developing effective water management plans. Mr. Pochon emphasized the significance of sharing knowledge and experiences among stakeholders to ensure the success of the Rioni River Basin Management Plan.

Sophiko Akhobadze, welcomed the participants on behalf of the Regional Environmental Centre for the Caucasus (REC Caucasus) as its Executive Director. She highlighted REC Caucasus's dedication to promoting sustainable development and environmental protection in the region. Ms. Akhobadze stressed the importance of partnerships and engagement with stakeholders in achieving the goals of the Rioni River Basin Management Plan. She expressed optimism about the positive impact of the collaborative efforts that would be discussed during the meeting.

The opening and welcome remarks concluded with an invitation to engage actively in the discussions throughout the day, fostering a spirit of cooperation and shared responsibility in the development of the Rioni River Basin Management Plan.

Following the opening remarks, the floor was opened for a comprehensive introduction of all participants, a vital step in fostering a sense of community and understanding the diverse perspectives present at the consultation meeting. Participants not only shared their professional roles but also expressed their commitment to the objectives of the meeting. This exercise encouraged open dialogue throughout the day, ensuring that the consultation would benefit from the knowledge and experience assembled in the room.

Presentations:

Zurab Jincharadze took the floor to provide a concise yet comprehensive overview of the EU4Environment Water and Data programme. Mr. Jincharadze delved into the key objectives and strategies of the programme, emphasizing its commitment to promoting sustainable environmental practices and data-driven decision-making.

The presentation highlighted the programme's significance in the Eastern Partner Countries, particularly in Georgia, where it aimed to enhance water resource management and environmental data collection. He also underlined the collaborative nature of the initiative, emphasizing the importance of partnerships between the EU and Georgia in achieving shared environmental goals.

Mariam Makarova, the Head of Water Division at the MEPA Department of Environment and Climate Change, took the stage to provide insights into the specific context of River Basin Management Plans in Georgia. Her presentation outlined the key elements and considerations involved in the development of the Rioni River Basin Management Plan. Ms. Makarova emphasized the local nuances and challenges that shape water management strategies in Georgia, setting the stage for a more in-depth discussion during the consultation.

The presentation served as a bridge between the broader EU4Environment Water and Data programme and the specific application of its principles in the Georgian context. Ms. Makarova's expertise provided a crucial foundation for understanding the intricacies of water resource management within the Rioni River Basin.

Maia Zumbulidze, representing the Regional Environmental Centre for the Caucasus (REC Caucasus), guided the audience through the pressure and impact assessment in the context of river basin management plans, targeting the main pressures and drivers in Rioni River Basin. Her presentation delved into the methodologies employed to assess the environmental pressures and impacts within the river basin. Ms. Zumbulidze's presentation focused on the analytical frameworks used to evaluate the effectiveness of proposed management strategies and their potential implications on the ecosystem.

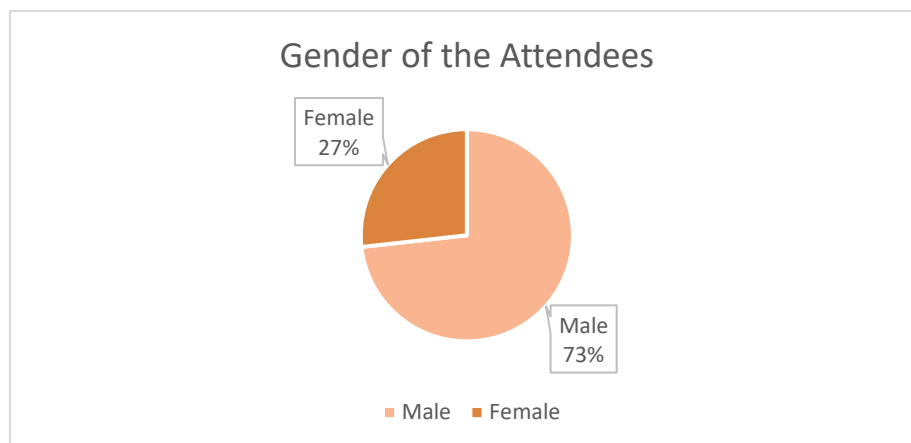
Following the informative sessions, participants engaged in a question-and-answer portion of the morning session, allowing for clarification and deeper understanding of the presentations. The Q/A session facilitated an exchange of insights and addressed any queries participants had regarding the EU4Environment program, river basin management plans in Georgia, and the pressure/impact assessment process.

