

SMALL BASIN COUNCILS: linking water governance, water diplomacy and water sector reforms in Central Asia



Background

Water resources management within river basins is by nature a nested system where water is allocated from higher-level hydrological units and watersheds to those at the gradually lower levels and scales (FAO, 2017; Darghouth et al, 2008). In fact, the bigger the river system the more nested and complex it is. Hence, it is essentially hierarchical involving multiple operational levels and scales until the water ultimately reaches the end-user. It is widely agreed nowadays that in the past, the integrity of such systems would be most frequently compromised by the prevalence of administrative boundaries, engineering dominance and top-down decision-making with water management considered the exclusive domain of the government (Davidson et al, 2015; Russell and Baumann, 2009). However, this state of affairs despite being classical, had repeatedly led to chronic inefficiencies and underperformances on the part of the governments to properly handle water resources and the distributive infrastructure without engaging more closely with other important stakeholders. This had been a consistent trend and phenomenon in the modern era that eventually led to water management crisis worldwide and the massive urge for alternative ways of approaching this important domain of economic activity that are more integrated, inclusive and smart (Vermillion & Sagardoy, 2004).

This is not peculiar and limited to water management only, however. The public services domain, as whole, had been long experiencing similar challenges that ultimately resulted in the overall paradigm shift from government to governance (Frahm & Martin, 2009). Therefore, governance as a relatively new phenomenon is closely linked to recent trends by the governments worldwide to make public services more inclusive, participatory, responsive and effective by bringing them under the direct control and influence of those who use them. Parents-

centered schools in public education and or patient-led clinical governance in health care are probably the best examples of this phenomenon worldwide in the attempt to transform national public services domain from being exclusively state-dominated towards more user-driven and customer-centered modalities (Krahmann, 2003; Coward, R. 2010). Coining this as the New Public Management paradigm management research suggests that this “forms part of a drive to place public services within framework similar to that governing private profit-making businesses” (Robson, 2002). As a result, a whole range of service-based sectors in the state-run public domain that involve customers are increasingly decentralized, deregulated and made accountable to the public at large in order to ensure more responsive and effective service performance. For that matter the water resources management domain is no different and is currently much inspired and driven by a number of fast spreading sustainable development frameworks and paradigms such as Good Governance, Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and Water-Energy-Food Nexus (FAO, 2014; Benson et al, 2015; Smith and Clausen, 2015; Narain et al, 2018; Meyer et al, 2019). Fully backed and supported by major international development aid agencies these have been increasingly used as the guiding principles to inform, shape and carry out agricultural and water sector reforms throughout much of the developed and developing world including in Central Asia. What makes water governance as part of the broader environmental governance domain different and more complicated from the governance of other public services is the transboundary dimension that adds considerable pressures, challenges and limitations due to the existence of administrative, economic and political boundaries especially those that physically separate countries. It is normally difficult to design and introduce governance schemes inside countries

and it is even more so in a cross-country setting, which is exactly the situation with internationally shared water resources and watercourses.

The most recent update of the transboundary freshwater basins database puts the total number of major international river basins in the world to 310 with the Aral Sea basin (ASB) being one of them.

All these cover 47% of the Earth's land surface and inhabited by 52% of the global population. In the Aral Sea basin that also includes Afghanistan, 80% of countries' total areas are located within international river basins (Melissa McCracken & Aaron T. Wolf, 2019). For the upstream countries, the percentage is even higher, almost 100%.

