

This policy brief reflects the activities carried out within the Central Asia Water Nexus Cooperation (CAWECOOP) project.

THE REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL CENTRE FOR CENTRAL ASIA



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The Diplomacy of Water Cooperation in Central Asia: an Evolving Approach and Demand

Context and background

Transboundary and integrated water resources management in Central Asia (CA) had emerged high on the regional agenda long before the countries of the region gained independence. Hit hard by a number of severe water crises back in the 70's and 80's of the last century the urge towards more appropriate and equitable water management and coordination in the region has been strong and persistent since then (UNECE & UNESCAP, 2004). This was further triggered more decisively by the collapse of centrally managed system and arrangements under the former USSR and the consequential processes towards securitization of national borders and economies as a whole in the region. The newly set geopolitical reality required new arrangements, agreements and cross-border institutions to deal with coordination of regionally shared waters. In the early years, this was successfully realized and initiated by all CA countries themselves in the effort to try to keep the status-quo of previously negotiated water sharing agreements, arrangements and compensation mechanisms (Pohl et al. 2017). However, with every CA country perfectly independent by then, keeping the status-quo was getting more difficult as

the time progressed. Which was not surprising at all as transboundary waters research elsewhere suggests that "at the point where transboundary relations move from the non-politicized to the politicized, responsibility for water relations move out of the departments of state responsible for managing water resources.... to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs..." (Earle et al. 2013). With most rivers in the region assumed a sovereignty issue, the process soon was joined for mediation and support by key international organizations and donors active in the region. It is worth noting though that most such donor support in the earlier years concentrated exclusively on the bigger regional picture represented by the Aral Sea basin, as a whole. Since the early 2000's the process has started gradually acquiring more sophistication, getting down closer to more operational levels of water management and involving a range of specific smaller transboundary watersheds at a lower sub-regional level. South Ferghana Canal, Chu-Talas, Aspara, Isfara, Khojabakirgan, Shahimardan are some of the Central Asian watersheds where novel governance approaches for transboundary waters were successfully introduced, tested and applied as part of ongoing development support from a range of donors. Of these, only the

relatively bigger Chu-Talas basin stood out as the best case winning most donors' attention and support (Wegerich, 2008). As for the rest and much smaller transboundary basins, most of them were considered rather as testing grounds where different donors were allowed their experiments without necessarily longer-term implications. Consequentially, despite some good and promising results, the longer-term sustainability of all such patchy cases was lacking and limited merely to the duration of specific projects.

The diplomacy of water

What seemed most lacking in all those patchy cases was an overall awareness and adequate appreciation at policy making level in all countries concerned of what works best in the transboundary waters domain, and eventually, not sufficiently solicited political leverage and support. In fact, the biggest challenge and the weakest point of any intervention that crosses the boundaries of two or more nations is the much slower process of coordinating and reaching joint agreements and arrangements even if the results are convincing and successful (Dusik E., Nurmamedova M. 2015). Success of a stand-alone transboundary project is not always sufficient alone to secure adoption beyond its life. This seems quite normal as transboundary impacts take much longer to materialize considering the much tedious process of consulting and reaching formal agreements at highest policy-making level in each riparian country. Besides, sufficient space and time should also be allowed for the much more tedious consultation process involving high level diplomatic and legislative interactions between independent states to reach mutually satisfying and legally binding agreements.

Experience suggests the latter is rarely possible, if at all, as part of an effort by the same stand-alone project.

The nature and scale of the abovementioned transnational challenges required some new ways of approaching and tackling them for possible solutions and the ways forward. With this in mind, two years ago the Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC) with support from the EU launched a novel intervention specifically designed to boost transboundary trust and high-level transnational political involvement. The project titled *"Promoting dialogue for conflict prevention related to water nexus and environmental issues in Central Asia: Central Asia Water-Nexus Cooperation"* (CAWECOOP) aimed at initiating and systematically supporting high level policy dialogue and interactions in the region and thus enhancing overall political will, mutual trust, management capacity and resilience towards dependency threats. These were the key assumptions underlying the theory of change of this new project that was implemented in all five countries of Central Asia - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Perfectly built on CAREC's reach, agenda, experiences and mandate¹ the project has been all about building and supporting active networks, platforms and partnerships at both national and regional levels. It involved alongside the more traditional target groups in water and environmental domains such as water managers, line ministries, regional organizations and training centers an entirely new group of stakeholders to help influence change processes more effectively and sustainably – representatives of national Parliaments and Foreign Ministries. Both are considered among the highest rungs of national law and policy making in each

¹ The Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC) is an independent, non-political and non-for-profit international organization with regional mandate to assist the Central Asian governments, regional and

international stakeholders in addressing environmental and sustainability challenges across Central Asia. CAREC was established in 2001 by a joint decision of all five Central Asian states, European Union and UNDP.

country and as such most influential and instrumental in advancing policy matters. On the other hand, transboundary water researchers elsewhere also observed that when water and rivers become a sovereignty issue only few riparian countries have sufficient resources to strengthen the staffing of their Ministries of Foreign Affairs by appointing professionals with a deep understanding of the technical features of water resources management and with expertise in the governance and legal aspects of water management and regulation, law and international law. However, most do not or cannot do so (Earle et al, 2013).

