Amu Darya Basin Network

Position paper

The Afghan–Central Asian water cooperation on management of the Amu Darya river:

Connecting experts and policymakers in the low lands

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I. Introduction

This position paper was issued as a result of the one-year process entitled 'Afghan - Central Asian water cooperation on management of the Amu Darya river: connecting experts and policymakers in the low lands', organised within the framework of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) by the EastWest Institute and Wageningen University. It aims to give an overview of challenges identified in the Amu Darya river basin during this process. It also contains concrete recommendations for regional and international experts and decision makers.

II. Challenges and observations

The challenges identified during the process include well-known overall challenges related to making progress with regard to basin-wide cooperation, and more specific challenges related to linking policymaking to the available expertise, regionally and globally. Factors that contribute to these challenges originate both within and outside the Amu Darya basin and are generic, political and technical in nature.

Overall challenges related to connecting experts and policymakers

Policymaking and scientific research take place in different time frames

Policy development and implementation processes are short-term and operational in nature. This is a structural challenge which is imposed on policymakers for a number of reasons, not least the fact that election terms are short (3-5 years) and the voting public is fickle at best. 'Impact or bust' is a common stance among policymakers.

The research community is driven by the need for credibility based on evidence acquired through longer-term analysis of trends, etc. This results in scientific research generally being undertaken with longer-term perspectives in mind. Despite this difference in perspective, policymakers still need evidence and substantive frameworks on which to base their policy decisions. Without evidence, policies are often weak, ineffective and prone to frequent change.

Synchronising these time frames and establishing working rhythms between policymakers and research community may help address these challenges in a very practical way. The lack of a connection between policymakers and scientific experts is, however, exacerbated by additional challenges. In particular, a two-tiered lack of capacity (human resources/time) on the part of policymakers means that even where efforts have been made to address the timing and synchronisation issues noted above, policymakers still do not have the human resources or time available to process vast amounts of scientific research and conclusions into operational and policy relevant practice, let alone assess the policy relevance of the research.

The challenges referred to above are slightly mystifying because governmental/institutional funding provides the resources for research to take place. There should therefore be nothing to prevent a more integrated approach to research and policy being implemented. It seems,

however, that despite their efforts, policymakers are not yet convinced and pay only limited attention to the tools they have available to influence change in the processes.

In general terms, a double commitment is required to change the situation. Research must make sense to policymakers (the responsibility of the research community) and funding must be provided in such a way as to give the research community a clear and consistent direction based on policy interests (the responsibility of the policymaker's donor arm).

Lack of transparency / difficulty in understanding each other's work and priorities
Policymakers and scientists find it difficult to establish links between their work in a sphere that lacks transparency and/or clarity. Policymakers could do a much better job of providing detailed and clear insight into their policies. This would help other policymakers to plan accordingly and would help scientists to ensure their work is relevant to policy. The nature of politics results in a high turnover of personnel at policymaking level. Consequently, policies undergo shifts – if not wholesale transformations – on an regular basis. This contributes to the lack of clarity about strategies and preferred policy options.

Similarly, scientific experts should try to communicate the policy-relevant elements of their research. This is difficult for one particular reason, namely that there is a big gap between policy researchers with an academic background in international relations, politics and law, and scientists who are knowledgeable on the technical aspects of water management (engineers, hydrologists, physicists, etc.). It is important that these two research communities combine their expertise and bridge this gap.

They also need to make sure that their research is readily available in a way that allows policymakers to draw operational conclusions from it. A great deal of policy-relevant research is being conducted and there is plenty of active campaigning by experts in the scientific community vis-à-vis policymakers, not only with a view to obtaining information passively on policy priorities but also in order to influence them. However, scientific researchers are not necessarily evaluated on the basis of their successes in reaching out to policymakers, and vice versa. As such, there is not always sufficient incentive to establish lasting and mutually beneficial links.