TABLE 1

Share of ASB states' territories within international river basins
(adapted from McCracken & Wolf, 2019)

Country	Country area, km ²	Total int'l basin area per country, km ²	% of country's area in int'l river basins
Afghanistan	641,800	641,500	100.0%
Kazakhstan	2,841,200	1,804,400	63.5%
Kyrgyzstan	199,200	176,200	88.5%
Tajikistan	142,000	142,000	100.0%
Turkmenistan	555,100	227,400	41.0%
Uzbekistan	449,500	384,700	85.6%
Mean			79.8%

Quite remarkably that all six ASB countries as listed above can be easily split into two distinct groups based on their hydrological locations – a group of three upstream countries (Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and that of three downstream countries (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Also quite distinct about these two groups is that those in the upstream tend to be economically and historically more vulnerable and poor than those in the downstream. Such economic implications of the hydrological location of riparian states sharing

the same river basin are not uncommon and have been frequently referred to in the transboundary water management literature as the late developer's problem that the upstream basin countries are most likely to be affiliated with. This also provides the grounds for policy researchers to explain the reluctance on the part of upstream countries to join the existing international water conventions and their key principles of equitable use and no-harm as something that favor more the downstream countries (Wegerich & Olsson, 2010).

Overview of water sector reforms in CA countries

The common feature of water sector reforms in most countries of Central Asia is that much effort in

the early years had been around bringing them in line with the faster moving land reforms. The highly iterative nature of the latter in an attempt to find the right size and ownership models would keep water reforms under constant pressure to adjust time and



again. As a result, the national water agencies would inevitably fail in those early years to properly work out, lead and coordinate their overall reform effort. Not in the least, this was also due to the presence of multiple international development aid providers in the region whose support in those early years was quite abundant but much uncoordinated and confusing. Only since the start of the 2010's that the critical mass of initial trial and error efforts on the part of both governments and development actors to handle water sector reforms in a more meaningful way seem to have been reached to allow better logic, coherence, long-term vision and coordination.

By now, all countries of the region have confirmed their commitment to IWRM, both politically and legally as the foundation for further water sector transformations. However, the pace and the scale that such reforms and commitments are rolled out in each CA country do differ in many ways - legislatively, institutionally and operationally. For instance, all countries by now have either developed new water codes or at least made amendments to the existing water legislation. Most countries have been also able to delineate their new operational boundaries by major river basins and watersheds following the hydrological principle regardless of administrative divisions. However, in some countries the conceptualization and the full rollout of national water sector strategies take more time than initially intended (e.g. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan). Overall, the whole process despite reaching the sufficient critical mass by now seems extremely iterative making the countries continuously learn as they go, revisit and adjust their earlier actions. Countries who had once thought to have adopted advanced water codes in the early 2000's start considering these days to

significantly revisit and upgrade them to set higher legal and policy standards for better regulation and performance of water sector reforms.

Likewise, the place and the role of the national agency responsible for water resources management within the national governments are also in constant flux in search for best fit and balance. While initially most CA countries would bundle water under one ministry with other closely related economic domains such as agriculture, natural resources, environment, energy etc., the most recent trend is to vest it with a stand-alone national ministry, committee or agency – such as in Uzbekistan (water.gov.uz, 2020), Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan (water.gov.kg, 2020) where in 2018 and 2019 water resources were unbundled from agriculture. In Tajikistan, the former Ministry for Amelioration and Water Resources was restructured in 2013 into two water-related agencies – the Ministry for Energy and Water Resources (www.mewr.tj, 2020) and the National Agency for Land Reclamation and Irrigation (alri.tj, 2020). Most recently, in February 2020, the Ministry for Energy and Water in Afghanistan underwent similar administrative system changes having been split into two independent national authorities including one for water – the National Water Affairs Regulation Authority of Afghanistan (<http://nwara.gov.af>, 2020). Only in Kazakhstan, water administration that until recently was under the broader public domain of the Ministry of Agriculture remains bundled since mid-2019 under the newly established Ministry for Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources (www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/water?lang=en, 2020). Nevertheless, it is in this country where water sector reforms and the status of IWRM are considered most advanced in the region.