The afternoon session was commenced with a detailed exploration led by Giorgi Mikeladze and Gia Melikadze. The presentation focused on the delineation of surface and underground water bodies in the Rioni River Basin. The speakers covered the identification, coding, and typological classification of water bodies, as well as the determination of hydro-morphological changes. This session, led by experts from GIS-Lab and REC Caucasus, provided a technical understanding of the geographical and hydrological aspects crucial for the development of the Rioni River Basin Management Plan.

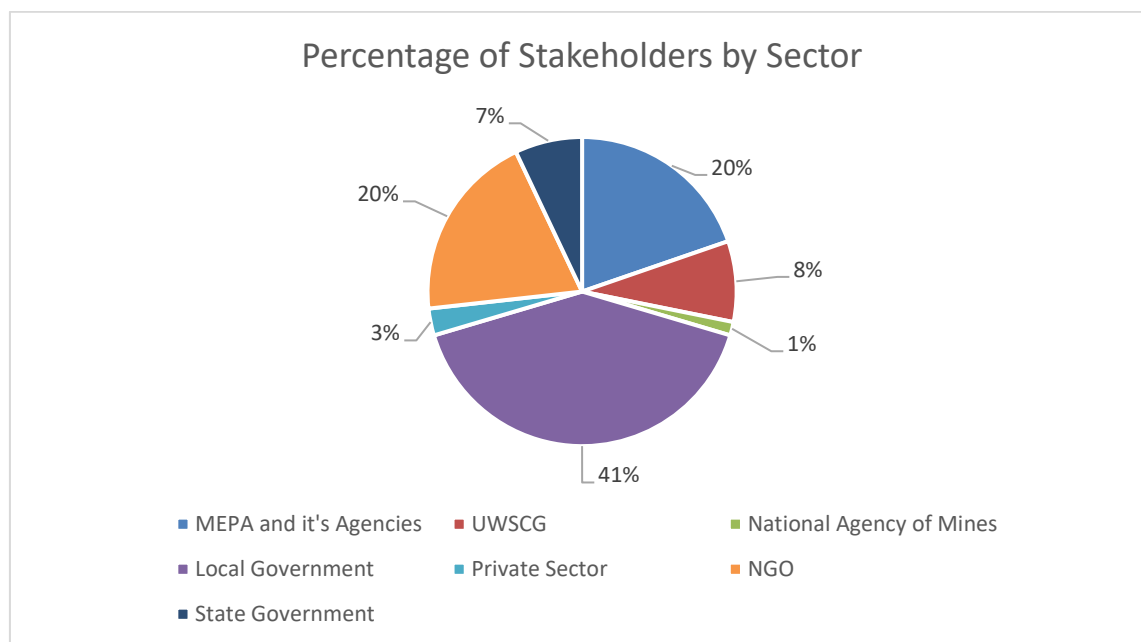
Following the presentation on delineation of water bodies, Nino Rostomashvili, representing REC Caucasus, presented an overview of the main issues and challenges identified in the development of the Rion River Basin Management Plan. This session aimed to frame the subsequent interactive discussions by highlighting key areas that required collective attention and resolution.

Following the presentations, the participants engaged in an interactive session and working group discussions, the results of which were presented at the end of the meeting.

Participants: The meeting, saw a diverse group of participants representing various organizations, central and local governmental bodies, and environmental stakeholders (including local NGOs). In total, 71 participants attended the consultation meeting, out of which 19 were women and 52 were men. Below, please find the chart of the gender breakdown.