Box 1. Examples of advisory councils providing links between the scientific and policymaking communities

- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provides useful lessons of how an enormous number of scientists from across the globe cooperate to pool their scientific resources, to improve both scientific research itself and its policy relevance. The IPCC's Summary for Policymakers is a valuable example of how highly technical research can be boiled down to an operational to-do list to guide policymakers.
- The Flemish Strategic Advisory Council (SAC) advises on questions of policy strategy and on the main policy course of the Flemish government. It functions simultaneously in proactive, reactive and anticipatory ways. It sometimes acts as a sounding board for policymakers' undeveloped policy ideas. It has 20 members: 10 independent experts and 10 representatives from civil society. The members are appointed by the Flemish government, but function fully independently from it. The SAC meets once a month in plenary format. It is supported by a permanent secretariat, which coordinates its work.
- The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) is an independent, scientific advisory body set up by the German federal government. It analyses and reports on global environment and development problems, reviews and evaluates national and international research, provides early warning of new issue areas, identifies gaps in research and initiates new research, elaborates recommendations for action and research, raises public awareness and heightens the media profile of global change issues. The WBGU prepares special reports and policy papers for the German government on request or on its own initiative. It has a secretariat that provides scientific and logistical support to the Council's members. The WGBU has ten members of staff, including six scientists from the field of economics, climate and energy, media and public relations, technology and innovation, and political science.
- In the Netherlands, the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) advises the government on issues facing society. The government can use these recommendations to adjust existing policies and develop new ones, or as support for decision making. The WRR uses scientific knowledge as a basis for its analysis. In this way, it forms a bridge between scientific expertise and policy.

Specific challenges from within the Amu Darya Basin region

Slowly growing culture of cooperation

Since 1992, the Central Asian states, excluding Afghanistan, have been involved in a process of formal agreements designed to tackle the transboundary challenges related to the water resources of the Amu Darya. To date, however, this has not resulted in a stable and sustainable solution for the diverging interests of upstream and downstream riparian states. Despite the formal structures existing to tackle the issues, there is still only limited communication between policymakers and scientific experts within the basin.

Political will and commitment by parties at the highest level are important preconditions for successful cooperation in all aspects of water-sharing within the Amu Darya basin. In the current political reality, the presidents of all the riparian states have the political power to drive a process of positive change. To a large extent, lower level policymakers and scientific

experts will benefit from political leadership which creates the conditions for improved contact between experts, policymakers and other stakeholders. Progress on such transboundary cooperation cannot, however, be achieved overnight. Instead, it is a process of incremental benefits.

A number of seemingly insurmountable challenges complicate progress towards better cooperation. The ongoing tension, notably between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan surrounding the construction of the Rogun dam, has intensified and threatens to escalate in a context of regional environmental challenges, border disputes and a lack of inter-state cooperation, especially with regard to water management issues. There is a need for effective intra-regional and extra-regional policy responses to avoid such conflicts.

Information deficit, particularly in Afghanistan

Data sharing between *all* riparian states is an absolute necessity to ensure progress in transboundary water cooperation in the Amu Darya. However, information can only be shared if it is available. Important data and information are often dispersed, heterogeneous and incomplete and therefore rarely comparable and conducive to making objective policy decisions. At the same time, many public, semi-public and private institutes produce data without sufficient means and guidelines for exchanging, gathering, standardising, summarising and using it optimally.

Within the Amu Darya basin, including key riparian state Afghanistan, there is a need for reliable and easily accessible data on the status of the surface water resources, the tributaries, the associated wetlands and groundwater, and fluctuations. It is also important to have reliable data on the use of the water resources and on land use. This information need is met to a certain extent, but there continues to be an enormous data gap.

In the case of Afghanistan, the Ministry of Energy and Water drafted plans in 2007 which stated that specific programmes would be implemented in Afghanistan to establish the information needed on annual run-off, the estimated amount currently being utilised and the amount the country could reasonably expect to use. Currently available resources, such as the Watershed Atlas of Afghanistan, are a valuable collection of resources, but much of the currently available data originated in the 1960s and 1970s. There is still a substantial data collection challenge in Afghanistan.

Promising examples of data collection and sharing do exist. Participants in the discussions of the Amu Darya Basin network drew attention to initiatives such as Central Asia Water Info and a number of other initiatives (Box 2).

Box 2. Data and information exchange in the Amu Darya Basin

- 'CA Water Info – The Portal of Knowledge for Water and Environmental Issues in Central Asia' was created within the framework of the Central Asia Regional Water Information Base (CAREWIB) Project funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and being implemented by the Scientific Information Centre of the Interstate Coordination Water Commission (SIC-ICWC) , jointly with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and UNEP/GRID-Arendal (www.cawater-info.net/).
- UNECE is implementing a programme entitled 'Regional dialogue and cooperation on water resources management in Central Asia'. One of the priorities of the programme is to involve Afghanistan in the joint management of shared water resources in the Amu Darya basin as well as at the wider regional level. The programme is likely to result in increased sharing of more effectively collected data (www.unece.org/speca/).
- The EU-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) project, co-sponsored by the Open Society Institute (OSI), the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, and the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office and implemented by two organisations from Europe (FRIDE and CEPS) in cooperation with Central Asian partners, sought to scrutinise EU policy towards Central Asia in the fields of energy (including water management), democracy, human rights, security and education. One key aspect of EUCAM was to inform policymakers on the importance of EU involvement in the region and of the relevant challenges, and to advise them on how to strengthen the European approach to the region in the fields mentioned above. Within the project a large network was created consisting of an expert working group from Europe and Central Asia. Besides numerous policy briefs and working papers the project concluded with a final report aimed at EU policymakers (IntoEurasia – www.eucentralasia.eu).

