

Fact sheet on SAGE

1. Following the adoption of the Water Act of 3 January 1992, a new system of management of water and aquatic ecosystems entered into force in each of the six river basins in France. For each river basin a master plan for water development and management (SDAGE) was drawn up, encompassing all the hydrographic obligations fixed by the law.

These master plans coordinate and guide local initiatives through the water development and management schemes (SAGE).

The area covered by the SAGE is determined in the context of its human and economic geography. The SDAGE generally defines the overall guidelines to be followed in regard to the river basin and in particular in regard to the large river basins.

The SAGE has two main functions:

- To ensure water management and the management of aquatic ecosystems; out of a concern for sustainable economic development, the main objectives are the qualitative and quantitative management of water (ecological heritage, biodiversity, the natural landscape, public health...);
- To give priority to local collective interests: to facilitate the reaching of consensus, SAGE depends on the principles of concerted and shared management. The SAGE initiative therefore rests with those responsible for lands, local elected officials, associations, economic actors and users, who all have a common project for water.

Of the 16 SAGE schemes established, it has been seen that their boundaries depend on the physical and socio-economic setup, so that each SAGE is adapted to a particular situation.

By way of example, consider the Drôme River Basin; the Drôme River is a pre-Alpine-Mediterranean type of watercourse; it covers 1,700 square kilometres, well adapted to a hydrographic unit, and it has well recognized territorial features. The issues at stake are the management of the resource, irrigation, tourism, extraction and the protection of an outstanding environment.

The SAGE schemes are concerned with the extended territory, the situation of groundwater, flooding, large developments or, for example, getting rid of pollution.

When a SAGE is to be prepared, a local Water Commission can be set up, composed of local elected representatives, users, associations and government representatives. Such commissions have enabled two innovations to be put in place, namely, genuine river basin management and the concept of planning that depends on both a global and participatory approach. At the same time, its pluralistic composition facilitates the resolution of disagreements about water arising from interests that are often diverging.

2. The SAGE is basically a “territorial project” and hence a development project. Its principal role is undoubtedly that of creating an opportunity for debate among decision makers, users and economic agents, providing a platform for defining a local sustainable development initiative.

The quality objectives of the SAGE will therefore be preserved and adapted to best meet the objective of the territory in question, whether this is to develop tourism or better manage an industrial park in a centre of high population density with major drinking water issues at stake. A shared management of the water resource, accompanied by a development policy outlook, can only have beneficial effects in terms of employment.

3. The Water Act of 3 January 1992 has therefore, thanks to the SAGE, promoted the spirit of good governance advocated in the Kyoto Summit in March 2003.

Based on its experience, France has engaged in institutional cooperation with numerous countries, to help them to set up their own river basin organizations. This activity led, in 1994, to the establishment of the International River Basin Network (RIOB), whose objectives are:

- To organize water and ecosystem management at the level of large river basins;
- To help local authorities and the different users to define water policy;
- To prepare master plans for river basins;
- To institute specific financial systems, along the lines of the “polluter-pays” system.

Several cooperation programmes have been undertaken in various countries of the South. Such sustainable management of water resources is indispensable to attain development objectives, for the protection of ecosystems and to ensure social and political stability in the world. Water is a potential cause of tension, but it can also contribute to the emergence of strong transboundary cooperation.

France, which has experience of regional cooperation in regard to the transboundary river basins of the Rhine and the Meuse, feels the need to encourage cooperation between riparian countries that share a river basin.
