

Introduction: This factsheet describes the River Basin Game (RBG), a two-day workshop designed around a board game to resolve conflicts over water.

What is the River Basin Game? It is a role-playing tool for promoting dialogue and decision-making over water resources where irrigation is present. The river basin game is a physical representation of a catchment (or small river basin) with a gradient and glass marbles to show upstream-downstream flow of water. Upstream abstractors/users of water are favoured over downstream abstractors and users of water. This difference often gives rise to inequality in water access for rural people—which can result in conflict. The game allows local users to reflect on the distribution of water in various situations and to strategize accordingly by taking up roles (upstream abstractor and downstream abstractor). The game then asks players to act co-operatively, and in doing so, generates discussion on ways to share water.



There are four ways of playing the Game:

1. With students and researchers of water management to teach common property management of water.
2. With local resource users of water to facilitate local decision-making with regard to the allocation of water. This type of game also allows external researchers to observe current problems and proposed solutions.
3. With higher-level decision-makers to reveal the issues facing local users, and the beneficial & negative outcomes that their actions might have on them.
4. With both higher-level institutions and local resource users to generate a comprehensive picture of how mutual collaboration, flexibility and support is required to manage water at the basin level.

How the game is played – a two day event

Day 1 – Five sessions for playing the game

- Phase 1: Introduction to the 2-day event and demonstration of the game.
- Phase 2: Individual action to acquire marbles (the search for water).
- Phase 3: Individual action to acquire marbles (the search for money & livelihoods).
- Phase 4: Community action to share water more fairly.
- Phase 5: Initial discussion, lessons, feedback, future action, assistance and summary (main discussion is left until Day 2).

Day 2 – Four sessions for water users/decision makers

Session 1 allows water users to brainstorm the methods they think work to maintain income and production while using less water. What have they observed? What practices save water but do not harm production? During this session outside experts should add to the ideas.

Session 2 is to prioritize these methods by a system of voting so that farmers agree on what works best – these can become the basis for bye-laws & agreements by farmers so that they can try these methods.

Session 3 divides into two groups – one group discusses the role of the catchment authority, the other discusses all other formal institutions. Each group discusses how best these institutions should function to assist in conflict resolution and to support the new agreements.

Session 4 is to review what has been said, allow questions and answers, to reflect on the two days and to conduct an evaluation. If there is time agree on a way forward.

Conclusions

Players benefited from having two days and a highly structured and organized schedule to explore in detail various issues. Players could call upon with their own experiences to discuss issues, and did not need any specific prior training. In a relatively safe and sociable environment, the game demonstrated various dimensions of irrigation, water-based livelihoods and river basin management at the local level. The game verified simple linear relationships between upstream abstraction and downstream water shortages (these relationships may seem obvious to outsiders, but often one would hear the upstream users saying that they did not realize the consequences of their actions on users some 50 km away). The game elicited many suggestions regarding solutions and revealed to users that they held the key to managing water rather than relying on external agents and solutions (although timely suggestions from attendant technical experts were well received by participants). Consensus-building was encouraged by the game, particularly on agreements to start catchment-wide meetings to share water. The game demonstrated well how the different organizations working in the basin should work with water users to remove constraints and to facilitate the new agreements generated at the workshop.