Hence, CAREC directed most thrust of its new project activities at a more delicate diplomatic dimension of transboundary water management and coordination. The other remarkable feature of the project design was that it was not linked to any specific river basin this time round. The key issues facing transboundary water management were designed to be tackled as a whole with the bigger regional picture in mind that is more holistically.

Diplomacy conventionally reserved exclusively for state actors nowadays is increasingly applied to non-state change agents such as non-governmental, civil society and international organizations. While non-governmental organizations have always been active in development cooperation as providers of development services, they have not openly become political actors in the development policy field at least until most recently (Hocking et al, 2012). The pertinent change is looming and out in the air given the scale and nature of specific water sector development interventions and trends in the region that started crossing the national boundaries and actively involving transboundary processes, forces, arrangements and relationships at different levels including at the very grassroots. By the virtue of fact and nature, this inevitably entails a whole range of sensitivities and concerns -

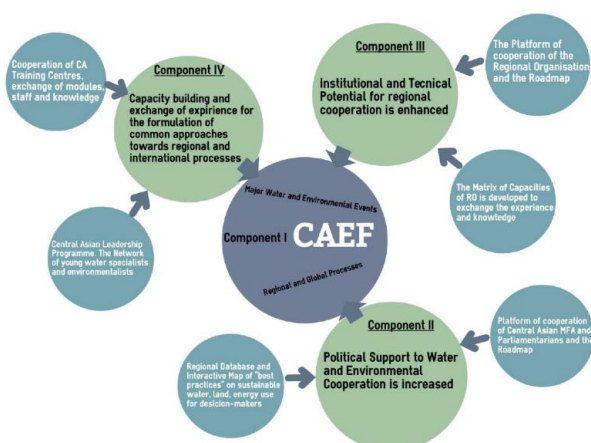
political, security, legal just to mention a few, that require some certain ways to deal with along with multiple consultations, negotiations, arrangements and agreements at highest possible political levels in countries concerned of the region. From this perspective, the transboundary work and mission that CAREC has embarked on involves a range of distinct diplomatic domains that among other things pertain to *development diplomacy*, *people's diplomacy* and *water diplomacy*. Each of these addresses sensitivities at different levels and scales: *development diplomacy* sets the right balance, pace and place that CAREC as a regional change agent enjoys in the development cooperation landscape as a whole when dealing with multiple donors and partners, both nationally and regionally; *people's diplomacy* is a must and instrumental in mobilizing local support and ensuring involvement and participation in the transboundary processes of all those concerned at the very grassroots; while *water diplomacy* is indispensable and come handy in more specific and delicate multi-country situations when negotiating, discussing and settling all things water is required. Mastery of all such sensitivities is also important considering the evolving shift in global diplomacy from the age of secrecy to the age of sharing (Faris, D. 2013).

Zoom-in on CAWECOOP and its key results

With all this in mind, the key objective for CAREC when implementing the innovative project mentioned above was to facilitate and make all key stakeholder groups concerned, both traditional and non-traditional, meet and interact on a regular basis by jointly setting the overall agenda for discussions, working out joint positions and effectively maintaining collaborative arrangements and relationships with each other. This was designed to take place in a number of ways thought conducive to

active interactions, trust building, mutual learning and establishing effective long-lasting collaborative bonds through participation in high-level international, regional and national fora and project's own events including a high notch training series. These interactions were designed to be additionally strengthened by a number of innovative instruments and tools that the project had to offer for good measure: a regional calendar of environmental and water events and two interactive online databases-cum-maps – on best practices in water, land and environmental domains and on training centers available in the region.

The figure below provides a snapshot schematic of key areas and accomplishments by the project.



For that matter the following key processes, instruments and cooperation arrangements successfully introduced and supported by the project are specifically worth mentioning and presenting:

1. Launch and formal recognition of the *Central Asian Environmental Forum (CAEF)* as the major highest-level event on environmental issues in the region: initially emerged during CAREC's 15th anniversary celebrations in 2016 the forum was formally launched and endorsed by all countries in 2017 in Ashgabat as *CAIEF – the Central Asian International Environmental Forum*, following which it was agreed to hold

CAIEF annually with the next forum in 2018 to take place in Tashkent.

