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Commentary

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MIGUEL SOLANES*

Commentary

These comments are influenced by experiences in developing countries rather than by a concrete or particular reference to either the International Joint Commission (IJC) or the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC).

This is an era of macro-issues. Global problems or questions include a globalized economy, long-range and long-term transboundary impacts, and sociopolitical phenomena apt to prompt actions outside the territorial boundaries of the countries where they take place. The environment has become an overriding concern, which results in concepts like "sustainable development." The conceptual relationship between environment and economics is widely acknowledged, as seen with the requirement of environmental impact assessments for particular projects. However, the project approach is too local, too focal, and too narrow. There are local issues whose roots are to be found at the national level. While actions to identify the problem and to press for solutions must be local, the institutional frameworks and decisionmaking processes to be changed are more often than not part of the national institutional and legal frameworks. The project approach is too focal. Many grave environmental impacts, like overuse of fauna, flora, and soil or water pollution caused by human uses, are related to either macro-economic policies or general economic situations.

A concrete example is the cholera epidemic, which has already proven to be a transnational problem. However, there are no institutions formally making, assessing, and operationally active linking macro-economics and the environment. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) should be given a role to play and a responsibility to fulfill in this regard.

The operational approach to environmental and economic problems is usually uncoordinated, conflictive, and not much concerned with social issues. Therefore, large masses of the population are usually outside the advocacy concerns of environmental groups and the technical advice of economic and financial organizations.

Within the framework of macro-issues, transboundary river organizations should address specific problems. The macro-issues can only be dealt with through a mix of institutions and procedures within which river organizations should have a place; as one of the several actors

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(instead of "boundary" entities, they should be perceived "transboundary"). Therefore, macro-issues must be addressed through a macro-institutions approach, based on a "multi-layer" strategy which might range from international organizations to local agencies. It is essential to: (1) have a common reference framework including principles, methods, and objectives; (2) not rely on administrative or public action only (private action and participation are essential to mobilize concerns into action); and (3) expand the criteria to confer standing to act in either administrative or judicial fora, for both nationals and nonnationals. Flexibility and broad basis to act in increases the level of public (i.e., private) participation.

In developing countries many environmental issues require a basic reappraisal of social equity, institutional arrangements, and legal principles (including constitutional issues) within the national boundaries.