



## **Bridging gaps and connecting experts: the linkages of water, scientific collaboration and regional security**

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***Abstract:** Challenges and opportunities related to water remain high on the agenda of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the world's largest regional security organization. Water has for many years been one of the main areas of OSCE engagement, including in Central Asia. Supporting joint research and sharing of knowledge among researchers, practitioners and policy-makers from neighboring countries is a vital foundation for trustful and sustainable water co-operation that benefits overall regional stability.*

**Keywords:** OSCE, transboundary waters, water management, Central Asia, security, co-operation.

### **Introduction**

The OSCE was initiated in the early 1970s, during the cold war, as a negotiation forum between East and West. Today, the organization comprises 57 member countries, named participating States, on three continents: North America, Europe and Asia. Since its beginnings, the OSCE has followed a comprehensive approach to security that embraces three complementary dimensions, which together are viewed as essential in meeting the goals of the organization: the politico-military dimension, the economic and environmental dimension, and the human dimension. OSCE activities on linkages between environment and security stretch from water management, hazardous waste to climate change, sustainable energy and involving the public in decisions affecting the environment. This article will explain the OSCE's engagement in water management, and the rationale for its support to the regional e-journal "Integrated Water Resources Management in Central Asia".

### **The OSCE's engagement for sustainable water management**

When it comes to water, the entry points for the OSCE are clear: First, water is a strategic resource and an essential element of national and regional security. Second, over 150 rivers and lakes are shared by two or more of the OSCE's 57 participating States. Water scarcity, lack of access to water, and pollution are potential triggers for tensions and conflicts. But water can also be a source of co-operation: Jointly managing water can lead to improved relations among countries and communities, and enhance security, prosperity and the protection of the environment. Consequently, water is an essential element of the OSCE's work and Secretary General Lamberto Zannier has taken a leading role in promoting the water-security agenda. [1]

In many watersheds of the OSCE region, the riparian countries have established joint bodies and long-standing and trustful co-operation. But there are still transboundary water basins that lack an agreement, have insufficient arrangements or no effective implementation mechanism. This could potentially lead to disputes. Water can also be a security challenge on the domestic level, threatening socio-economic development and political stability.

The OSCE has a long track record of supporting countries to jointly manage water resources sustainably. Most of these activities are implemented in the framework of the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) Initiative and in close cooperation with the UNECE<sup>1</sup>[2]. One impressive success story of water cooperation in the OSCE area dates back to 2002 when the riparian countries signed the Framework Agreement on the Sava River Basin in South-Eastern Europe, the first development-oriented multilateral agreement signed after the Dayton Peace Agreement. The first meeting of the Interim Sava Basin Commission took place at the OSCE premises in Vienna in April 2003. In Eastern Europe, the OSCE and the UNECE have been facilitating for eight years negotiations between Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova that culminated in the signing of the Dniester River Basin Treaty in 2012. The Dniester river basin is also a focus area of an OSCE-led ENVSEC project on climate change and security, financed by the Instrument for Stability of the European Commission and the Austrian Development Agency. In the South Caucasus, since 2010 the OSCE in collaboration with UNECE has been facilitating several rounds of bilateral consultations between Azerbaijan and Georgia for the development of an agreement on the Kura River Basin.

In Central Asia, the OSCE has been supporting water co-operation for more than a decade. Since 2003, the OSCE together with UNECE has supported the establishment and operation of the bilateral water commission of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on the Chu and Talas Rivers. The first project “Promoting the Creation of the Commission for the Chu and Talas between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan” (Chu-Talas I) was implemented from 2003-2007 by the OSCE together with UNECE and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific Region (UNESCAP) and supported the establishment of a permanent commission in July 2006. Chu-Talas I also included the support to an agreement on how to define costs for exploitation and maintenance of the water