2. Launch and support of an exclusive *Interaction Platform for representatives of MFAs and Parliaments*: a high-level policy panel that meets on a regular basis both nationally and regionally and from time to time collectively represents the region globally at high notch international events such as World Water Week, World Water Forum etc. Direct access to people who are responsible for legislation and foreign policy is a key element of long-term cooperation between Central Asian states. A series of meetings held by this platform suggested existence and potential for significant cooperation and jointly shared positions on water issues among both the legislators and the foreign policy makers. This is also embodied in a jointly drafted cooperative roadmap that resulted from such interactions.
3. Launch of a high notch training series on *Water Diplomacy* - a new evolving discipline much demanded both nationally and regionally: a total of 5 training events were organized by the project creating an important critical mass for further ideas and plans to initiate a regional educational resource/center on water diplomacy.
4. Securing and boosting support, collaborative arrangements and synergies with other similar projects in the region along with renowned champions and active promoters of transboundary water governance principles both globally and regionally.
5. Launch and promotion of a regionally coordinated *Calendar of Regional and International Environmental and Water Events* in the region to facilitate better planning, overall awareness, participation and non-duplication (CAREC, 2017a).
6. Continuous support of the existing *Interaction Platform of Regional*

Organizations (ROs) and further development of their strategic capacities for the common regional good: initially set up in 2015 with support from GIZ the platform held with project facilitation a total of 6 high level meetings and 4 training workshops in 2015-17.

7. Launch and maintenance of an online *Interactive Database and Map of regionally available best practices* on water, land, energy and environment (CAREC, 2017b): this is much hoped to effectively contribute to regional water cooperation through exchange of experiences, best practices and continuously accumulated knowledge, also as an instrument to extend and strengthen trust between countries.
8. Launch and maintenance of an online *Interactive Database and Map on regionally available authorized training centers* (CAREC, 2017c) with detailed inventory and analysis of their training expertise, resources and potential for further promoting unified capacity building and knowledge system approaches in the region aimed at strengthening region-wide cooperation and coordination.

Implications for regional water cooperation

To sum up, all key partners and stakeholders in the target countries unanimously commended and endorsed the newly established platforms and instruments of the water cooperation project as allowing effective region-wide interactions among all those concerned and interested in water and other related issues – something that was not possible prior to the project. The informal format of established platforms was especially praised as the key in stimulating open, integrated and creative communication among all those concerned – countries, regional institutions, donors, key resource people, not restricted by official mandates.

In a way this paves the way for a whole new paradigm of regional water cooperation in Central Asia.

An independent evaluation of project's results (EcoCoast Consultancy, 2017) further suggests the existence of very good prospects for long-term functionality and sustainability of the initiated water cooperative arrangements, platforms, formats and instruments. All this effectively builds on the increasingly robust collaboration of CAREC with key international donor, development and research organizations active in the region. Among other things, this effectively builds up and strengthens both the existing and newly emerging coalitions, synergies and opportunities in the transboundary water governance landscape of Central Asia as a whole. In this respect, most important and noteworthy are the long-lasting alliances, collaborations and joint experiences that CAREC enjoys, besides EU, with USAID, GIZ, World Bank, UN agencies such as UN's Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia (UNRCCA), UNDP etc. Moreover, such broad collaborative efforts by CAREC lead to the emergence of new important actors in the region such as the recent interest of the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) to start supporting local initiatives in transboundary water management in Central Asia.

The multi-actor collaboration is also effectively contributed by the positively and rapidly changing political landscape in Central Asia. Most recently, this is driven by important breakthroughs in the relationships of Uzbekistan with its upstream neighbors – the remarkable development in its own right that deserves further notice and support from global community. Hence, the moment seems just right to cease the opportunity and boost our support of integrative processes towards increased cooperation in the

region and beyond. With respect to transboundary waters, greater cooperation can be best achieved through systematic communication, interactions, exchanges and jointly agreed and coordinated institutional arrangements, be it formal or informal. Experience suggests that despite the well-established initial challenges in brokering and maintaining the required level of communication and riparian trust, cooperation is always more cost effective and economically beneficial rather than conflict (Giordano et al., 2005). Therefore, CAREC's role, place and commitment to continuously nurture and strengthen the mutually beneficial cooperative arrangements in the region are well received, acknowledged and strongly supported by all CA countries. Similarly, well received and appreciated are CAREC's efforts in the last couple of years to increase its presence in Afghanistan and make this war-torn country an integral part of all such cooperative processes.

Putting all this in perspective, to fully capitalize on these initial successes and positive developments, support and further promotion of the established platforms and instruments both in the region and more globally should be continued. What seems also important when doing so is finding the right balance between promoting and steering these platforms.

In addition, as business and economy, as a whole, constitute the major drivers of regional stability, subsequent steps and projects in this direction should pay more attention to more actively considering and involving them among other target groups. The same is equally applicable to the financing sector, especially considering the newly evolving tendency of major international financial and donor institutions to shift their policy from core to gap financing. This might have important implications on dramatic increases in available funding for such important development work.

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