

NGOs' role in solving transboundary water conflicts (the case study of Central Asian countries)

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1. Introduction

Water scarcity is a global challenge. It has become one of the most precious natural resources in the XXI-th century. Almost one-fifth of the world's population (around 1.2 billion people) live in areas of physical scarcity of water and the number is expected to grow (FAO, 2007). It also true that access to water is spread unevenly and this become a cause of economic and political conflicts.

The question of natural resources and institutional capacities is the corner stone for economic and social development at national, regional and international levels. In Central Asia this particularly applies to water resources. The two great rivers of the region – the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya and their basins provide main water resources for the region. The Amu Darya flows from Tajikistan through Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan into the Aral Sea, and the Syr Darya goes from Kyrgyzstan to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Water plays the key role in the formation and maintenance of local ecosystems. The fact that Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are rich in gas and oil, while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan control the headwaters of the two major rivers, adds another tension, as countries exhibit pressure politics on each other. As water resources are essential for agriculture and general populations' well-being, these limited resources create demand in regional cooperation in a sustainable manner so that resources can be spread out enough for all the needs of the five Central Asian republics. Unsustainable uncoordinated use of water resources could lead to serious conflicts in the region, even water wars which is highly undesirable. Such warnings have been made since the beginning of the independence era:

The social and economic crisis faced by all the republics is not likely to foster respect for their own environment, let alone for the economic problem in the Aral Sea region. In the foreseeable future, the republics will increasingly focus on their national development program including water management, reclamation of new irrigated lands, crop diversification, optimization of hydropower production and food requirement for their growing population. Their water demands may differ significantly from the current allocation based on the former Soviet quotas. If no equitable water utilization plan can be found, different national water principles will lead to conflicts...The competition for scarce water will then become a key factor in carrying out conflicts and shape inter-republican cooperation in Central Asia (Klotzli, 1994, p.68).

At the same time, since independence, all the Central Asian republics have realized the need to carry out more sustainable policies and made some steps in that direction. This requires a radical shift in attitudes and institutional behaviour at all levels, but particularly at the policy-making level. However, these changes are arguably the most difficult part in the development of the region. The set of required institutional changes have covered reforms in most aspects of resource management: from reviewing legislation, outdated standards and tariffs to introduction of monitoring systems and strict rules of protection of environment, let alone educational programs for local people. The projects to restore degraded environmental resources were costly. For example, the project to revive the Northern part of the Aral Sea and to control water levels of the Syr Daria River cost 64.5 million USD (Kuehnast et al, 2008).

Central Asia is a region with interregional tensions over access and use of water resources. It provides examples of both difficult and relatively successful cases of cooperation in water management. The Aral Sea, which basin countries include Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, has become a tragic symbol of water mismanagement. In contrast, mutual cooperation between the Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan in the management of the Chu – Talas basin has been more successful and the case where new institutional actor – the NGOs played a role.

Thus, this paper provides a brief review of water management issues of the region, analyzing causes of the present tensions, and discusses in this context the role of non-governmental organizations in managing and preventing water management conflicts, how these organizations comprehend such conflicts, what tools do they use, and which relations they have with other organizations in these processes.

2. Water Management in Central Asia: Major Challenges

The two main rivers of the region the Syr Darya which rises in [Kyrgyzstan](#) and [Uzbekistan](#) flows through Uzbekistan and [Kazakhstan](#) to the remains of the Aral Sea, and the Amu Darya covers [Afghanistan](#), [Tajikistan](#), [Turkmenistan](#), [Uzbekistan](#), are “hot spots” with the huge potential for existing water tensions with a potential to escalate into an open conflict. The tension rises from different level of access and different use of water. The upstream countries Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, not energy rich countries, heavily rely on hydropower, especially in winter periods, while the downstream countries (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) use water to irrigate agriculture.

Today’s tension over access to water in the region results from the disintegration of joint resource use which was previously organized and centrally managed by the Soviet authorities. Under the Soviet system, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan provided Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan with water in exchange for coal, gas, and electricity (International Crisis Group, 2014). The previous integrated operation system of the region’s power grid collapsed with the withdrawal of Turkmenistan (2003), Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan (both 2009) from the Central Asia Power System (CAPS) (BBC, 2009). The disintegration is aggravated with lack of adequate infrastructure and unsustainable irrigation methods for monocrops (rice and cotton) (Shalpykova, 2002).

