

Water for life

Central Asians challenged to be joint stewards of a precious resource

By Saulius Smalys

In Central Asia, as everywhere, water is key to advancing social and economic development. In Tajikistan, people put this more simply: *ob manbai hayot ast*. (“Water is the source of life.”)

High up in the Tien Shan Mountains in Kyrgyzstan, the Naryn River begins a journey of more than 2,000 km to the Aral Sea, once the world’s fourth largest inland body of water. In the Ferghana Valley, the Naryn meets the waters of the Kara Darya and becomes the Syr Darya, quenching the thirst of cotton fields and the communities of Kokand in Uzbekistan, Khujand in Tajikistan, and Kyzyl-Orda and Turkistan in Kazakhstan, before drying up far short of the sea.

The Amu Darya, twice the size of the Syr Darya, is formed by the melting snows and glaciers of the Pamir Mountains. Its source is Lake Zorkul, on the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. As the Pamir River, the waters rush east, then north-west through the Hindu Kush. As the Panj River, the waters race along Afghanistan’s border, first with Tajikistan, then with Uzbekistan, then with Turkmenistan.

Flowing northwards from Kerki, the Amu Darya passes Turkmenabat before tracing the border with Uzbekistan and dividing into the delta of the Aral Sea. These waters, too, disappear into the desert before reaching the Aral because of reckless management.

Mutual dependence on this valuable resource has long been acknowledged as a fact of life. In the Soviet era, a relatively efficient water-sharing network, taking seasonal and regional circumstances into account, nourished the production of cotton, fruit and vegetables for what was then one country.

Nearly two decades later, the needs of upstream States, which use the water to produce hydroelectricity, are less easily managed vis-à-vis the irrigation priorities of downstream neighbours and their agricultural sector.

Furthermore, the prospect of additional consumption in Tajikistan and Afghanistan of as much as 28 cubic km from the Amu Darya is a source of serious concern to the Uzbeks and Turkmens downstream. Though blessed with the largest water resources in Central Asia, Tajikistan has yet to harness much of

its potential and is grappling with its own set of water management problems as its population grows. As for Afghanistan, as its political situation stabilizes and development gathers momentum, it intends to irrigate an additional 1 million acres of land for a variety of crops.

A wealth of legislation regulates international water-sharing, including the Helsinki Rules on the Uses of the Waters of International Rivers (1996) and the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (1992). Several agreements concluded in the 1990s focus specifically on the management of the Aral basin, including those between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Unfortunately most of these agreements — due to their declarative nature and unfeasible tasks and objectives — have not proved sufficient to stem the disappearance of the waters of the Aral Sea, which has led to further ecological and socio-economic decline.

At the same time, individual country efforts in the region, coupled with a lack of financial resources, are making the goal of wiser water management even more elusive. To integrate all these scattered initiatives, it is vital that international

organizations and donors be actively drawn into the process of designing projects aimed at preventing other ecological disasters and at monitoring and managing the environmental impact of industry and agriculture.

The OSCE has taken up this challenge with the launching this year of a project to promote regional co-operation focusing on cross-border river-basin management. Specialists across the region will team up to analyse the water management and ecological problems of the Aral basin, review the relevant legislation and identify

obstacles to its implementation, and prepare recommendations for each of the Central Asian States, as well as Afghanistan.

The OSCE project represents only a first step forward on an ambitious path. The envisaged activities will make a difference only if the OSCE, international donors, and each and every country in the region put their collective political influence, financial support and good will behind the project.

Encouraged by the recommendations of the fifteenth OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum, which recently took place in Prague, the Centre in Dushanbe is poised to take concrete follow-up measures aimed at improving the way the region manages its cross-boundary water resources.

Saulius Smalys is an Environmental Officer at the OSCE Centre in Dushanbe. He headed the EU programmes and projects unit at Lithuania’s Ministry of the Environment. He also served as a director of EuroInfoCentre and the US Peace Corps.



Eric Gourlan’s photo of the shrunken Aral Sea won a prize in the 2007 OSCE photo contest sponsored by the Spanish Chairmanship of the OSCE. The theme was “Land and water, protecting our fragile environment”.