Launch of River Basin Council Scheme: when the right size matters

Since the early 2000's Kazakhstan has been making consistent steps to develop, introduce and fully embrace the new management spirit of IWRM in order to reform its water sector more comprehensively (GWP, 2014). By the mid-2000's Kazakhstan had already in place eight cross-territorial new-type river basin organizations (RBOs) formally called Basin Inspectorates that were legally mandated to engage with the public and stakeholders at large

by establishing multi-stakeholder Basin Councils for regular coordination, advice and feedback in order to improve basin planning, decision making, conflict resolution and the basin performance, in general. As a result, in 2005-2007 eight cross-provincial basin councils, one per each RBO in Kazakhstan were successfully established through a concerted consultative process that was supported and facilitated by a multi-donor project (Meyer B. C. & L. Lundy. 2014; <http://www.caresd.net/iwrm> - last accessed 27.05.2020). However, the reform process was still far from being complete as it was addressing the issue at hand rather in a broad blueprint fashion



involving only the bigger picture river basin scale while leaving all the other lower operational levels unattended to.

To bridge this gap, in the early 2010's an approach was introduced to try to better integrate the lower sub-basin levels (GIZ-CAREC, 2014). Building on latest developments and reforms in Kazakhstan as well as learning from similar experiences elsewhere, CAREC proposed splitting up the river basins into smaller hydrological units to engage with and organize the locally identified multiple group interests into Small Basin Councils (or Sub-Basin Councils to be more exact). This ultimately became the basis for further institutional and technical training of SBC members as well as participatory development and implementation of catchment-specific Basin Plans. What is also worth noting is that the approach was

conceived with the transboundary context in mind, as the region is abundant with hundreds of small rivers that either form or cross the national borders of all CA countries without exclusion. The cross-border water interactions in these small river basins that had traditionally long existed was increasingly challenged by the securitization of the newly emerged national borders and economies following the break-up of the USSR (Pak et al, 2014). Many of them had specific agreements and protocols in place that formally regulated both water sharing and the use of shared water infrastructure between the then Soviet republics. The fact that flags up again the need for formalization and institutionalization of transboundary water interactions in mitigating the pressures and disagreements that the sharing of same water sources inevitably entail from time to time, whatever is their size.

A decade of pilot experiences: putting the Small Basin Council Scheme on regional map

The idea of small basin councils first emerged in Kazakhstan when in the early 2010's CAREC with support from GIZ and EU funding was facilitating the development of a basin plan for the Aral-Syrdarya River Basin Organization (RBO) responsible for water management of the downstream Syr Darya river section in South Kazakhstan (GIZ-CAREC, 2014). The Aral-Syrdarya Basin Plan was developed in 2011 through a lengthy consultative process with multiple basin stakeholders (Aral-Syrdarya RBC-RBO, 2011). It was realized that the identification and addressing of diverse water interests and needs in the larger basin would be much easier, better and more manageable if it is split up into smaller hydrological units. This is how the idea of establishing a series of constituent smaller sub-basin councils (SBCs) emerged as one of the priority needs for inclusion into the Basin Plan in order to improve representation, consultation and coordination of the facing issues as part of the bigger River Basin Council (RBC) that was earlier established under the Aral Syrdarya RBO. Therefore, two SBCs were set up initially – one in the upstream

of the Kazakh part of the Syr Darya (the joint Ugam-Keles river subsystem) and one in the downstream (the Little Aral river subsystem). Later, this two-part representative basin system was further optimized by delineating one more subsystem in the midstream (the Arys river subsystem), where a third SBC was established in 2015.

In 2012-16, the emergent stakeholder engagement approach with funding from USAID was additionally applied to the three small transboundary rivers of Aspara, Isfara and Ugam, each crossing the boundaries of two to three countries. As a result, two more CA countries were involved in this cross-country pilot, apart from Kazakhstan (Kz) - Kyrgyzstan (Kg) and Tajikistan (Tj). As the outcomes were convincing, the donor decided to continue funding and scale out the approach to more rivers in the region. Since 2015, CAREC has been disseminating the approach as part of the newly USAID-funded Smart Waters project in six other small transboundary rivers. Besides, two additional SBCs were established inside Uzbekistan in 2018 by GIZ with contributions from CAREC under the EU-funded National Policy Framework for Water Governance and IWRM in Uzbekistan Program where the recognized institutional basin planning approach was adapted and applied to two local watercourses.