During the 1990s countries of the region attempted to build an efficient mutually beneficial system of transboundary water use regulation. Multiply rounds of talks were held to intensify cooperation: between Kyrgyzstan from the one side and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan on the other one over the Syr Darya river basin, and between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan over the water from the Amu Darya. Unfortunately, these negotiations did not result positively, as interests are contradicting.

It is a rather unique situation, different from other water conflicts, where a stronger negotiating position is held by the upstream countries, downstream countries are in an unfavorable position and rely on the ‘mercy of those upstream countries’ (Lowi, 1993, p.10). In Central Asia, the downstream countries, with a better economic and political position, seem to act unwilling towards collaboration, while upstream countries are forced to communicate their need to get access to energy resources and electricity from their neighbors.

Both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan put priority on development of hydropower to satisfy the growing energy demand and avoid paying high tariffs to the neighbouring countries and revised

some of the old Soviet plans. The projects of Kambarta-2 Hydro Power Plant in Kyrgyzstan and the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan have been launched. Their construction began in the mid-1970s, but none of them have been functioning in full capacity. The Rogun Dam is still being constructed; the process has been suspended several times, despite the supervision of the World Bank (WB, 2014). It also represents the matter of demonstration of political will and capacity of national leadership to solve one of the main challenges in both countries. For national leaders ‘the construction of the Rogun Dam is a matter of life and death for Tajikistan, and this project will be materialized at any cost’ (Rogozina, 2014).

Access to water has become a tool of strategic pressure. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are actively involved in a political conflict, while Kazakhstan keeps a moderate position. All countries involved released a number of statements to pressure the neighboring countries, including threats and even energy blockade from the Uzbek side. Uzbekistan has referred to mostly economic and ecological reasons opposing the completion of the hydro power projects, as the Uzbek leaders have been concerned about the possibility of total control of the rivers operated by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Under these tense circumstances, created and developed within quite a long period of time, Central Asian countries have found difficulty in solving water conflicts on their own, and a way forward was to be found either from outside the region or with a support from non-state actors.

2.1 Regional Cooperation for Salvation of the Aral Sea

The Aral Sea is possibly the most quintessential example of the costs caused by the Soviet unsustainable development. From the period of 1950-1990 the agricultural production in the area increased four times, as a result of such growth the water influx in the Aral Sea was stopped, its water level decreased and 26 km of the sea became land. Until the 1960s, when the Soviet Union launched an ambitious irrigation project on the arid plains of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, the Aral Sea was the fourth largest lake in the world. From 1960 the soil salinity level more than doubled and 50 lakes in the Amu Darya’s basin dried out. The lower reaches of the river were fed by the drainage dumping highly mineralized waters with fertilizers (Matmuratov, 1991).

Ignorance of the environmental impacts led to the change in ecosystems, bringing a climate shift. The soil salination and drainage of ground waters led vegetation with roots closer

to surface first to disappear, followed by willow and suckers and finally by other trees. The degraded riparian forests were then occupied by salt cedar, Halimodendron, winterfat and salsola. Former oases would be turned into sand barkhans (Akramov&Rafikov, 1990). It was a complete remake of ecosystem resulting in climate change. The water of main region water arteries – the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya – was used for irrigation purposes, and the amount of water feeding the Aral Sea decreased dramatically. Other sources (water flowing underground, glaciers) turned out to be insufficient to keep water level stable. By the year 2007 the Aral Sea had only 10% from its initial size (Aladin&Miklin, 2008).

Previous solid water reservoir has been split in three separate parts left: the Northern Aral Sea (also known as Small Aral Sea) separated from the Southern (Large) Aral Sea. The Southern Aral Sea split into eastern and western parts. Two of these parts have an extremely high level of salt in which water fish cannot survive. As a result, local community is deprived of natural resources and employment. Large open sandy areas present health hazards for locals.

To save the North Aral Sea (the Small Sea), the dike Kokaral was built in 2005 (Kozybaeva, 2005). The project was launched with the support of the World Bank. The dike helps to maintain and revive the Small Sea for the last ten years, while the Large Sea lost its last feeding source. In comparison to 2003, the level of water in the North Sea grew approximately by 12 meters (Esbergen, 2010).

It is clear that in order to deal with economic, ecological and political troubles in the Aral Sea basin, the mutual transboundary cooperation is strongly required. It is necessary to strictly regulate the future use of water resources between upstream and downstream states in the Aral Sea basin, while the existing conflict of interests may influence the cooperation negatively and slow down the process. The first attempts to organize transboundary water and land use in the basin go back to the early 1970s, when the Aral Sea showed the first signs of decline (FAO, 2012). Among actions was the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), “a process which promote[d] the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources in order to maximise economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems” (GWP, 2010).

