1 Introduction

The Northwestern Sahara Aquifer System (NWSAS), better known under the acronym SASS for its French name Système Aquifère du Sahara Septentrional, is a large aquifer system shared by Algeria, Libya and Tunisia which covers an area of more than one million square kilometres. Given the climatic conditions of the Sahara, recharge is negligible. Intense exploitation by the three countries has caused stress on the resource, augmenting the risks of saltwater intrusion and salinization, loss of artesian pressure, the depletion of natural outlets and the lowering of the water table. Because these effects have in some areas cross-boundary implications, the countries sharing the aquifer system have initiated technical and institutional cooperation - including the creation of a consultation and coordination mechanism. The institutional dimension is particularly interesting because once in place the mechanism will be one of the first in the world established for the management of a transboundary aquifer.

2 The Setting up of a Permanent Consultation Mechanism

In 1998, the three aquifer countries and the Observatoire du Sahara et du Sahel (OSS), a Tunis-based international organization, elaborated a new programme for the SASS which comprised two main components. The first was scientific and technical, aiming at the evaluation of the water resources, the establishment of a common database and information system, and the development of a hydrogeological model. The second was a legal and institutional component that envisaged the setting up of a consultation mechanism. It was supported by a short (2001-2002) and small-scale (US$ 302 000) FAO legal assistance project.

An important step in the process of reaching a consensus on the scope, purpose and approach of cooperation in managing the SASS were seminars, which were held in Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers in late November/early December 2002, where government officials, including from regions most affected by the future of the SASS, the project team and OSS identified and discussed different institutional options. Participants at the seminars agreed on the following points: 1) the need to continue and strengthen cooperation through the establishment of a consultation mechanism; 2) the institutional anchoring of the new mechanism within an existing well-respected regional body, the OSS; and 3) the need for an incremental approach starting with a more informal structure and proceeding towards a more formal institution. The national seminars were followed by a regional workshop held at FAO Headquarters in Rome in December 2002, at which the countries agreed in a procès verbal on the outline of the consultation mechanism. The outline was subsequently endorsed by the three countries at ministerial level and, after some cooperation had been initiated, in November 2005 the three Ministers in charge of water issued a formal declaration in which they declared the creation of a “mécanisme de concertation permanent pour le Système
Aquifère du Sahara Septentrional” and called upon OSS to support its creation and the establishment of its Secretariat.

The consultation has the objective of reinforcing the means and the capacity of the governments of Algeria, Libya and Tunisia to produce decision-making tools that ensure the joint management of the shared waters of the SASS in a sustainable manner. It will offer a framework for cooperation amongst these countries towards several ends: establishing indicators for measuring the status quo of the aquifer and its use, elaborating management scenarios, strengthening and updating common databases and developing and managing joint monitoring facilities. Its programme of activities will comprise joint studies and research, the definition of data exchange protocols, the updating of aquifer models, the dissemination of indicators about the resource and its use, the identification of vulnerable and risk-prone zones, and training, publicity and sensitization activities.

3  Conclusions

A number of factors were crucial to reaching an agreement to establish this mechanism for consultation and coordination. The growing deterioration of the shared resource underscored the need to cooperate in its management. External support and expertise provided a framework to develop and discuss options that resulted in a consensus on the first contours of a mechanism and initiated the process of its establishment. Joint scientific activities carried out under the first component of the SASS programme helped to create trust amongst country representatives at the technical level and led to the conclusion that cooperation would ultimately lead to better management solutions. Through the OSS, a functioning regional institution trusted by all countries was available to promote the process and provide an institutional home for the consultation mechanism. Finally, the envisaged solution is simple, feasible and tailored to meet the needs of the aquifer countries. Following the SASS example, Niger, Nigeria and Mali have been contemplating to set up a similar consultation structure for the Iullemeden Aquifer and have been assisted in this process by FAO and GEF.

For more information, see the website of the OSS at:

http://www.unesco.org/oss-sass/vuk/objectifs_programmeuk.htm

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