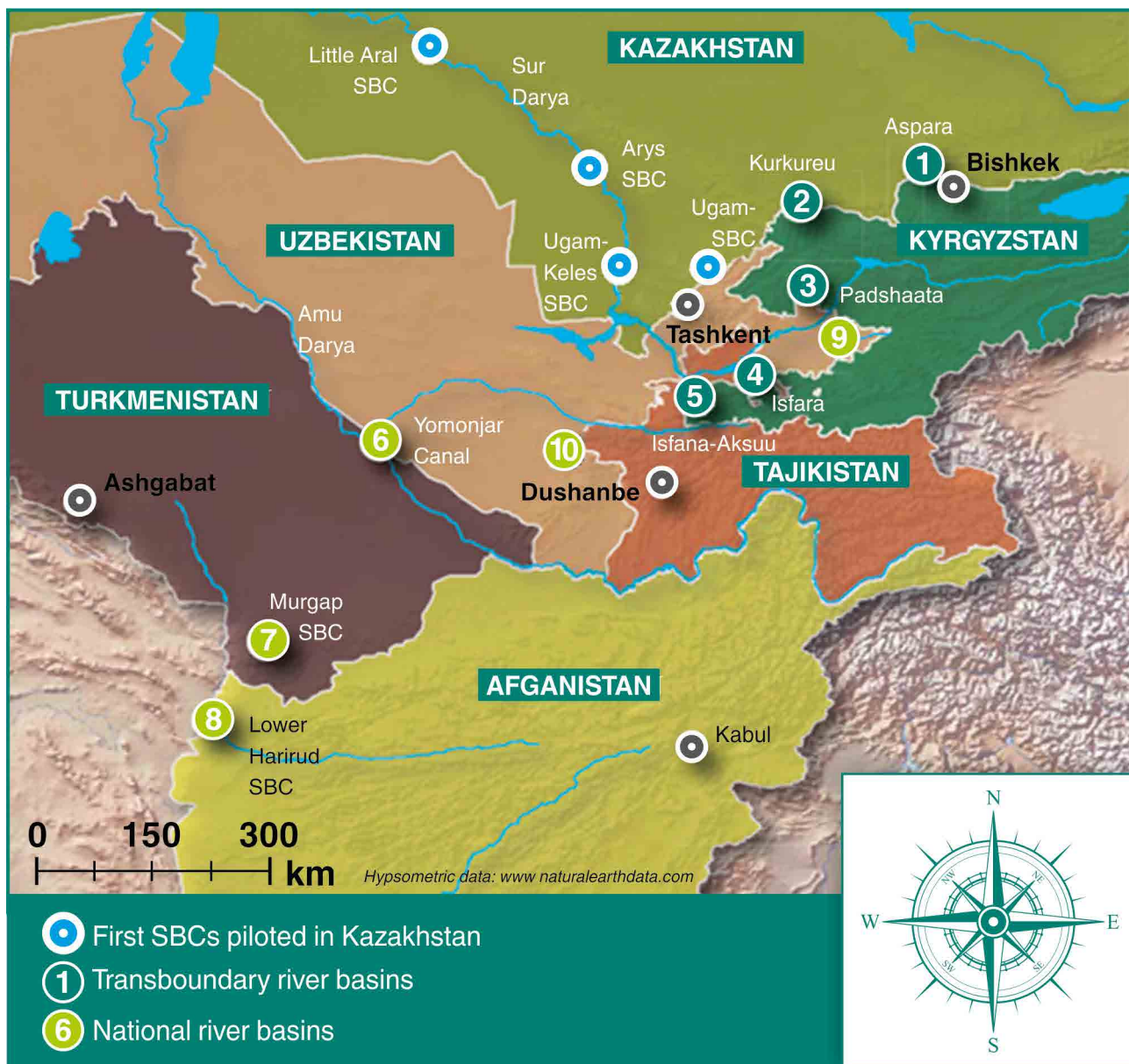


Figure. Rivers with the SBC scheme piloted in 2011-19
(Adapted from USAID- CAREC, 2018).