The Aral Sea Recovery Plan, developed by the World Bank, consisted of a detailed strategy to address the situation (UNEP, 2006). Its main goal was to improve the efficiency of water use by implementation of new water management systems followed by usage of less water.

There were other projects by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), The United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), World Water Council, Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), Medecins sans Frontiers (MSF). These activities were also supported by regional, local and international NGOs, such as “Aral Tenizi” society¹, GIWA(Global International Water Assessment),² Women in Europe for a common future,³ Center-Perzent,⁴ and many others.

The Aral Sea tragedy, because of its extremely large scale and damaging consequences, has drawn attention of policy-actors at all levels, including a large number of international and non-governmental organizations. This participation and high involvement of new players forced decision-makers of the countries involved and not always willing to cooperate to take part in this process more actively. At the same time pressure on governments is not their unique achievement: their assistance have been material (money, food, clothes) as well as non-material one (information platforms, help with jobs, etc) for local population.

To the moment the Aral Sea is the most eye-catching spot in the map of the Central Asia, and it attracts a lot of attention at both local and global levels. The scale of the existing problems is commonly recognized, however the attempts and the invested efforts are not enough. The Aral Sea problems are closely related to the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya rivers management, so it should not be examined separately, but in a system of linkages with other areas.

2.2 Cooperation in the Chu-Talastransboundary basin.

The Chu and the Talas are two not very large rivers, water of which basins is shared by neighbouring countries– Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic. Although smaller than the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, these rivers are still vitally important for irrigation agriculture, as well as for hydropower usage. Under these circumstances the countries were forced to cooperate and to develop a legal framework for the joint management of resources and facilities. Their maintenance is needed for the well-being of both nations.

¹ Aral Tenizi Society // <http://www.aralsea.net/en/>

² GIWA – Global International Water Assessment // <http://www.unep.org/dewa/giwa/>

³ WECF - Women in Europe for a common Future // http://www.wecf.eu/english/articles/2004/04/aral_sea.php

⁴ Center-Perzent // <http://www.env-health.org/members/article/center-for-reproductive-health-and>

The basin is located on the territory of two neighbouring states that are Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The zone of flow formation is mostly situated in the mountainous areas of Kyrgyzstan, and the Kazakhstan territory has the dispersing and balancing flow zones.

In fact, there are three rivers are the Chu, the Talas, and the Asa. They all are formed by a wide range of smaller rivers. The Chu river is the main river of Northern Kyrgyzstan. It starts with the confluence of the rivers JoonAryk and Kochkor in the Kochcordistrict (Kyrgyzstan), with total length of 1067 km; making the river as one of the longest in the region. There are almost 5000 small rivers/canals that feed the Chu, its watershed reaches 67,500 km². The length of the Talas is 661 km, its watershed is 52,700 km²(Chief Editorial Board, 1994, p.718).

As for the water distribution between countries, 78,3% (the Talas) and 57,5% (the Chu) of the rivers' watershed are owned by Kyrgyzstan, and, respectively, 21,7% and 42,5 % are located on the Kazakhstan territory (Wegerich, 2008, pp.117-131).

The USSR epoch was marked by a fixed framework of agreements in Central Asia. In 1983 the agreement on water management in the Talas basin was signed by the Kyrgyz and the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republics. According to this agreement, the water was shared in an equal proportion (50 per cent to each). Both USSR republics profited from funding provided by the Ministry of Water Resources. As it derives from the data given by Demydenko (2004), under the Soviet system the Kyrgyz republic released additional water to maintain irrigated agriculture in downstream Kazakhstan.

It was expected that the emergence of new independent states in the region would create threats for the existing water distribution system. However, the states first agreed to keep the existing water allocation structure, and to confirm that, the Almaty Agreement was signed in February 1992 by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to jointly manage regional water resources.

This agreement was relevant and to the Chu-Talas basin. As Krutov and Spoor (2006) mark, "both countries, after independence, continued to recognize the method and agreed to follow it". Nevertheless, the real situation was far from ideal. Hutchens argues that in the years 1997 and 1998 Kyrgyzstan did not stick to the agreed amount of water to be provided to Kazakhstan (Hutchens, 1999). One of the possible explanations is that Kazakhstan did not participate in any investment in water infrastructure, or its amount was insufficient. Thus, it was

costly for the Kyrgyz republic to continue sharing the same amount of water and, at the same time, to maintain on their own all the water management facilities.

