National report on
Monitoring progress and promotion of water demand management policies

ITALY

Overview and conclusion

In the last century in Italy water resource has progressively abandoned the nature of "free good" to enter the public domain. In addition water is more and more felt as scarce and not totally renewable resource. Problems of water scarcity and droughts are becoming more severe, involving regions, in central and northern Italy, non usually affected by this kind of problems. For this reason public concern on water resource management is grooving fast. This process of development of public rights on water resources has witnessed a substantial acceleration in the last 2 decades, in particular due to the increased role of the EU as a driver of environmental policy and to the regional and international commitments; in fact, the largest part of environmental legislation in Italy can be regarded as a consequence of the implementation of European Directives.

However, al though the Italian legislative and institutional framework of water policy is now broadly coherent with the rest of Europe, the distance between legislation and a concrete implementation is very large, partly due to the delay in the development of environmental policy, partly because of structural difficulties (e.g. prevalence of non-point impact sources).

While the legislation now explicitly requires full cost recovery for all public water services, the reform of the pricing system and of the regulatory structure is still lagging behind. The delicate issue of access to water at a reasonable price is not definitely solved yet: a significant part of the population, especially in the South, is still relying of insufficient water deliveries; at the same time irrigation remains the largest user of water, and still the demand largely exceeds the available resources.
Moreover, even if water demand management policies seem to have taken a new route, there are still problems to solve or for whom there is need of implementation as fragmentation,localism, poor integration, poor level of industrial development, orientation to supply rather than demand management, lack of alternatives to command-and-control regulation, financial weakness. Of course, it has also to assert that given that public subsidies will continue to be necessary, the main problem at present seems to look for flexible alternatives, and to use subsidies as a complimentary – not substitutive – financial resource. This will mean for example the need to develop a "co-financing" mechanism aimed at awarding those efforts that are best channelled towards planning objectives, rather than continuing with the past tradition of authoritative investment decisions arising from regional plans.

Moreover there is the need to implement the use of modern irrigation techniques like drip irrigation, micro-sprinklers and other water saving devices.
However, substantial research is still needed to develop improved irrigation techniques, particularly those adapted for the use of marginal waters, in addition to associated technology transfer activities, which will be essential to further increase irrigation efficiency. There is also a need to determine the socio economic and environmental impacts of these new techniques, and to assess the social and political impacts of diverting agricultural water to municipal and industrial uses and to assure the adequacy of water quality if irrigation water is to be replaced with treated wastewater.