



Basin Organisations



Summary

River basin organisations (RBO) are important institutional bodies responsible for overseeing the development and management water resources at the watershed level, meaning that they can be domestic or transboundary. RBOs can help to improve water cooperation between stakeholders, promote economic development, environmental conservation, international trade, and regional integration. This Tool provides the basic characteristics of RBOs, outlines its main mandates and functions, and discusses its various forms within the RBO institutional setup.

What are RBOs?

Basin organisations are set up under different arrangements depending on the aim, the legal and administrative systems, and human and financial resources. They are usually, but not always, formal legal bodies. In some cases, less formal arrangements also work. But, whatever the setup, basin organisations must have a number of constitutive elements (Figure 1). They must also be public/collective organisations because water resources management is a public good. Although formal basin organisations are part of the public sector, for water to be managed effectively, a wide range of stakeholders, community groups, economical sectors, non-governmental organisations and private enterprise, need to be involved. Older RBOs can be a useful benchmark for emerging ones, providing lessons related to governance, legal frameworks ([Tools A2](#)), knowledge production and sharing ([Tools B4](#)), dispute resolution mechanisms ([Tools C6](#)) and water resource management.

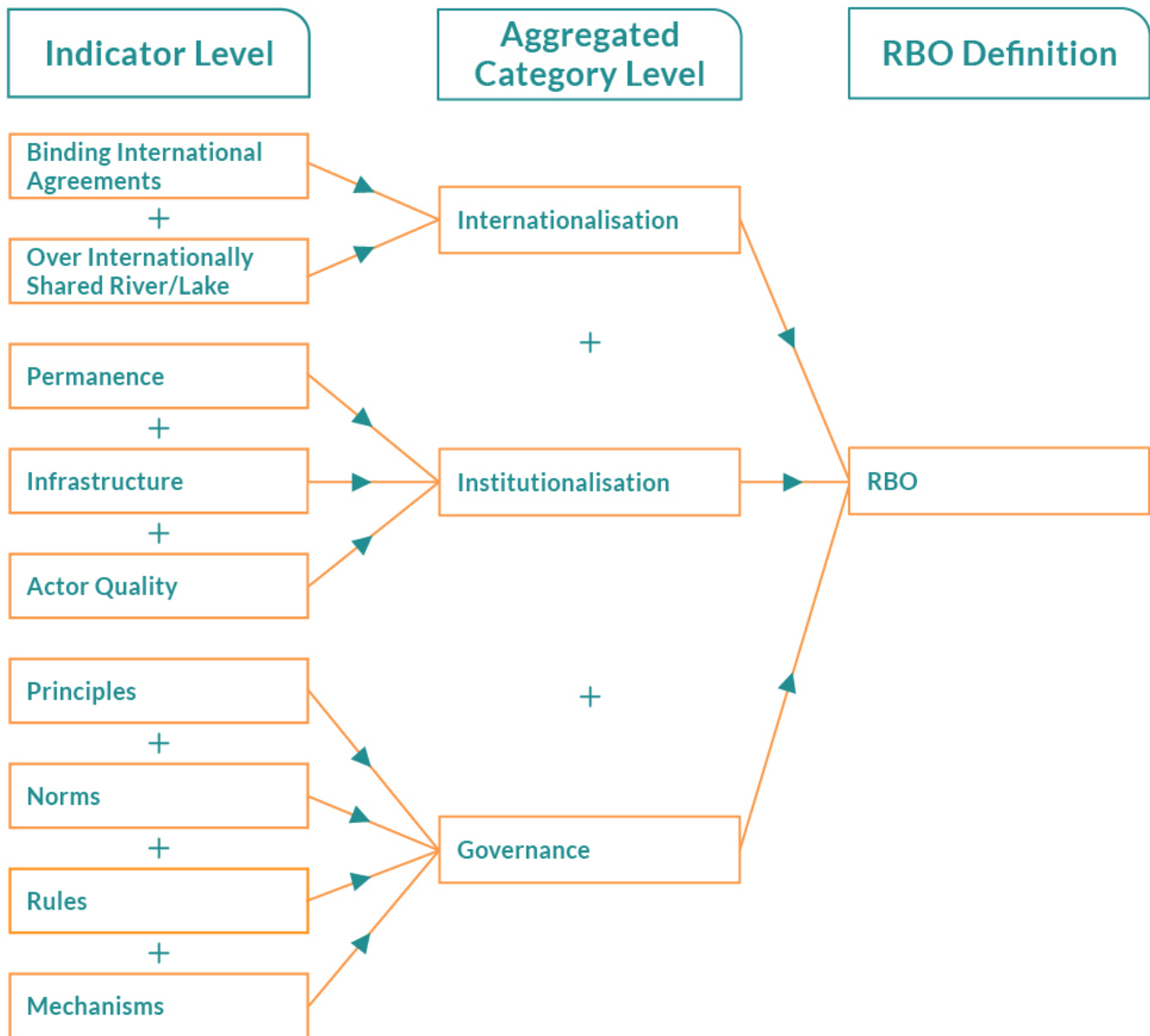


Figure 1: Overview of the constitutive elements of an RBO (Adapted from Schmeier et al., 2016)

Functions and Management Instruments

The main role of a basin organisation is to keep basin stakeholders and decision makers involved and well informed. They are responsible to having bigger perspective on basin water issues. Basin organisations may be incorporated in several forms, ranging from advisory, statutory decision-making, management and regulatory bodies to development entities. Quite often basin organisations function in close cooperation or as part of governmental agencies. Thus, it's important to clearly assign responsibilities to ensure full accountability for actions taken within the basin. Basin organisations normally have functions that can stretch in three main directions (GWP, 2009):

- **Monitoring, investigating, co-ordinating and regulating:** Involves collecting and managing data regarding water quantity and availability; prevent water pollution; harmonise actions taken by state and non-state actors; and resolve conflict in the case of litigation.

- **Planning and financing:** Implies to allocate water to users based on respective needs; formulate medium- to long-term plans for water resources management in the basin; and mobilise financial resources, for example, by collecting water user fees or water taxes.