Lack of human and technical capacity

Causes of the above-mentioned lack of data are the absence of technical expertise, poor staffing, and poor management when it comes to generating and using the data for collaborative purposes. This capacity is possibly most lacking in Afghanistan where it results in a reluctance to pursue greater regional cooperation for fear of being in a weak bargaining position. Nevertheless, as the following examples show, more and more attention is being paid to enhancing local capacity:

- With the support of the Canadian International Development Agency, ICWC established a Training Centre that serves as a platform for the exchange of experiences and for the capacity enhancement of water specialists and specialists from other sectors.

- In the 'River21' programme, students from Wageningen University and from Central Asia are given an assignment by the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (which is now part of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation). Water used to come under Transport, Public Works and Water Management, which is now part of the new Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment] comprising a joint research project which results in a field trip to the region.

  The idea is that such initiatives increase capacity and create trust between students.

Specific challenges from outside the Amu Darya basin

Failure to put a basin-wide approach into practice

Central Asia is usually considered to consist of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In the context of the transboundary water resources of the Amu Darya basin, this traditional grouping is insufficient. As a key riparian state, Afghanistan needs to be fully incorporated into all considerations relating to the basin. For a number of reasons, this is not yet the case as regards much of the donor community, and donors' policymaking structures do not always reflect this geographic reality. This creates a problem with putting the basin-wide approach into practice.

Institutional rigidity, different priorities and outright competition do not provide for optimal understanding or prioritisation of the basin-wide aspects of issues of contention related to the Amu Darya basin. The limited participation of policymakers in the conference calls of this project was indicative of how difficult it is to generate interest in the subject.

Afghanistan has not yet been fully included in any decision making on the management of water resources in Amu Darya River. Nevertheless, as most discussants agreed, Afghanistan's inclusion in regional water structures should begin at a technical level. This would help to improve Afghanistan's hydro data and encourage interstate information sharing. It would also encourage contact between experts.

One of the priorities of the UNECE programme 'Regional dialogue and cooperation on water resources management in Central Asia' is to involve Afghanistan in the joint management of shared water resources in the Amu Darya basin as well as at the wider regional level. In addition, the Joint Progress Report on the first three years of the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, published in June 2010 by the Council of the European Union and the European Commission, identifies Afghanistan as one of the key issues to which the EU must pay greater attention in its cooperation with Central Asia.

Lack of donor coordination

In many river basins transboundary cooperation is initiated and financed by international donors. Although their role is limited, it can still be significant. Donors can support the conclusion of an international treaty and the resolution of the underlying issues and promote action on the ground. They can also support social, economic and/or political change in the basin and provide continuing support after conclusion of an agreement.

Central Asia and Afghanistan have long been on the international community's radar. There is no shortage of donor interest in the region in general and for environmental challenges like the sustainable use of the Amu Darya water resources. The Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, UNDP, UNECE, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the International Monetary Fund, the Islamic Development Bank and many other organisations are active in the region.

The huge number of projects and initiatives and actors involved make it difficult to operate in a coordinated manner and this represents a challenge as regards efficiency and effectiveness.

The above-mentioned lack of clarity or simply insufficient communication of goals, objectives and ongoing projects make it extremely difficult to obtain an overall picture of what the donor community contributes as a whole. Although donor coordination on water at national level does to some extent exist in some Central Asian countries, there is still a clear need for more effective mechanisms for coordination and prioritisation.

There are examples of coordination among donors, e.g. UNDP's Central Asia Water Sector Coordination Initiative (CAWSCI) platform. The goal of the platform is to map activities of the various international and regional partners involved in the water sector in Central Asia with the aim of supporting information exchange, and thus facilitate coordination amongst partners, projects and processes. CAWSCI's long-term vision is a synchronised water sector with complementary interventions ultimately adding value for Central Asian countries and populations, with jointly defined scopes, work divisions, roles and responsibilities among international and regional actors, as well as concrete collaboration in selected projects, processes or initiatives.

