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Horizontal and Vertical Coordination in River Basin Management: German Experiences and New Challenges [abstract]

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ABSTRACT

The European Union (EU) Water Framework Directive, which came into force in December 2000, establishes the river basin as the relevant unit for water management and planning in the EU member states. For the first time, river basin management will be institutionalised throughout the European Union. The Directive intends to leave behind the common sectorial water management approaches and the management practices based on administrative borders. The EU member states are obliged to identify river basins within their territory and assign them to River Basin Districts (RBD). These River Basin Districts will be the relevant spatial unit for the ambitious environmental objectives and all measures (river basin management plans and programmes, economic analyses, participation, etc.) that are introduced by the Directive. In the case of transboundary rivers, International River Basin Districts have to be established. For all River Basin Districts, member states are obliged to set up appropriate administrative arrangements in order to ensure the practical implementation.

The implementation of this Directive is a remarkable challenge for all member states of the European Union but the necessary changes will be the greatest in those countries where water management is more decentralized and traditionally organized around political-administrative units. Germany is a prime example of this type of EU member
state. While the responsibilities for water policy and management are divided between the authorities at different spatial levels in accordance with the federal structure of government, within Germany inter-state cooperation is only partly assured and institutionalised.

Against this background, this paper deals with the necessary institutional change in water management in Germany. First, the institutional challenges for water management will be discussed in general terms. The theoretical background is the economic theory of federalism. Second, a case study on current river basin management practices in Germany will be presented and the challenges and obstacles for horizontal and vertical coordination in the federal political structure of Germany will be illustrated. Third, more general conclusions will be drawn concerning the establishment of river basin management in federal political systems. Finally, the new European approach and the relevant experiences will be compared to recent discussions in the US.