Additionally, it is crucial to also look at the sectoral distribution of the stakeholders in attendance. The sectors represented at the consultation meeting are as follow:



The primary driving force among stakeholders hailed from local governments, particularly those managing water-related departments within the basin municipalities. Following closely were representatives from the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture (MEPA) and its affiliated agencies, such as the Rural Development Agency, National Environmental Agency, and Georgian Amelioration. Their pivotal roles in information gathering set the stage for meaningful discussions on challenges related to water management in the region.

The subsequent substantial group comprised stakeholders from the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector, strategically prioritized to include voices from community organizations. Many from the NGO sector were actively engaged in the development process of the RBMP, providing valuable insights into the practicalities and challenges of data collection.

This comprehensive mix of stakeholders, spanning municipal, national governmental bodies, NGOs, and community representatives, highlighted the diverse insights shared. This diversity enriched the discussions, providing a well-rounded understanding of the RBMP development process and the specific challenges associated with it.

MAIN DISCUSSION POINTS



TOP1: Key Issues in the Rioni River Basin

In the course of an interactive session, two distinct groups collaboratively identified critical issues within the Rioni River Basin, encompassing:

- Municipal Waste Management is a priority area and addressing concerns related to both illegal dumpsites and legal landfills is crucial, with a focus on potential pollution of surface and groundwater bodies.
- Assessing the disturbance caused to the natural migration patterns of indigenous fish species, such as trout in the Khanistskali river, attributed to extensive hydropower plant (HPP) development.
- Recognizing issues arising from blocked irrigation canals in the basin and the subsequent challenges they pose.
- Highlighting the problem of untreated sewage being discharged into surface water bodies, posing environmental risks.
- A comprehensive examination of drainage and irrigation systems in the basin to identify areas of improvement.
- Assessing the environmental impact of an anchovies processing plant near Paliastomi lake, with a focus on potential disruptions to local ecosystems.
- Evaluating the environmental implications of mining activities, including sand and gravel extraction, precious metals, manganese, and coal.
- Recognizing the need to enhance the institutional capacity of the National Environmental Agency (NEA) for more effective monitoring.
- Prioritizing the identification and mapping of illegal dumpsites as a crucial step in environmental management.
- Addressing the licensing processes for sand and gravel extraction, ensuring responsible and regulated practices.

TOP2: Proposed Measures for Issue Resolution

The proposed measures for addressing the main issues in the river basin was determined to be improved data collection practices and developing the programme of measures for subsequent implementation.

TOP3: Data Collection Strategy: Identifying local or national government bodies that can provide the most accurate and up-to-date data for comprehensive information gathering.

- Engaging with local municipal authorities responsible for waste management, water use, and environmental regulations to obtain accurate and localized data on issues such as waste disposal, irrigation, and pollution control.
- Collaborating closely with the National Environmental Agency (NEA) and other relevant national environmental bodies to access centralized and authoritative data on environmental quality, hydropower development, and industrial activities.
- Gathering precise data on fish migration patterns and the impact of hydropower development on aquatic ecosystems.
- Collection of data on the status of irrigation canals, agricultural practices, and the impact of blocked canals on local farming.
- Collaborating with industrial regulatory bodies to gather information on industrial facilities, including the anchovies processing plant, and assessing their environmental compliance.
- Working closely with regulatory agency (National Agency of Mines) overseeing mining activities to collect detailed data on mining practices, environmental impact assessments, and waste management in the basin.

AGREEMENTS / DECISIONS

During the discussions, the following key topics were prioritized by the groups:

1. Floodplain forest restoration for preserving unique floodplain ecosystems;
2. Employing Nature Based Solutions in the decision-making process;
3. Using waste collection technologies for weaker currents;
4. Assessment of ecosystem restoration opportunities within the Protected Areas;
5. Implementing measures for better monitoring of water use;
6. Assessing the feasibility of sand and gravel mining before issuing licenses;
7. Focusing on early warning systems – dissemination of necessary information;
8. Monitoring of sanitary zones and drinking water quality;
9. Development of Emerald Network Site management plans.