The Third Aral Sea Basin Programme (ASBP-3) or the Programme of action on providing assistance to the countries of the Aral Sea Basin for the period of 2011-2015, which was drawn up by Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving Aral Sea (EC IFAS) in close cooperation with the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination and Interstate Commission for Sustainable Development, and which involved national experts and donors, is the main long-term action programme in the region. Its mandate comes from the Heads of State of Central Asia. The objective of the ASBP-3 is to implement joint activities and programmes to address the Aral Sea crisis, and to strengthen cooperation through focused activities at national, regional and international levels which are intended to improve the environmental, social and economic situation, sustainable development and the wellbeing of the people in the Aral Sea Basin. On 15 December 2010, the Board of the IFAS reviewed the draft of the ASBP-3 and submitted it for approval at the highest political level to IFAS member States. Within the ASBP-3, the Statement by the Donors and Implementing Agencies has been adopted. The Statement confirms that donors fully support the Programme and are ready to work together with the Executive Committee of IFAS and the Governments of IFAS member States in its implementation.

III. The way forward: recommendations and areas for action

An assessment of the challenges identified shows that there is an enormous variety of areas for action in regional water cooperation. To this end, incorporating Afghanistan into the discussions on the Amu Darya is appropriate and necessary. In addition, there is a need for local ownership and input and for engagement in the region in more concrete ways. Although Central Asian and Afghan policymakers ultimately make 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 policymakers

Researchers and policymakers can only bridge the gap between them if there is some sort of mutual consultation channel or an intermediate actor that allows for a double filtering mechanism: from policy strategies to scientific research support needs and from research to policy-relevant conclusions.

A number of actors can fulfil that filtering role. First of all, researchers themselves need to learn how to communicate their research results to policymakers. Often, policymakers will not read more than 2,000 words of an article. Therefore, researchers need to learn to formulate their views in an effective and concise manner. Consequently, a 'policy brief' format that explains the matter and concludes with tangible recommendations is a format researchers should aim for if they want to communicate effectively to policy communities. This, of course, would need to be connected to an advocacy strategy.

Other mechanisms include advisory bodies. An ad hoc or permanent advisory council for specific policy domains can be set up and funded to assess research support needs and policy options. Existing NGOs and think tanks should also aim at facilitating connections between the scientific community and policy in areas where they fail to do so themselves. The advisory councils in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and other countries already mentioned above can serve as a model.

Networks like the DPRN supporting the Amu Darya Basin Network (ADBN) are equally important: researchers could send their reports to policymakers and policymakers could similarly make clear which issues need to be addressed and researched, thus strengthening expert-to-expert, policymaker-to-policymaker and expert-to-policymaker contacts. Specifically, networks' engagement could focus on:

- a **permanent advisory function through** research support and guidance for policy coordination in areas relevant to land use, hydrology, integrated water management, international water law, and rural development;
- **multilingual training of students, farmers and professionals** in all matters relating to basin-wide management of the Amu Darya's water resources.

One way of addressing such needs could be to establish an all-inclusive regional centre of excellence of sorts. Such a centre could become a key driver in linking policymakers with researchers, and could play a unique role in meeting current and future capacity needs in the management of the shared water resources in the region. The role of such a centre of excellence could be two-fold:

- As an advisory body, the centre could coordinate the policy-relevant analysis of data in the river basin, coordinate projects within the Amu Darya basin (cf. CAWSCI, see above), provide summaries of research reports, translate reports and other documents from and into English and the Central Asian languages (Kyrgyz, Pashtu, Tajik, Turkmen, Urdu and Uzbek), create an effective and transparent tool for sharing data between experts and policymakers, and create a database of scientific projects and academic articles (cf. CAWater-Info; CAWSCI);

- As a training centre, it could facilitate the development of high level technical, analytical, communication and other relevant skills on the management of shared water resources, resulting in greater capacity within the region.

The vision would be to become a go-to point for all regional and international policymakers, scientific researchers and other interested individuals for the collection of publicly available up-to-date interdisciplinary data, scientific and policy relevant research, and capacity development relating to the sustainable use and development of, and cooperation on, shared water resources in Central Asia and Afghanistan. The network of graduates can contribute to the long-term cooperation process over shared water resources.