The year 2000 brought to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan another agreement on joint participation in infrastructure maintenance and development, as the countries agreed to share the costs (Wegerich, 2008). According to the agreement, Kazakhstan was to compensate for such facilities as dams, reservoirs and canals, located on the Kyrgyz territory, in order to profit mutually from its safe and reliable exploitation (Kommissia, 2014). One of the main achievements of the agreement was setting up a permanent bilateral Commission, a mechanism for implementing the water management regime, satisfying the both parties, and sharing costs for the maintenance of the facilities. This mechanism was put into practice in 2006, with establishment of a joint Secretariat, which run sessions, decisions based on consensus, and temporary expert groups.

The creation and existence of such Commission is itself a sign of countries readiness to transboundary cooperation. Still, the cooperation has some specific features that distinguish it from the similar ones. It introduces a principle of sharing water resources and costs involved. The shares are set proportionally to the amount of water the countries get, and their contributions include financial and material support towards repair of existing infrastructure and purchase of new equipment.

Thus, it can be observed that the Commission activities are strictly aimed at regulating the facilities management, and all the rest – including the issues of water supply itself – derive from the condition of dams, canals and depend on contribution towards maintenance of the infrastructure. It also opened up a dialogue through which the countries cooperate, interact and are ready for the further steps to release former tensions and improve a general state of water management in the region.

The agreement reinforcement was accompanied by the Programme of society participation in transboundary water management in the Chu-Talas.⁵ According to this programme, a special project is run by the Kazakh and Kyrgyz NGOs, with a main objective to raise awareness in the society. The involvement of a non-state actor also ensured the continuation of the project, which activities were slowly implemented.

⁵http://chutalas-commission.org/un_proj_1.php

To conclude, the project on the Chu and the Talas is commonly recognized to be an example of cooperation with visible results, although there is still space for improvement. The tension of the conflict over water sharing has decreased. , Among the key reasons that underlie the successful cooperation are the following. A relatively small size of the project allowed to set and achieve feasible goals under a well-developed and structured programme. A project plan and a road map were complemented by the international supervision of their implementation. Both sides shared involvement and interests in achieving the results, providing with high level of transparency and informational exchange. The active participation of international organizations and NGOs contributed to viability of the project, as they set extra pressure on both governments. NGOs of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan created an independent project involved locals into the managerial process.

3. The Central Asian NGOs: Comparative study of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Non-governmental organizations are quite active in the region of Central Asia. They exist in all countries, and their activities take place in various directions, including the environmental one. Thus, it is essential to analyse the context in which civil society groups, including NGOs, develop and to name the specific features of the region within its political environment.

What is common for all the Central Asian countries is that the basis for the non-profit sector emergence was laid out by the disintegration of the USSR and a new market economy. All countries have lacked the experience in civil society institution-building. Western aid (for example projects by USAID (United States Agency for International Development), GTZ (German Technical Cooperation Agency), UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) was accompanied with expectations that the newly-created NGOs would take part in promoting democracy in the region and, to some extent, would balance the governments.

As the paper mostly concerns the activities of NGOs in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, these are two countries in which it is crucial to examine the factors having influence on development of civil society organizations.

Based on the research published by the Association of Civil Society Support Centers (2006), there are number of significant institutional landmarks. It included an official course on building a democratic state with the involvement of third (civil society) sector development, as an unalienable condition for pluralism and democratisation; additionally the president, AskarAkaev, claimed to set a more liberal approach than the neighbouring states' leaders.

Influential former high-positioned bureaucrats, the Communist Party officials, were opposing structural changes in fear to lose their positions in power (Gerasimova, 2014). The reforms received positive feedback from the society, which was quite active in the processes of NGOs-building and influencing the political situation.

The economic crises and disability to handle it by the internal structures resulted in a higher level of participation of external donors (Counterpart Sheriktesh, 2007).

There are different approaches to classify Central Asian NGOs (Soviet organizations Vs New Independent ones; Political and institutional (campaigning; highly politicized in Kyrgyzstan Vs practical functioning at a local level, mostly rural (operational)), World Bank classification (Tretiakova, 2005). However, the most applicable approach for this research might be to classify NGOs according to the area of activity they deal with. According to this classification, in 2008 the biggest number of NGOs were working with Children/youth (302), with women (236) and on educational/scientific issues (212). The environmental sector comprised 120 NGOs (4.8% from the total). It should be also noticed that the existing statistics on NGOs is quite poor, and the numbers in different sources vary dramatically. For example, in the Kyrgyz Republic there is a tendency to create a huge number of household NGOs in order to get funding as additional source of household revenue. As a result, there is clear picture on how many NGO do implement (Counterpart International, 2008) (Kosmarskaya, 2015).