NEXT ACTIONS

The participants of the meeting agreed on the following next steps:

- Inclusion and prioritization of the main issues highlighted by the stakeholders during the consultations and collection of data from relevant agencies;
- Provision of detailed mining data by the agency of mines on licenses issued in the river basin (for sand and gravel extraction as well as other precious metals);
- Cooperation with municipalities regarding the existing drainage and irrigation systems and their state, with mapping considered as a possibility (feasibility to be determined by the municipalities as the resources will need to be allocated by them);
- Active cooperation of the stakeholders with the project team to ensure the development of thorough and well-informed

NEXT MEETING

The next consultation meeting was decided to be scheduled upon the availability of the first draft of RBMP, alongside the proposed programme of measures. Additionally, the participants expressed their readiness to communicate with the project experts throughout the RBMP development process.

MEETING EVALUATION

At the end of the consultation meeting, the participants were provided with the meeting evaluation forms, with a set of pre-selected criteria and scoring grid. The results are presented in Figure 1 below.

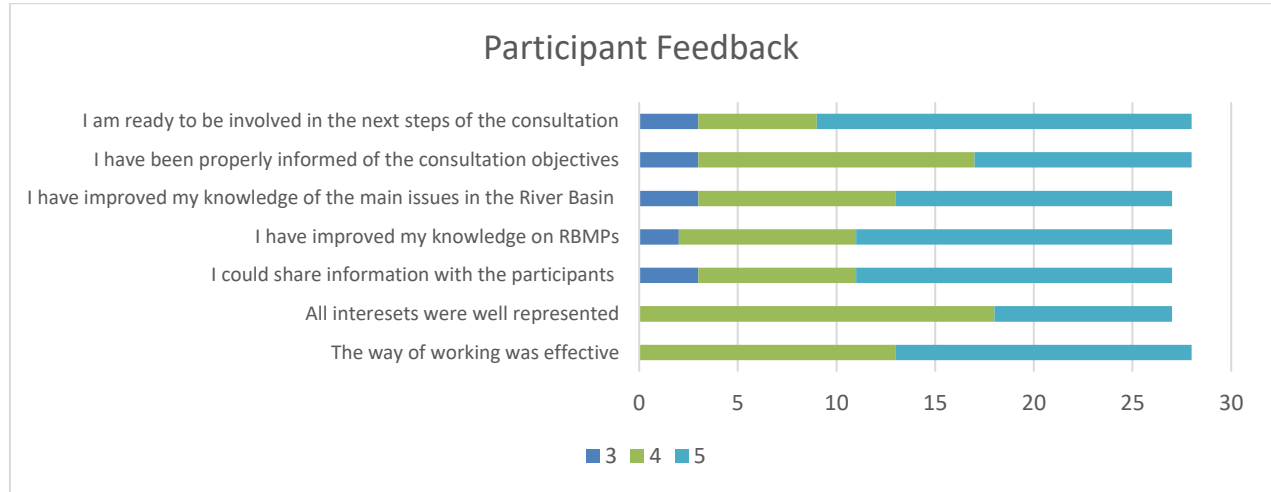


Figure 1. Meeting Evaluation Results. The question was “On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (yes, totally), how would you answer the following statements”

An insightful analysis of participant feedback reveals a notable trend, where the assessment of "All interests were well represented" received the lowest proportional score. Similarly, readiness for involvement, along with the effectiveness of disseminating information about the meeting's objectives and ensuring equal participation, was also comparatively lower. This observed trend can be attributed to the constraints posed by the limited duration of working group sessions, leading to variations in the levels of engagement among stakeholders. Acknowledging this, the project team has proactively identified areas for improvement. To address these concerns, the team intends to implement strategic measures during the upcoming consultation meeting. These measures include a) extending the time allocated for discussion and b) optimizing group formations based on shared interests to foster a more inclusive and participatory environment. This analytical approach aims to enhance the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement and ensure a more equitable representation of diverse interests in future project activities.

