



Building bridges among scientists, decision-makers and the civil society

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The tragedy of the Aral Sea left the countries of the basin to cope with grave environmental, economic, social, and health problems. Achieving environmental sustainability in the Aral Sea basin requires major, long-term efforts at the national and regional levels. What give special urgency to this task is the new challenges looming large on the horizon. Population growth and economic development result in increased demand for water and might aggravate environmental pollution. Recent studies and modeling of the effects of climate change forecast changes in weather patterns and river flows that are expected to reduce the amount of water available in the vegetation season. The established practice of water resources management that is already under considerable strain today may not be able to cope with the challenges of tomorrow.

Many of these challenges can only be effectively addressed through regional action. To resolve disputes and strengthen regional cooperation, decision-makers need to find novel, mutually agreeable, compromise solutions to existing and emerging regional problems rather than to stick to long-term entrenched positions. This would require regular, intensive work in the framework of regional bodies.

Broader use of information and analysis for decision making would further strengthen the work of these bodies. All IFAS¹ decision making bodies – the Inter-State Commission on Sustainable Development, the Inter-State Commission on Water Coordination, the Executive Committee of IFAS and the IFAS Board - would profit from higher quality decision support.

Efforts to strengthen trust among IFAS member states reinvigorate the functioning of the Fund and improve the effectiveness of its organizations and institutions are needed at both the political and the expert level. Regular, well-prepared meetings of IFAS decision-making bodies and active participation of every member state would offer an opportunity for governments to listen to each other with an open mind and search for mutually acceptable, cooperative solutions. This requires first of all political will.

But political will alone is not sufficient. A result oriented high-level political dialogue can only be started on the basis of reliable, mutually agreed data and impartial and professional analysis. It is the responsibility of the experts and scientists to provide such

¹ IFAS: International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea

data and analysis, to develop innovative ideas and develop viable, creative solutions to existing and emerging challenges. They can only do it through an intensive and open dialogue, by sharing their ideas and listening to others' views. While Central Asian experts and scientists publish quite a few writings on water and environmental issues in their own country, the number of publications on regional issues in regional journals and on regional Internet portals in English and Russian is more limited. Increasing the number of regional publications would facilitate the exchange of information and ideas and a productive dialogue between researchers and practitioners both within and outside of Central Asia.

An authoritative, peer-reviewed electronic journal that is now being launched upon the initiative of the Kazakh-German University offers a much-needed framework for scientific exchange on water and environmental problems in the Aral Sea Basin. The success of this initiative depends first of all on the willingness of the authors to accept that any writing published in the journal must meet the highest scientific standards, must be supported by reliable data and provide an objective, unbiased analysis. They must accept that the journal cannot be the place for politically motivated disputes or attempts to defend the entrenched positions of this or that party. The Editorial Board should require respect for universally accepted principles and approaches, like integrated water resources management, in all publications prepared for the journal.

A regular flow of impartial, objective, scientific analysis of water and environmental issues is expected to assist policy makers in seeing problems in their complexity, learn about the interests and legitimate needs of their partners, get acquainted with international best practices and with solutions offered by the latest achievement of science and technology, understand how relevant provisions of international water law could help resolve disputes and discover innovative, cooperative ways to address existing and emerging challenges.

The task to publish such a journal is not easy. Water and environmental problems are often over-politicized in Central Asia – as in many other regions of the world. Objective, unbiased analysis might not always fully concur with or back the position of this or that party. What the journal should strive to achieve first of all is the broad recognition of its integrity and credibility, which will make it an authoritative voice in water and environmental issues.

The Kazakh-German University is not alone in its efforts to support regional cooperation in the field of water resources management and sustainable development through better information management and analysis. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the United Nations Environmental Programme, the World Bank, the German International Development Agency, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and their partners are providing much needed support to the more efficient management of water and environmental data at the national and regional levels. Comprehensive, agreed, easy to interpret data, accessible to policy makers, the academic community and

the broader public alike through the portals of a regional information space combined with high-quality scientific analysis published by an authoritative, peer reviewed journal would offer a solid basis for a multi stakeholder dialogue on water and environmental issues in Central Asia and help provide improved decision support to IFAS.

The journal should become a bridge between Central Asian scientist and practitioners, decision makers, the civil society and the interested public, helping them to work together in the interest of the whole region. And it should facilitate the involvement of the best minds of the international academic community, international donors and everybody who is ready and able to help address the huge challenges faced by the countries of the Aral Sea basin.