

Organisations cooperating in project
“Reconnecting Iberian Rivers” funded by
MAVA

Implementation Committee
Convention on the Protection and Use of
Transboundary Watercourses and International
Lakes (Water Convention)
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
(UNECE)

Subject: Implementation of Albufeira Convention

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Environmental and civil society organisations in both Portugal and Spain involved in water and river basin management are deeply concerned about the ongoing deterioration of the ecological and environmental qualities of the shared rivers between Spain and Portugal. Taking into consideration the impact of climate change on river ecology and water security, the lack of cooperation between the two countries to address these issues requires urgent attention. These leading Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) protecting and restoring river ecosystems have been collaborating through the project Reconnecting Iberian Rivers (RIR) towards the resolution of transboundary river basin issues. The undersigned CSOs are of the opinion that the Albufeira Convention in its current form is not fully suited to address the impacts of climate change, nor does it pay sufficient attention to restoring the ecological and environmental condition of the river basins shared by Portugal and Spain.

Spain and Portugal signed the Albufeira Convention in 1998. The Convention focuses on ensuring water flow from Spain to Portugal and covers four transboundary river basins: Minho-Lima, Douro, Tagus and Guadiana. In 2008, seasonal flows for the Douro, Tagus and Guadiana were defined (as a revision of the Convention), including minimum flows for different times of the year, but not including other essential components of a sound ecological flow regime, such as maximum flows, rate of change, sediment load, etc.

Moreover, the current way of working of the Albufeira Convention is not in line with the requirements and obligations stemming from the UNECE Water Convention. The Albufeira Convention lacks a permanent secretariat, which makes it impossible for CSOs and other stakeholders to participate. Officially, there is a Portuguese Technical Secretariat and a Spanish Technical Secretariat that support the Commission for the Development, Implementation and executive organisation of the Agreement (CADC). Also, a number of thematic working groups are supposed to support the work of the CADC.

CSOs working in the RIR project have not been able to get updated information or be involved in the work of the CADC or any of the thematic working groups. The website of the Albufeira Convention does not provide information on who are the representatives in these working groups, only a summary of the issues considered. The information on the website is outdated - the most recent dates back to 2018 (validated to 2020) and the latest information on the Conference of Parties is from the 3rd Conference in 2015. Reporting on the activities of the CADC stopped in 2005. In terms of stakeholder engagement, accountability and transparency, the Albufeira Convention does not live up to what is required by an international convention.

Because of the organisational structure and the way of working, the Convention is not fit for purpose for its tasks and obligations deriving from subsequently approved legislation such as Directive 2000/60/CE (EU Water Framework Directive).

Contrary to the requirements of the Water Convention, there is no joint monitoring of the indicators to assess the conditions of the shared basins. Furthermore, the Convention does not actively promote joint cross-border research, and the warning and alarm systems are poorly coordinated.

In line with the overall long-term objective of the RIR project to restore the ecological quality and connectivity of the three major transboundary river basins, the project partners have recommended an integrated cross-border river basin approach to develop river basin management plans in both countries and developed various proposals for ecological restoration of transboundary rivers.

The project also advocated for a revision of the Albufeira Convention to integrate climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as ecological restoration as essential objectives of the Convention.

In summary, we recommend the following improvements for the Albufeira Convention:

- Establishment by the competent authorities of a permanent and independent Technical Secretariat, as approved by the Conference of the Parties in 2008;
- Development of a coherent, coordinated and holistic vision for each of the shared basins as a basis for input into national river basin management plans and their programmes of measures for each of the shared river basins as required by the EU Water Framework Directive.
- Design and implementation of cross-border river basin restoration actions to promote ecological connectivity and restoration of the river basins (Minho-Lima, Douro, Tagus and Guadiana).;
- Implementation of ecological flow regimes in all transboundary river basins, including minimum, average, peak and seasonal flows, prior to other water allocations to attend socio-economic demands;
- Ensure the establishment of cross-border monitoring systems on water quantity and quality by the competent water authorities, including ecological and hydro morphological indicators as required by EU legislation.
- Mechanisms that ensure and promote public participation and stakeholder involvement in all activities.

- Ensure up-to-date information on all relevant activities and meetings of the Conference of Parties, the CDAC and working groups on the website <http://www.cadc-albufeira.eu/pt/>.

Organisations working together in RIR are of the opinion that sound cooperation and stakeholder involvement is the only way to effectively address the deepening freshwater and biodiversity crises that are being made worse by climate change. Already now the impacts of climate change are obvious and climate models predict a further increase of the pressure on the scarce water resources. Immediate action through international cooperation between Portugal and Spain is urgently needed to address the looming water crisis in the Iberian region.

Because of the discrepancies between the obligations stemming from signing the UNECE Water Convention and the actual cooperation managing their shared rivers, we call upon the Implementing Committee to assess the situation and urge Portugal and Spain to bring the cooperation in line with the requirements of the UNECE Convention.

On behalf of Partners cooperating in Reconnecting Iberian Rivers.

Ana Catarina Miranda

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(Project Manager)

