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Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit

## Press Release

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### **Act globally, think locally: Challenges to water resources management in West Africa**

*World Water Day 2006 / Local problems while implementing global ideas / Example of the ZEF-led GLOWA project in the Volta basin in West Africa.*

Water resources can be managed in an effective way only if the planning and implementation process reflects local conditions and includes local actors. Though this is not a new concept, a failure to apply it has caused problems again and again while attempting water reforms, especially in Africa. That is why scientists of the Center for Development Research (ZEF) of the University of Bonn try to bridge the gap between theory and practice in their research project on the "Global Change in the Hydrological Cycle", located in the Volta basin in West Africa (GLOWA Volta).

"If we want to do research in a practical way, we need to cooperate closely with local partners", confirms project coordinator Dr. Charles Rodgers. "And this is exactly what we do in the framework of the GLOWA Volta project, which deals with the impacts of global climate change and regional environmental change on land- and water use in the Volta basin. This approach enables us to transfer scientific results and knowledge into concrete decision support for the local decision makers. In the end we have a common goal, which is to improve the allocation of the increasingly uncertain water resources between the various countries and user groups in the basin. In order to achieve this, we collaborate for example with the national institutions responsible for water resources management in Ghana and Burkina Faso. We are also working with a committee of representatives of the two main riparian countries of the Volta, Ghana and Burkina Faso, to evaluate protocols for transboundary flows. This committee is aiming to develop common strategies concerning the management of water resources and therefore has a potential role in conflict prevention".

Ghana initiated its water sector reforms about ten years ago, following the initiative of the World Bank and further international donors. The existing national water management institutions appeared to be inefficient, whereas the previously successful traditional ways of managing water resources and allocating them between the various user groups had become insufficient to meet growing demands. The increase in demand for water by households, industry and irrigated agriculture, caused by population growth, required other management tools. To complicate matters, global and regional climate change in combination with increasing regional demand has led to the perception of increasing scarcity among many local users.

“The balance of the water sector reform process so far, especially in Ghana, is a rather mixed one”, says Wolfram Laube, social scientist in the GLOWA Volta project. “Local and traditional power structures as well as rules were not taken into account sufficiently. Moreover, the actual water users were not really involved in the decision-making process. Instead, the whole process was conducted with a top-down approach, although the central state neither had the financial nor the personnel resources to implement its national reform policy at local level”, explains Laube. “Besides, we have to consider that there is much distrust among the population concerning state intervention in the allocation of resources. Historical experiences with the nationalization of estates as well as with corruption and nepotism have undermined the state’s legitimacy. Therefore, the population tends to escape from state control”.

These findings are confirmed by the social research done in Burkina Faso in the framework of the GLOWA Volta project. “Concepts which have been drafted by the international donor community often fail because they don’t take local power structures into consideration”, tells Charlotte van der Schaaf, social scientist in the project. “But in the end, exactly these local power struggles interfere with and cause a delay in the implementation of national reform efforts. In addition, there often is a lack of political will to implement the reforms, because the national state does not really want to devolve power to the local level. Also, we often forget that water has another value connotation in African societies than in the Western world. In most African societies, you can’t own water nor sell it, since it is a common good you have to share with others. According to this idea, you can’t refuse water to someone who needs it, be it for drinking, for irrigating his land or watering his cattle. This attitude is still deeply anchored in the region, despite the reform process in which water is dealt with more or less as a commercial good”, explains van der Schaaf.

The scientists in the GLOWA Volta project aim to strengthen the communication between the stakeholders in the next project phase, starting in 2006. This means that the project will continue cooperating closely with regional scientists, as well as with water user groups and representatives of central authorities and non-governmental-organizations. In order to improve ways of communication and interaction, a “decision support system (DSS)” is being developed, including and integrating information and project results from social as well as from natural sciences. This decision support system will enable the stakeholders to take decisions on the basis of scientific information.

The GLOWA Volta project is part of the Program “Global Change in the Hydrological Cycle”, initiated and financed by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). It is due to start into its third research phase in 2006. The project is conducting research on the natural and human factors having impacts on water demand as well as on its availability within the Volta basin.

*For more information see also [www.zef.de](http://www.zef.de) or [www.glowa-volta.de](http://www.glowa-volta.de)*

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