

Afghan–Central Asian water cooperation on the management of the Amu Darya river: connecting experts and policymakers in the lowlands

🌐 Cross-border management

The transnational Amu Darya river is a main tributary of the Aral Sea basin in Central Asia and crucial for local livelihoods. Millions of people depend on its water for agriculture and hydro-electricity in the downstream countries Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and the upstream countries Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

In the context of ongoing reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts, the international community is implementing numerous water-related projects in Afghanistan. Good examples are the numerous small-scale projects implemented by the Netherlands to dig and restore irrigation channels, protect river banks, and construct new canals, water reservoirs and dams. Belgium funds a series of multilateral projects primarily focusing on rural development, which incorporate numerous water projects.

These projects tend to focus on local or meso-level water infrastructure rehabilitation and often lack a regional perspective, which means that the transboundary impacts of development projects are overlooked. In 2010, the EastWest Institute and the Irrigation and Water Engineering Group of Wageningen University therefore started a process to promote information exchange and raise awareness among Belgian and Dutch policymakers, practitioners, private sector experts and researchers who work on Afghanistan and Central Asia, about the need for cross-border cooperation on water management as a way of improving regional stability.

For this purpose they established the Amu Darya Basin Network, which is an international network of policymakers and experts in the

Process organisation

The 'Amu Darya basin' process was carried out within the framework of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) by:

- The EastWest Institute
- The Irrigation and Water Engineering Group of the Wageningen University

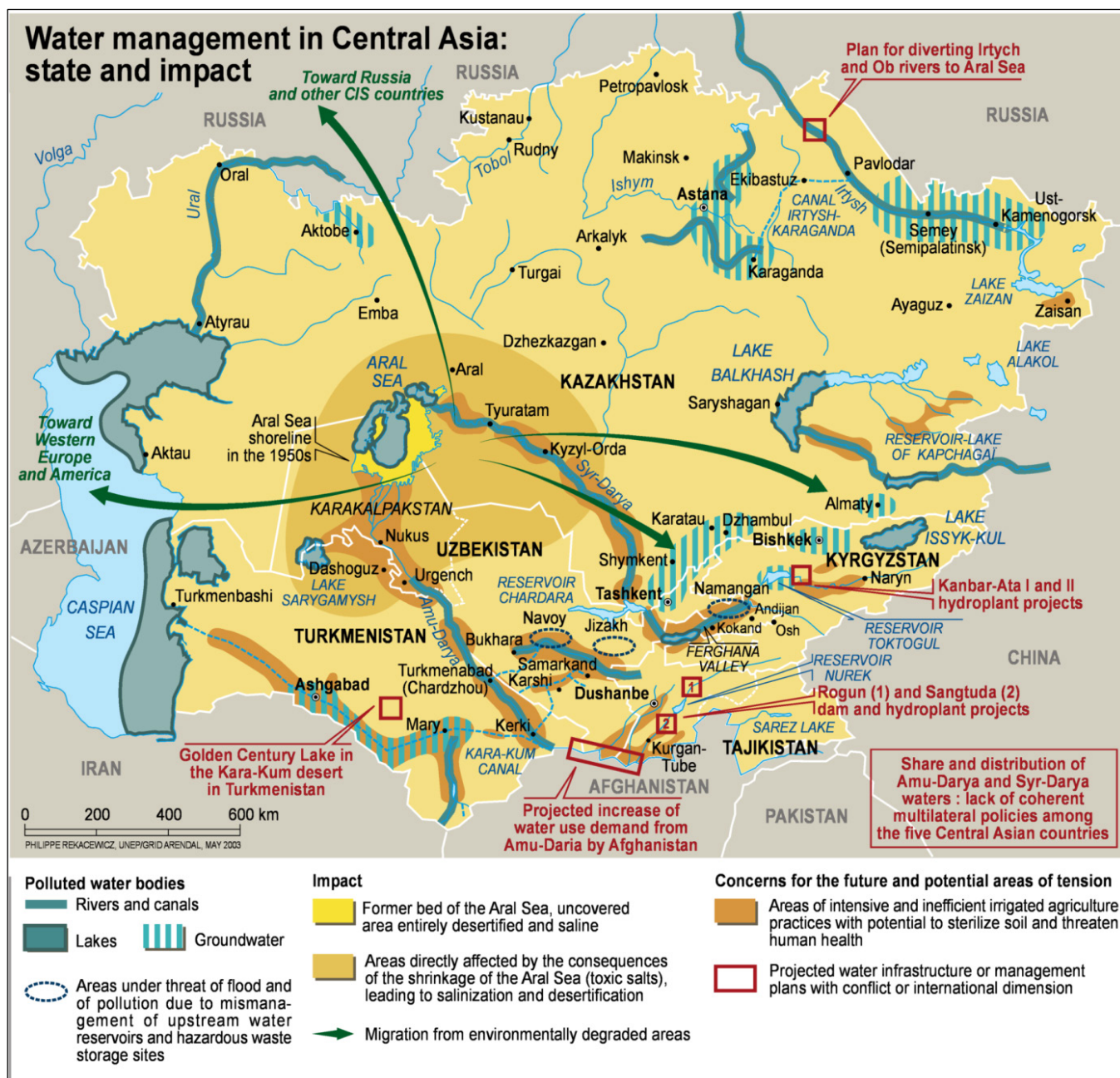


field of rural development and water management in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

🌐 Challenges and opportunities

Clearly, progress on transboundary cooperation cannot be achieved overnight. For regional cooperation on water sharing within the Amu Darya basin to have any chance of success, political will and commitment at the highest levels of the national governments in the region is a must.