- **Developing and managing:** Means designing and constructing water facilities; maintaining the water infrastructure; and operating them in ways to ensure water distribution and navigation amongst different functions of water.

RBO Types and Institutional Setup

Depending on the institutional design, RBOs could be arranged into several prevailing types of institutions:

- **Autonomous:** These RBOs have their constituent documents underline their independent positions in relation to governmental bodies, where most of water cycle elements are controlled by the RBO. Such RBO normally has an elected governing body and a mandate to resolve all issues within its jurisdiction, which typically rests within the basin boundaries.
- **Agency:** This RBO derives a mandate from another governmental body. An RBO could be incorporated as an “agency”, focusing on either economic development or environmental objectives. Agency’s functioning often depends on its success in reaching set goals, but in case of unsatisfactory performance it could be terminated by a governmental body. Its boundaries also often coincide with the mandate of governmental body.
- **Coordinating body:** This RBO has no autonomous authority but acts as facilitator between other institutions playing a role in water management. Its tasks might be broadened subject to satisfactory performance which could mean transforming into another RBO type with time. Coordinating body’s boundaries remain within jurisdictions of its stakeholders, but could operate within several geographical scales.
- **Partnership:** It is a form of RBO which is voluntary and usually controls a resource jointly owned by partners for the purpose of conservation. Voluntary membership imposes certain obligations on members, providing them instead with a substantive stake in decision-making process.

When choosing the appropriate set up for basin management, actors need to account for potential institutional interplay between existing organisations. The boundary issues between institution in this case depend not on improper spatial fit but rather on clashes in political influence spheres and responsibilities. Despite political consensus while establishing a large basin organisation, there emerges another jurisdiction with its own competencies, making it more complex to ensure accountability. For instance, in case of autonomous RBOs, accountability can be ensure through an elected governing board. However, there could be a great institutional overlap with other governance actors so the public would have trouble navigating who is accountable for a particular water policy. On the other hand, in partnership-type RBOs, internal accountability among partners becomes most important. Such RBOs also should adopt agile communication practices to uphold positive public perception.

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