DISCLAIMER

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December 2023

ANNEX - AGENDA



EU4Environment in Eastern Partner Countries:
Water Resources and Environmental Data (ENI/2021/425-550)

"Development of Rion River Basin Management Plan in Georgia"

Consultation Meeting

Date:
13 November, 2023

Place:
Hotel Tskaltubo Plaza
15 A Rustaveli str.,
Tskaltubo, 5400, Georgia

Time: 11:00-18:30

Aim of the meeting:

- Presentation of the preliminary results for development of the Rion River Basin Management Plan - RBMP
- Discussing the main challenges in the river basin with the stakeholders
- Agree on the main issues
-

AGENDA

Monday, 13 November 2023

Local Time	Topic	Speaker
11:00-11:30	Registration and Welcome Coffee	
Morning Session	River Basin Management Plans - Introduction	
11:30-11:40	Opening and welcome remarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mariam Makarova, Head of Water Division, MEPA Department of Environment and Climate Change - Yannick Pochon, International Office of Water - OiEau EU4Env Program Representative - Sophiko Akhobadze, Executive Director, REC Caucasus
11:40-11:50	Introduction of participants (<i>tour de table</i>)	- All participants

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11:50-12:00	EU4Environment Program <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brief overview of the program “Water Resources and Environmental Data” 	- Zurab Jincharadze EU4Env Programme Representative in Georgia
12:00-12:20	River Basin Management Plans in Georgia	Mariam Makarova, Department of Environment and Climate Change, Head of Water Division, MEPA
12:20-13:20	Pressure/impact assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pressure/impact assessment of river basin management plans 	- Maia Zumbulidze, REC Caucasus
13:20-13:30	Q/A	
13:30-15:00	Lunch	
15:00-15:45	Delineation of surface and underground water bodies of the Rion basin <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identification, coding and typological classification of water bodies - Determination of hydro-morphological changes 	- Giorgi Mikeladze, GIS-Lab / REC Caucasus - Gia Melikadze, Groundwater Expert
15:45-16:00	Q/A	
Afternoon session		
16:00-16:20	Main Issues/ Challenges	- Nino Rostomashvili, REC Caucasus
16:20-16:30	Q/A	
16:30-16:45	Coffee Break	
16:45-18:00	Interactive session and WG discussions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Data, information sources, and processes - The main challenges in the river basins 	- Consultants and EU4Env Experts, All Participants
18:00-18:20	Presentations of the findings	- WG representatives, EU4Env Experts
18:20-18:30	Closing the meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Final remarks and next steps, closing the meeting 	- Mariam Makarova, Department of Environment and Climate Change, Head of Water Division, MEPA

Background and Objectives

The main objective of this assignment is to produce the elements and prepare the draft of the RBMPs and its implementation dashboards for the Rioni and Enguri river basins in Georgia (covering respectively 15,820 km² and 6,610 km²), in line with the Water Framework Directive (WFD) principles. The River Basin Management Plans are the key tools for implementing the Water Resources management and are drawn up after extensive public consultation and are valid for a six-year period.

Other key documents and links to the reported River basin management plans - along with other important information from the process of implementing the Water Framework Directive This information production will be based on available data, existing reports and literature, meetings with stakeholders, data formatting and exploitation, brainstorming, experts' judgement, etc. No new field survey neither additional census is asked at these first steps of the planning process.

Some consultation events at sub-basin level are foreseen including 2 plenary meetings to share the initial characterisation, the draft Programme of Measures (PoM) and the draft RBMP.

About EU4Environment – Water Resources and Environmental Data

This programme aims at improving people's wellbeing in EU's Eastern Partner Countries and enabling their green transformation in line with the European Green Deal and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The programme's activities are clustered around two specific objectives: 1) support a more sustainable use of water resources and 2) improve the use of sound environmental data and their availability for policy-makers and citizens. It ensures continuity of the Shared Environmental Information System Phase II and the EU Water Initiative Plus for Eastern Partnership programmes.

The programme is implemented by five Partner organisations: Environment Agency Austria (UBA), Austrian Development Agency (ADA), International Office for Water (OiEau) (France), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). The action is principally funded by the European Union, and co-funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation and the French Artois-Picardie Water Agency based on a budget of EUR 12,75 million (EUR 12 million EU contribution). The implementation period is 2021-2024.