Geographically all the most recent dissemination activities involve river basins across all five CA countries plus Afghanistan (Af) - Kurkureusu (Kg/Kz, depicted as N2 in the Figure on the right), joint Aksu-Isfanasai rivers system (Kg/Tj, N5), Padyshaata (Kg/Uz, N3), Murgab (Turkmenistan – Tm, N7), Lower Harirud (Af, N8), Shahrikhansai (Uz, N9), Aksu (Uz, N10) as well as Yomonjar (Uz, N6), a small canal irrigation scheme in the midstream Amudarya with its headwork structure in Turkmenistan.

The map above provides a bird view picture of all SBCs established so far in Central Asia and

Afghanistan. Overall, in the period of 2011 to 2019, CAREC has facilitated the establishment of 19 small sub-basin councils (SBCs) in 11 small to mid-size rivers of Central Asia and Afghanistan. With almost 3000 km in the total cumulative length and affiliated with six major transboundary rivers of the region they cross the borders of 6 countries, 14 provinces and 26 districts. All these catchments are home to over 6 million people and more than 1.1 million hectares in total irrigated areas. The table below elaborates on each of the river subsystems with details on key characteristics and further information on their affiliations within the larger basins.

TABLE 2

The full roster of CAREC-facilitated rivers and Small Basin Councils established across the Aral Sea basin states in 2011-2019.

#	Small river or river subsystem with established SBC	#	Riparian side	Year SBC set up	Basin Plan, Year	Location within mid-level Basin	Affiliated mid-level basin org, in-country (BO)	Mid-level RBC [Yes/No]	Basin Plan [Yes/No]	Location within Large Basin	Large River Basin	Length, km	Irrigated area, ha	Population, people	Annual flow, km ³
1	Ugam-Keles river subsystem	1	Kaz	2011		Upstream	Kz: Aral-Syrdarya BO	Yes ²⁰⁰⁶ (since 2006)	Yes ²⁰¹¹ (since 2011)	Downstr	Syr Darya	1,746	730,000	3,200,000	22.17
	Little Aral river subsystem	2	Kaz	2012	2011	Downstream									
	Arys river subsystem	3	Kaz	2015		Midstream									
	Ugam river	4	Kaz	2013	2015	Upstream					Syr Darya	55	0	128	0.66
2	Aspara river	5	Kyr	2013	2015	Upstream	Kg: Chu BO	Yes ²⁰⁰⁸	Yes ²⁰¹⁸	Midstr	Chu	36	3,700	7,616	0.10
		6	Kaz	2013	2015	Downstream	Kz: Shu-Talas BO	Yes ²⁰⁰⁷	No			72	5,300	15,850	
3	Istara river	7	Kyr	2013	2014	Upstream	Kg: Kara-Syr BO	[in process]	[in process]	Midstr	Syr Darya	130	9,232	82,976	0.47
		8	Taj	2013	2014	Downstream	Tj: Syrdarya BO	[in process]	[in process]				21,300	85,000	0.42
4	Kurkureusu river	9	Kyr	2017	2019	Upstream	Kg: Talas BO	Yes ²⁰¹³	Yes ²⁰¹⁸	Midstr	Talas	43	12,041	27,124	0.20
		10	Kaz	2017	2018	Downstream	Kz: Shu-Talas BO	Yes ²⁰⁰⁷	No			13	1,604	2,558	
5	Padshaata river	11	Kyr	2017	2018	Upstream	Kg: Naryn-Syr BO	Yes	[in process]	Upstr	Syr Darya	50	5,145	47,000	0.19
		12	Uzb	2018	2020	Downstream	Uz: Naryn-Syr BO	No	No	Midstr		130	24,000	130,000	0.18
6	Aksuu river	13	Kyr	2017	2020	Upstream	Kg: Kara-Syr BO	[in process]	[in process]	Midstr	Syr Darya	45	550	5,864	0.13
			Kyr												
7	Istana river	14	Taj	2018	2020	Downstream	Tj: Syrdarya BO	[in process]	[in process]	Midstr	Syr Darya	69	1,616	26,751	0.02
													1,025	9,197	0.02
8	Yomonjar canal	15	Uzb	2018	2020	Midstream	Uz: Amu-Bukhara BO	No	No	Midstr	Amu Darya	32.5	7,960	34,000	0.28
9	Shahrkhansai canal	16	Uzb	2018	2019	Upstream	Uz: Naryn-Kara BO	No	No	Upstr	Syr Darya	120	59,487	615,900	0.63
10	Aksu river	17	Uzb	2018	2019	Upstream	Uz: Amu-Kashka BO	No	No	Midstr	Amu Darya	154	48,796	856,000	0.42
11	Murgap river	18	Trm	2018	2020	Midstream	Tm: Murgap BO	Yes ²⁰¹⁸	[in process]	Downstr	Murgab-Harirud	316	82,000	126,000	1.66
12	Lower Harirud river subsystem	19	Afg	2019	2020	Midstream	Af: L. Harirud BO	Yes ²⁰¹⁹	[in process]	Midstr		620	165,016	1,068,592	0.98
	TOTAL		SBCs N=19	Basin plans N=19			Mid-level Basins N=13	Mid RBCs N=5 [+4]	Bplans N=3 [+5]		L.Basins N=6	2,979	1,132,979	6,340,556	26.9