As for the Kazakh Republic, its NGOs-sector has some similarities with Kyrgyzstan, and, at the same time, has its own specific features. The very existence of NGOs in Kazakhstan was predominated by the existing two types of organizations: those existing under the soviet rule (up to 1985) and those of the “Perestroika” time (1985-1991). After the crash of the Soviet Union, the civil society formation process got the new birth. As all over the Central Asia, the non-governmental sector was a new phenomenon that provoked two main types of problems: first, people lacked a clear understanding of the necessity of the sector, and, second, NGOs themselves were too inexperienced (UNDP, 2002).

According to the report published by the Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan, there are four stages of NGO- formation in the country (Baibolova, 2011, c.24). The first one (late 80s – 1994) was marked by the emergence of approximately 400 NGOs, mostly human rights ones (related to the newly-got independence of the country and the wave of democratization). The key element of this time was a complete lack of systematization in NGOs creation.

The second stage (1994 – 1997) produced quantitative and qualitative growth and development. The number of NGOs during this period reached 1600 (ibid. p. 25). The cooperation with international organizations and international NGOs also grew significantly during this period that

allowed Kazakh Civil Society organization to compensate its little experience. By the end of this period, the Association of Nongovernmental Non-profit Organizations (ANNOK) was formed, main activities of which were aimed at the development of legal system in the sphere of non-profit sector (Diachenko, 2007, p.57).

The third stage lasted from 1998 to 2003 and the main issue raised was about the direct interaction between non-governmental organizations and the government. A number of new associations were created, including the Forum of Ecological NGOs.⁶ During this period the legal framework was developed (The Law on NGOs (2001), The Concept of Governmental Support of NGOs), however the legal status still remained unclear.

Finally, the fourth stage has started in the end of the year 2003 and is still in process. According to the experts and representatives of Kazakh NGOs, it is a stage when the constructive cooperation between state and civil society has been born (Rogozina, 2015). They also claim that the non-profit sector in Kazakhstan is the most developed in the region, mostly due to the existing legal base, multidimensional activities, relative sustainability (both organizational and financial).

It is also true that the distribution of NGOs in Kazakhstan is unequal in terms of regional balance. Most of them are located in Almaty or Astana, two biggest cities, however their activities extend beyond. As for the sectors, 42% of NGOs specialize in social services (education, healthcare, cultural), 24% of the organizations protect the interests of socially vulnerable population, and 34% of them deal with ecology (Diachenko, 2007).

The key goal of Central Asian NGOs is to facilitate the process of civil society development and public involvement, including the water issue. The list of the activities in which NGOs are involved is quite long. Advocacy NGOs focus mostly on lobbyism and information campaigns; while operational ones conduct programs and perform specific activities. They help to elaborate management programs and control the process of its realization. They also deal in an active way with local, invoke them to peaceful cooperation and assist with routine issues.

In Kazakhstan, more than a half of environmental organizations in one way or another are involved in water management activities. They participate in local and international conferences on the topic, organize river eco-tours, and help to clean up streamways, run ecological education projects for youth, and raise awareness through media.

⁶<http://eco-forum.kz/index.php/en/about>

The Eco Forum of non-governmental ecological organizations of Kazakhstan, the so-called Water Campaign was launched in 2000. This campaign unites the effort of all the NGOs working on water issues. The Forum coordinates activities and organizes mass actions, it also created and keeps maintaining the database on organizations and experts on water issues. Additionally, it works with governmental structures, business sector and international groups; these activities help to increase the common consciousness about what the NGOs do, to get government support and to raise funds from business sector.

Based on the study by the Regional Ecological Centre of Central Asia that summarized the data on ecological NGOs of Central Asia in a catalogue, one can argue there are not a lot of organizations working exclusively on water issues (RegionalnyEkologichheskyZentr, 2009). Among 185 ecological organizations of Kazakhstan, listed in the study, only “Kosaral” and “Amanotkul” IG stated that water resource management is their key activity. There are also some NGOs that deal specifically with the Aral Sea issues and the Caspian Sea, but mostly they prefer to cover them in a more general way. The most popular options in the field activity were: assistance to problem solution, ecological education, biodiversity, sustainable development, etc. The same picture is observed in the case of Kyrgyzstan: out of 163 ecological NGOs those who deal only with water management/regulation are “EL Bulagy” (rural societal alliance) and “Manas irrigation fund” in the Talas area. All the rest of the organizations mention that they work on sustainable development, protection of biodiversity, ecological policies, and education. For instance, BIOM organization is an ecological movement, specialising in the topics of sustainable development, environmental education and management, renewable energy, environmental safety; water issues are considered to be a part of environmental management, and they are not able to focus completely on this topic (Domashov, 2015).