Enhancing cooperation within the Amu Darya Basin region

Scientists and policymakers should work together to emphasise the benefits of cooperation, as opposed to focusing on areas of contention. There are real economic benefits to be reaped from transboundary cooperation within the Amu Darya basin. Scientists and policymakers from the region and donor countries should first focus on optimising the generation of such basin-wide benefits and second on sharing those benefits in a manner that is agreed as fair. These benefits will include benefits for the environment, improved production in the agriculture and energy sectors, and more generally, increased trust between stakeholders, which could potentially spill over into other areas of cooperation.

Improving data and information exchange

More political commitment on the part of the regional stakeholders and more support on the part of the donor community should be geared towards strengthening and therefore possibly pooling initiatives like the ones noted above. As a first step, improvements should be made to the coordination of existing data collection and sharing frameworks. Where these initiatives overlap, the overlap 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. Comparability of data, regular updates and data collection methodologies are all important factors to be borne in mind.

Incorporating a basin-wide approach

Existing formal frameworks of cooperation on water in the Amu Darya basin should aim to incorporate Afghanistan fully as a partner. Such incorporation is likely to be incremental and can be achieved by providing observer status first and then by gradually building up trust. Donor nations that often fund frameworks of cooperation should consider an approach which leads to the inclusion of Afghanistan in Amu Darya water cooperation projects.

IV. Concluding remarks

This position paper aimed to give an overview of the challenges identified during the one-year process 'Afghan - Central Asian water cooperation on management of the Amu Darya river: connecting experts and policymakers in the low lands', organised within the framework of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) by the EastWest Institute and Wageningen University. Lack of capacity, trust, information exchange, donor coordination, and cooperation between policymakers and experts are all interrelated factors that contribute to the stagnation of the cooperation process in the Amu Darya river basin.

An assessment of the identified challenges shows that there is an enormous variety of areas for action in regional water cooperation. Incorporating Afghanistan into the discussions on the Amu Darya, local ownership and engagement, donor coordination and capacity development can play constructive roles in the cooperation process.

The value of the Amu Darya Basin Network process

The linking process is an important part of the Afghan-Central Asian water cooperation project. Therefore, creating an Amu Darya Basin Network and the subsequent cooperation and information exchange between its members have played a key role within the project. The Amu Darya Basin Network is a solid network consisting of policymakers, decision makers, rural development and water sectors experts from the Netherlands, Belgium, Afghanistan, the Central Asian region, and all actual and potential stakeholders, also from the donor community. Overlapping interests and activities between the network members generated greater cooperation and information exchange. The members continue to collaborate on a number of projects, linking up with counterparts in the region. The network's online platform became and continues to be the repository for research materials and all project documentation.

Relevance to Dutch and Belgian development policies

The Netherlands and Belgium are home to a large number of policymakers, as well as academic and other experts that specialise geographically in Afghanistan and Central Asia and in water cooperation as a theme. However, these institutions and individuals often work in isolation or with suboptimal coordination. The projects focus on local or meso level water infrastructure rehabilitation and development (such as dams and rehabilitation of existing or new irrigation systems). A good example is the Netherlands' choice to focus on rural

development, through small-scale projects to dig or restore irrigation channels, construct new canals and water reservoirs and take measures to protect river banks. Belgium participates in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and is funding a series of multilateral projects primarily focusing on rural development. However, neither Dutch nor Belgian policies indicate a regional focus in their Afghanistan development-related work.

While the project clearly focused on the Netherlands' and Belgium's engagement in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries, the promotion of basin-wide cooperation has slipped down their agenda, due to the massive security challenges they are facing, which are of more immediate political relevance. These are certainly important, however, as the report by the Scientific Council for Government Policy reflects 'the developing countries would benefit more from long-term perspectives'. These perspectives could be reflected in capacity development projects like the establishment of the Regional Centre of Excellence. Such a centre could become a key driver in enhancing regional cooperation in the longer term and meeting current and future capacity needs in the management of the shared water resources in the region.

Process organisers:

This paper has been written for the "Amu Darya basin" process, which is being carried out within the framework of the Development Policy Review Network. *DPRN (www.dprn.nl) is a network of Dutch and Flemish development experts whose aim is to stimulate informed debate on development policies and enhance cooperation and synergy between scientists, policymakers, practitioners and entrepreneurs in the field of international cooperation. DPRN has a web portal which provides searchable access to development expertise in the Netherlands and Belgium (www.global-connections.nl) and a repository for publications of Dutch development organisations (www.Search4Dev.nl).*