Out of the 19 established SBCs as listed in the above table, six are in Kazakhstan, 5 in Kyrgyzstan, 4 in Uzbekistan, 2 in Tajikistan and 1 each in Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. Five pairs of SBCs or 10 in total (depicted in the earlier presented map as orange circles numbered 1 to 5) are co-riparian to each other sharing the same transboundary watercourse, while the remaining nine (9) SBCs are internal affiliated with one country only. All these 19 SBCs have double basin affiliations being integral parts of both mid-level sub-river basins inside their respective countries and the larger international river basins. Considering this, all of them can be potentially integrated in future under the larger river basin multi-stakeholder institutional infrastructure, both internally or transnationally, when conditions so allow.

Overview of CAREC's basin planning approach

Overall, the SBC scheme and approach builds on the following stakeholder engagement stepwise process aimed at close consultation with and involvement of key stakeholder groups throughout the process of establishing Small Basin Councils and preparing their subsystem-specific basin plans (Strikeleva, E. and Inozemtseva, A. 2014):

1. Inception visit by a project team/initiative group to a basin or sub-basin for establishing first contact with local authorities, identifying other key stakeholders and getting their nominations for a prospective SBC, building initial awareness among them, scoping and fact-finding
2. Introductory meeting with nominated key stakeholders on the prospects of establishing an SBC and setting up one, if consensus is reached. The meeting is conducted back to back with training the prospective members on the process of SBC establishment.
3. Commissioning a series of expert-led thematic studies such as on local hydrology, water infrastructure, socio-economics, environment, law and other, as needed.
4. SBC meeting #1 – reviewing and discussing the results of a series of thematic studies, generating a long-list of local problems and needs, identifying priority areas for basin planning intervention as well as setting overall goals, objectives and measures of success. This meeting is conducted back to back

Due to the continuous donor support, it is remarkable that the pace of disseminating the SBC scheme in the region including the development of basin plans by far outperforms the pace of creating larger basin councils. Moreover, the small river basins seem to set both the pace and the institutional blueprints for the larger basins to follow and engage with multiple stakeholder interest groups in the basin. By June 2020, the number of established SBCs across the region is almost twice that for the established higher-level basin councils, even if we consider all other RBCs established in the region elsewhere since the mid-2000's that are not part of the earlier presented roster (mostly in the river basins of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan).

with training the SBC members on the process of basin planning

5. Commissioning the preparation of a draft basin plan by a local expert
6. SBC meeting #2 – reviewing, elaborating and finalizing the basin plan for action
7. Implementing and monitoring the implementation of BP

