

Good governance in the River Niger basin

Those hoping for a solution to West Africa's water problems have kept a close watch on developments in the River Niger basin, particularly the creation of the *Autorité du Bassin du Niger* (ABN), a body involving all nine countries in the basin.¹ Around 42% of the population of West Africa lives along the 4,900km of water that make this the densest river system in the region. Its resources are under constant pressure from surrounding communities, and they urgently need more efficient organisation and management systems to help prevent further degradation and meet users' needs. However, despite the considerable effort invested in seeking a system of good governance for this river system, an institutional framework that will facilitate efficient management of its resources has yet to be developed. This was a key issue at the Paris summit in 2004,² which brought together all the countries concerned and highlighted the shortcomings of the mechanisms for participatory management of the river.

Ineffectual international agreements

Because the resources of the Niger basin extend across several borders, member states need to agree on how they are man-

aged. The ABN is supposed to ensure that the various agreements and legal mechanisms regulating their productive use are enforced,³ but the reality is that these legal instruments are both too numerous and too weak to be effective, with no mechanisms to ensure that member states keep to their commitments. The financial repercussions of widespread breaches of regulations are such that the 23rd session of the ABN council of ministers held in Cotonou on 10 September specifically raised the issue of member states failing to pay or falling behind with their contributions. Studies are under way so that the council can establish mechanisms to sanction defaulters, but their findings have yet to be published.

Discrepancies in national legislation

At the institutional level, work needs to be done on harmonising international agreements with the internal legislation of member states, to ensure, for example, that national water policies are in line with the master plan to develop the River Niger basin and avoid discrepancies between the two levels of river management. With several member states promoting Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM), and intro-