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<sup>1</sup> The Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC) is a partnership of six international organizations – the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Regional Environment Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as an associated partner – with specialized, but complementary mandates and expertise, that provides an integrated response to environment and security challenges. See [www.envsec.org](http://www.envsec.org).

management infrastructure. A follow-up OSCE-UNECE project “Development of Cooperation on the Chu and Talas Rivers” (Chu-Talas II) was finalized in 2011. Its results included the broadening of the bilateral cooperation, an improved understanding of the two countries on the available water resources, improved access to information as well as plans for the future involvement of stakeholders. A recent ENVSEC project implemented by UNECE, UNDP and OSCE analyzed and developed plans for adaptation to climate change. It contributed to an increased adaptive capacity of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and of the Chu-Talas Commission to ongoing and future climate change impacts, helping to prevent possible negative effects on regional security.

In addition, the OSCE field operations advance good water governance through training courses on IWRM, support to Water User Associations and river basin councils, and promotion of civil society participation. Some examples from Central Asia:

- The OSCE Programme Office in Astana has since 2009 a Memorandum of Understanding with the Executive Directorate of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) and supported a series of Roundtable Discussions and trainings to enhance the professional knowledge and skills of Water Basin Council members. These activities were held at the Training Centre established with the support of the OSCE Programme Office in Astana at Korkyt Ata State University. In November 2014, the Office co-organized together with the Kazakh-German University and in co-operation with Kazakhstan’s Foreign Ministry the first national forum on effective water resources management and co-operation between the government, universities and industries.
- The OSCE Office in Tajikistan supports Tajikistan’s dialogue with Afghanistan on water management, hydrological and ecological monitoring, disaster risk management, and climate change. In 2013-14, the Office and UNECE organized several workshops and meetings for Tajik and Afghan authorities, experts, students and civil society. In addition, both organizations supported two expeditions on the Pyanj River with the purpose to collect and share data on the state of hydro-meteorological situations along the river and develop a set of recommendations. The OSCE Office in Tajikistan is also engaged in awareness-raising activities on efficient transboundary water use principles in the regions neighboring the Kyrgyz Republic.
- In the Kyrgyz Republic, the OSCE Centre in Bishkek worked jointly with GIZ, WFP and the Mayor’s Office of Isfana for the construction of a new drinking water supply system for Isfana city, Batken province. It was opened in September 2014 and allows over 1.400 households to have access to clean drinking water. The issue of water accessibility had plagued several communities for years and led to inter-ethnic tension and a breakdown in friendly relations between the respective village administrations. The project included training opportunities on

conflict prevention mechanisms and efficient drinking water supply management for the multi-ethnic communities of Isfana city and its environs.

Knowing of the important role an active and well-informed civil society can play as a partner of the government to reduce environment and security risks, the OSCE has over a decade supported the establishment of a network of currently 57 Aarhus Centres in 14 countries, including 22 centres in 4 countries of Central Asia. They serve as a link between the government and non-governmental organizations, providing a platform for coalition-building and partnership among NGOs in addressing environmental issues. Among their wide range of activities they play a key role in facilitating participation and access to information on water issues.

The Swiss and Serbian OSCE Chairmanships together identified sustainable water management as a priority in their joint 2014-15 workplan. This year, the Economic and Environmental Forum (EEF) is dedicated to water governance. The EEF is the OSCE's main annual event dealing with economic and environmental aspects of security and is bringing together governments, civil society, international organizations, the private sector and academia [3]. These deliberations and the strong mandate given to the Organization through last year's Basel Ministerial Council decision on disaster risk reduction firmly put the topics of disaster risk reduction and water governance and their security implications on the agenda of the OSCE to achieve enhanced stability and peace. With these actions, the OSCE contributes also to global processes such as the development of the post-2015 development agenda and the climate change negotiations, as part of its role as a regional security organization under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter.

### **The linkages of water, security and scientific collaboration**

Researchers, the business community and foreign policy makers are increasingly aware of the risks water crises can pose to security, and the additional stress put on water resources by climate change. How can joint research and exchange of knowledge contribute to sustainable water governance and regional stability?