The central element of the above process is the participation of key basin stakeholders at each step from inception and planning through implementation and monitoring. The initial SBCs that were established in Kazakhstan, for instance, followed, in general, the blueprints of Kazakhstan's Water Code that suggests that the Basin Council is an advisory consultative body made of the representatives of diverse stakeholder groups with vested interests in the basin's water matters. In different river basins and contexts where CAREC provided facilitation across the region, the number of such different group interests range from 6 to a maximum of 14. They would normally include in addition to local water management authorities the following stakeholder groups: district government, rural/village administration, local authorities for agriculture, environment, emergency situations, hydrometeorology, hygiene-and-epidemiology, border control, representatives of water users associations, individual farmers, drinking water suppliers, mass media, NGOs, research organizations, political parties and some other interest groups such as court of elders, local industries and schools. In most instances, the SBCs facilitated by CAREC were organized as informal institutions by



joint agreement of all basin stakeholders through their nominated representatives. As a rule, the newly established SBCs are formalized through a signed joint protocol and development of the working SBC procedures to stipulate basic roles, functions and jointly agreed arrangements for membership, selection of leadership as well as other procedures as might be required. For instance, in contrast to bigger cross-territorial river basin organizations where basin councils are mandated by the Water code to be chaired by the heads of respective RBOs the small basin councils are more flexible in the way they select their leaders and the format they agree on to collaborate with each other. In most cases, the

SBCs facilitated by CAREC are chaired by those who are thought by the majority of members as most fitting for the role. On different occasions, this role is performed by a local lead farmer, a district governor, a WUA director or the head of territorial water management organization. Each of them would be selected by joint consensus of all SBC members. Alternatively, all this can well take the form of a formal legal entity too. Global experience suggests that similar multi-stakeholder basin institutions can be established more formally in the form of committees, commissions, secretariats, joint stock companies and other types of business-like entities (Lautze et al, 2013).

Ways and options for cooperating over water through SBCs

There are two progressive options or degrees of water cooperation that can be targeted and proceed in the transboundary context once co-riparian SBCs that share the same watercourse are established and ready to function. One is focusing on their own sub-basins to plan, coordinate and implement water activities, on the one hand, and establishing regular contacts and communication with the SBC on the other riparian side in order to start meeting, informing each other, coordinating and exchanging on anything that represents mutual interest and concern. In the similar vein, as things and mutual communications progress the riparian sides might decide to plan and take joint actions. These might include anything from data exchange to water measurements to cleaning, maintenance and repairs of shared water infrastructure to celebrating joint events such as River Days. Initially all these can be agreed and implemented on a one-off basis and once things progress planned and conducted more regularly.

The other option, most progressive, would be to

start planning and managing water under one transboundary basin-wide organization and basin council. It might sound ideal and a bit too optimistic for riparian sides to reach and materialize this degree of water cooperation early on, as this would most likely require proper enabling conditions in place both politically and legally to allow such ideal type transboundary integration. However, this does represent a great option provided a legally binding arrangement is agreed between the respective riparian governments. Alternatively, such an arrangement can be also reached at regional scale, if all countries that are members to a regional organization such as IFAS or one of its structures, agree and decide so. Despite that this option sounds a bit too ambitious, time consuming and challenging it does provide a great opportunity to leapfrog all national and bilateral procedures and considerably cut all pertinent transaction costs and efforts in case such collective regional agreement can be achieved. This would also conveniently allow rescaling the current focus of regional organizations exclusively from big rivers to more local levels of transboundary water management that have been lacking attention so far.