On the contrary, the organization that deals with one issue in one area is “the Supply of Clean Drinking water for people in Fergana Valley” which it was founded by locals and the range of its relevant activities is aimed directly at locals. The existence of such initiatives, in its turn, is important for the cooperation process. The NGOs are in charge of getting society involved into the management activities, raising people’s awareness, etc. This objective was achieved successfully.

Overall, it can be concluded that assessment of particular contributions of NGOs is a very challenging task, as qualitative methods may be hardly applied. What is clear though is the fact that NGOs help to achieve progress in water management by lobbying authorities, raising

awareness and empowering local people. The case of the Chu-Talas is an example of successful cooperation and NGOs' engagement. At the same time, one should realise that the project's success is not exclusively based on the NGOs' involvement, there were other reasons for success, such as its small size and feasibility, a structured and well-developed programme, transparency, common desire to cooperate of conflicting parties. The viability of the project is proved by the fact that the project and its realization did not suffer from political events happened in 2010 in Kyrgyzstan.⁷

4. Conclusion

Central Asia is an example of a region where serious tensions over access and use of water resources have existed for an extended period of time. The Soviet rule brought unsustainable practices of water management that contributed to the aggravated problems of environmental degradation and water scarcity, such as the loss of the Aral Sea in its original form, and at the same time a central system of governance and sharing of resources in the region. With the independence era, new states had to seek solutions to aggravated problems on their own and finding common ground in interregional cooperation has become more challenging.

Yet, it is possible to refer to cases of inter-state cooperation in water management which can be called successful, such as the Chu-Talas project by Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. One would hope and suggest that the Chu-Talas project can be used as an example of best practice to solve other water conflicts and tensions which exist in the region.

The argument brought forward by this paper is a positive role of a new institutional actor, the NGOs, in this project. We carefully assessed factors which led to a successful implementation and maintenance of the project, which include a feasible size of the project, its accountability, concrete goals realised in a form of a project program and plan of actions, the readiness of authorities of both countries to overcome tensions and to look at the project in a larger but more pragmatic perspective, setting up appropriate institutional framework in a form of a permanent bilateral Commission, which proved to be a working mechanism for implementing this bilateral water management regime. NGOs, on one hand, rely and can

⁷The wave of uprisings and protests in Kyrgyz Republic that led to the removal and exile of the president Kurmanbek Bakiyev, provoked changes of governmental system from presidential republic to parliament and resulted in Kyrgyzstani parliamentary election during the same year.

exercise only a limited lobbying on government, but on the other, this push might be necessary to governments to continue on looking for compromises in conflicts over access to natural resources, such as water. They also empower local population by providing information, raising awareness and running projects which can support population's needs. In the case of the Central Asian countries, where state authorities had limited material and institutional resources, the emergence of a new institutional actor which is able to provide additional institutional and material support, is beneficial. It is also possible to argue that these actors, as shown in the case of the Chu-Talas cooperation, can reach out to their neighbouring counterparts and establish collaboration easier than the state institutions that do it at formal inter-state level. Thus, the negotiating skills of NGOs can be assessed as relatively high and positively influential on conflict prevention and establishment of cooperation.

It is also important to emphasise the importance of the context. From the analysis of the general development of institutions of civil society, it is possible to argue that cooperation of multiple stakeholders would have more chances for success. NGOs can be an active national institutional actor in the process, but it might be over ambitious to expect them to carry on the function of state lobbying on their own. Partially, this challenge is solved by the nature of NGOs themselves, they easily enter in a varied forms of associations and can appeal to an international civil society network that provides them with necessary resources. And it also means a vital role that international institutions have to play in the solving conflicts in the region, including those relevant to joint management of water resources.

Overall, non-governmental organizations are commonly recognized to be active players in dealing with political issues, even at intergovernmental level. However, in order to apply the positive experience of the Chu-Talasproject to other areas it is advisable that NGOs followsuch rules as transparency, active public engagement and cooperation with other sectors, such as business and government and international organizations.

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