First of all, exchange of research results among riparian countries can bridge knowledge gaps. Reliable data and knowledge on precipitation, water volumes and water withdrawal are a prerequisite for making informed decisions about water allocation and use. Such knowledge is also needed to reduce Central Asia's vulnerability to the risk of water-related natural disasters like floods and mudslides. Scientific research provides analysis of these data, as well as of policies and development strategies related to water. Access to such evidence-based research is important for policy-makers to make well-informed decisions, but also for the public to be less subject to unjustified fears. The neutral and fact-based information stemming from scientific collaboration can reduce mistrust and prevent misleading information. In many river basins, joint monitoring and data

collection have proven a first step to build up confidence among the riparians and initiate cooperation. Access to relevant information and research results avoids misperceptions and increases trust - among riparian states as well as by the public in government decisions.

Second, joint publications and exchange of knowledge among experts from different disciplines and sectors allow the better understanding of the needs and constraints of all relevant stakeholders and the identification of joint interests and opportunities. Such multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral approaches are crucial for effective water management, in science as in practice. They require the collaboration and exchange of researchers of different disciplines, and of researchers, practitioners from different professional communities and policy-makers. Only such approaches can ensure the comprehensive knowledge that is needed to tackle water-related challenges effectively.

Third, joint research and scientific collaboration contributes to long-term benefits for sustainable water management and regional security, as it leads to capacity development and strengthened networks among the participating researchers. This increasing knowledge and scientific advancement provides an improved basis for policy decisions. In addition, such academic networks often sustain even in times of crisis when political networks fall apart and therefore fulfill an important role for continuous dialogue and mutual understanding. This effect is even bigger when it includes targeted and joint capacity development of the future generation of experts, students and young researchers. These linkages between water, security and scientific collaboration are the reasons why the OSCE as a security organization has been supporting water dialogue among practitioners and researchers in Central Asia in various forms, and now is supporting the establishment of this regional, scientific journal on "IWRM in Central Asia". We are convinced that the e-journal addresses some of the key conditions necessary to foster water co-operation and sustainable water management in this region:

- It is regional, improving networks among researchers from Central Asia and Afghanistan, but also cross-regional, as the bilingual set-up allows exchange with researchers from other regions.
- It provides a platform for exchange of knowledge, policies and experiences related to IWRM in Central Asia - knowledge that is of benefit for all Central Asian states and can improve policies. With its cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary scope, the journal brings different professional communities together and addresses also readers beyond the academic audience.
- As an online and open-access journal, it contributes to increasing access to knowledge and the transparency of policies.
- It contributes to capacity development on sustainable water management by peer-review of articles and support to young researchers.

- Finally, with seven partnering institutions in all five Central Asian states and Afghanistan, the journal is based on regional ownership and local expertise.

All these features are important elements for strengthening regional expertise, ownership and confidence among Central Asian water experts. They make this journal a valuable endeavor not only in supporting IWRM in Central Asia, but also in contributing to regional development and stability. The mechanisms and objectives of the journal reflect many elements of the OSCE's approach to foster security through water co-operation; therefore we will continue our engagement for this promising project and wish it every success.

In concluding, it is worth re-iterating that IWRM can help to address vital security concerns across all OSCE regions and to prevent growing divisions and deterioration of trust among the OSCE participating States.

### **References**

- [1] For an overview on OSCE water-related activities, see [www.osce.org/water](http://www.osce.org/water).
- [2] Libert, Bo (2015): The UNECE Water Convention and the development of transboundary cooperation in the Chu-Talas, Kura, Drin and Dniester River basins. In: *Water International*, 40:1, 168-182, DOI: 10.1080/02508060.2014.990202.
- [3] See [www.osce.org/secretariat/106406](http://www.osce.org/secretariat/106406).