



## Transforming Water Conflicts in Central Asia

**P.W. Brorsen** (1), V. Sokolov (2), A. Shuyska (3)

(1) Social Capital Bank, Denmark (brorsen@socialcapitalbank.com / +45 3699 1396), (2) Scientific Information Center, Interstate Coordination Water Commission, Uzbekistan (vadim@icwc-aral.uz / +998-71-2652555), (3) COWI, Denmark (asu@cowi.dk / +45 4597 1439)

Water in Central Asia is an object of competing interests and thus - by definition - a potential source of conflict. So far, the Central Asian states have managed their differences by engaging in information exchange, but conflict may erupt by the next dry season unless regional water experts assist in transforming the underlying assumptions on water usage and management.

Conflict is the expression of differences without a process to manage them. As such, the history of Central Asian water management has fortunately been a tale of conflict resolution. Every agreement and institution established to manage the variety of water stakeholder interests has performed basic conflict resolution functions, some more effective than others. During the Soviet period, the Aral Sea Basin was managed as an integrated economic unit. Economic priorities, defined by Moscow, dictated that water was allocated to optimise agricultural production and provision of hydroelectricity was a second priority. Thus integrated, centrally designed, and without concern of local interests, it was possible to operate an optimal schedule for energy and water management. With independence the integrated economic system broke down. Each country began to redefine its own economic priorities. The scene was set for intense competition and international donors have since sought to stabilise the region by creating a wide range of water projects.

After years of assistance, however, the international community only now re-discovers that the interdependencies of the Soviet Union can be used to foster mutual cooperation. The Aral Sea crisis has been viewed primarily as a water problem, not an oppor-

tunity for collaboration and economic development by trading energy for water, for example.

Central Asian stakeholders are consequently scrambling to establish effective conflict resolution mechanisms. In principle, such a mechanism does three things: It ensures information flow, secures fair treatment, and creates sustainable processes. By ensuring a flow of information between parties, a conflict resolution mechanism will allow greater degrees of transparency and predictability in the relation between parties, and ultimately build up trust. In practice this may include designated lines of communication, e.g. a hotline between heads of water management departments or standard operating procedures in times of emergency. Fair treatment is the main ingredient for achieving accountability among a group of actors. Fairness is a universal value with local expressions. In water management, agreed quotas may serve as a measure of fairness. Likewise, a third party arbiter or a joint council appointed by all parties could invoke the level of objectiveness needed for parties to comply. Sustainable processes are key to stability over time. By continuously providing a horizon with options, the parties invest resources and trust in a joint mechanism. When the mechanism is self-financing and governed effectively, the incentives to participation will be inherent to the system and need no external inducement.