Central Asian states, apart from Afghanistan, embarked on a process of formal negotiations in order to tackle transboundary challenges related to the water resources of the Amu Darya as early as 1992. This has not yet resulted in a solution that is acceptable to all stakeholders. Indeed, a specific challenge in the Amu Darya Basin region concerns the lack of trust between various parties and the lack of workable and sustainable solutions put for-



Source: Philippe Rekacewicz, UNEP/GRID-Arendal.

ward by local political leaders for the diverging interests of upstream and downstream states.

There is also a lack of coordination between donor activities. Besides the importance of co-ordinated donor support for social, economic and political change on the ground, experience in other transboundary river basins shows that well-aligned donor activities can play a crucial role by supporting the conclusion of an international treaty.

Coordination and technical expertise

Another specific challenge faced in the region, and particularly in Afghanistan, is the lack of data and technical expertise relating to water management. Cooperation within the Amu Darya basin region can only be enhanced if data and information exchange are improved. The initial focus needs to be on the coordination of existing data collection and data-sharing frameworks. In the event of any overlap between such initiatives, they should be

merged into a single go-to point for data collection and sharing. Data collection and sharing must go beyond the mere posting of data on an easily accessible shared platform. The comparability of data, regular updates and data collection methods are all important factors to take into account.

Afghanistan as a partner

The challenges identified show that there is a wide variety of areas for action in regional water cooperation. Existing formal frameworks of cooperation on water in the Amu Darya basin should aim to incorporate Afghanistan as a partner. Such incorporation is likely to be incremental and can be achieved by providing an observer status first and then by gradually building up trust. Donor nations that often fund frameworks for cooperation should consider an approach which leads to the inclusion of Afghanistan in Amu Darya water cooperation projects. In addition, there is a need for local ownership and concrete local engagement. Although the Central Asian and Afghan policymakers ultimately take the decisions, external actors can play constructive support

roles in the decision-making process, especially if they include the policymaking community in the donor countries.

🌐 Linking researchers and policy-makers

Researchers and policymakers can only bridge the gap between them if there is some sort of intermediate actor that allows for a double filtering mechanism: from policy strategies to research to address knowledge needs and from research to policy to communicate relevant conclusions.

A number of actors can fulfil such a filtering role. First of all, researchers themselves need to learn how to communicate their research results to policymakers. An *ad hoc* or permanent advisory council for specific policy domains could be set up to assess knowledge needs and policy options. Existing NGOs and think tanks should also work to facilitate connections between the scientific expert community and policy in areas where they fail to do so themselves.

A matter of political priorities

During the DPRN process it became clear that transnational management of Amu Darya's water resources does not figure prominently on political agendas of the Netherlands and Belgium. This is mostly due to the massive security challenges in Afghanistan, which are considered to be of more immediate political relevance. According to the process organisers this actually confirms the very need to make policymakers more aware of the longer term challenges.

For policymakers in the Netherlands and Belgium, immediate security concerns in Afghanistan are of higher priority than long-term concerns about regional tensions related to water management, and the latter therefore seems to fall off the agenda. This is partly explained by the fact that policymaking and research take place in different and unaligned timeframes. Where policy development and implementation processes are typically designed in line with election terms of 3–5 years, the research community prefers to work with a longer-term perspective as it is driven by the need for credibility based on evidence through longer-term analysis of trends. For research to make sense to policymakers and for policymakers to provide directions for researchers, these time frames need to be synchronised.



One way of addressing such needs may be the establishment of an all-inclusive regional Centre of Excellence on the Amu Darya basin. Such a Centre can become a key driver as regards linking policymakers with researchers, and can play a unique role in meeting current and future capacity needs in the management of the shared water resources in the region. In addition, networks like the Amu Darya Basin Network (ADBN) can become very important.



Amu Darya basin (Source: Wikimedia.org).

Within such a network, researchers could send their reports to policymakers and policymakers can make clear which issues need to be addressed in research. This would strengthen contacts between experts and policymakers in all directions. Such a network should preferably have a permanent advisory function through research support and guidance for policy coordination in the areas relevant to land use, hydrology, integrated water management, international water law and rural development. Moreover, such a network could facilitate multi-lingual training of students, farmers and professionals in all matters relating to basin-wide management of the Amu Darya's water resources.

Follow-up

The organisers plan to continue the online platform (www.amudaryabasin.net) and envisage significant visibility of process output and results by making the policy recommendations and reports available to some 750 policymakers and experts. In addition, the EastWest Institute is exploring the possibility of a project on capacity development at river-basin level, engaging key local actors, regional organisations and donor agencies.

Process output

The 'Amu Darya basin' process included connecting experts in the 'Amu Darya Basin Network' through conference calls, the organisation of an international conference, and the publication of two papers.

This resulted in the following publications:

- Position paper: 'The Afghan–Central Asian water cooperation on management of the Amu Darya River'.
- Policy brief: 'Capacity development for regional cooperation in the Amu Darya River basin'.
- DPRN process report.

All publications are available on the website: <http://www.amudaryabasin.net>

Development Policy  Review Network

This infosheet was made by DPRN. With a view to stimulating informed debate and discussion of issues related to the formulation and implementation of development policies, DPRN created opportunities to promote an open exchange and dialogue between scientists, policymakers, development practitioners and the business sector in the Netherlands and Flanders from 2003–2011.