Concluding remarks

Water legislations of five out of six ASB countries (Kz/Kg/Tj/Tm/Af) where new water codes have been adopted in the last two decades or so prescribe in one way or the other the formation of river basin councils (RBCs) as multi-stakeholder bodies to support the operations of the river basin authorities (RBOs) so that water management is more holistic, responsive and representative of multiple group and sectoral interests. Most countries see them advisory to the RBOs, while the law in Afghanistan stipulates also policy-making and supervisory powers. Common for all countries, however, is a lack of formal mechanisms to allow putting all these legal stipulations into action. Neither there is any mention of subscales where basin approach can be effectively operationalized and applied besides the abstract stipulation of river basin scale as a whole. As a result, most basin organizations would be normally delineated by big basin catchments, both internally or transnationally, without due regard to the nested nature of most big river systems comprising multiple scales and numerous small rivers that make up most of the big river catchment landscapes on their way from the sources up in the mountains to the big river waterways in the low laying valleys and plains. The share of such small rivers in the total hydrology of big river basins is huge and estimated at 99% of the total number of watercourses of all sizes (Tkachev & Bulatov, 2002). This suggests in a way that most water interactions between different riparian sides in the course of daily economic activities occur at the scale of small rivers rather than that of the big ones. However, the latter being the natural conduit for most basin freshwaters to travel from country to country would grab most attention of national governments, donors and international organizations. This is also probably the reason why solution and regulation of transboundary water issues most frequently occur at the big rivers scale. (CAREC, 2018). However, with the ongoing and increasing adoption of the small basin council scheme across the region, the existing legal and policy frameworks need refocusing and further rescaling to allow adequate recognition, institutionalization and empowerment of cross-border water interactions - especially those that aim to strengthen trust and foster long-term collaborative arrangements at the very grassroots between different riparian sides. This is particularly important as both experience and governance research suggest that much of such cross-border water interactions at the

grassroots level is often informal (Norman & Bakker, 2015). All this makes the issue of the rescaling of water governance to more local levels an important topic both regionally and globally to guide and shape the ongoing water sector reforms specifically from transboundary water management perspective. The task seems challenging given the borderless nature of water that comes at odds with the principle of sovereign rights of riparian states; but not impossible. One of the promising water governance solutions that have been around for almost a decade already promoting the IWRM cause across the region is the establishment of small river basin councils in both internal and transboundary watercourses across the region including Afghanistan. As earlier mentioned they even outnumber their bigger river basin counterparts. At the same time, being mostly implemented as part of donor-funded projects they do not seem to have adequate legal basis and regulation so far. Some countries with active donor's support and mediation did try in the past to work out and adopt a model framework agreement for their transboundary small rivers. Unfortunately, the agreement that was almost due to be signed between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan did not materialize for some reason. Despite this, this experience does provide a good way of going forward. The other option could be putting the transboundary basin council scheme under the umbrella and supervision of one of the regional bodies that deals with water management or natural resources and environmental management in general. This can be accomplished, if national water and/or environmental leaders during one of their regular meetings could explicitly agree to support and use the scheme at regional scale. This can take the form of some sort of general framework procedures, political statement or countries' commitment regarding the transboundary rivers, canals and even hydraulic infrastructure in the region that are locally shared by two or more riparian sides to facilitate and support the establishment, basin planning, collaboration and even likely merger of multi-stakeholder riparian water governance structures under one cross-border basin organization.

To sum up, water legislations of most CA countries mandate water authorities to closely engage with the public at large through the establishment of basin councils that are representative of diverse stakeholder groups. Despite this, the need to further optimize and operationalize the modes, formats and institutions for public engagement within river



basins is still strong due to the nested nature of most water landscapes and systems. Pilot experiences by CAREC and other development actors across Central Asia and Afghanistan provide some of the useful alternatives and practical ways of seeing, formulating and applying the public engagement scheme in real world both internally as well as in a number of transboundary river contexts.

Worth noting is that the issue of scale is traditionally under-represented in the water governance research literature as clear and real-world evidence from lower levels is still much lacking or poorly documented. Therefore, pre-occupation with large river basin level blueprints and frameworks remains most common practice with the understanding that at this level “issues are more general and institutions may be able to follow a more generic format” (Holmatov and Lautze, 2016). As the pace and rollout of water sector reforms in all countries of Central Asia still continue and are much on the rise, this puts the region as a whole at the forefront of water governance research and practice. The unraveling developments in ongoing water sector reforms in the region are ample with real-world cases including those that deal with the issue of scale and rescaling of water governance in river basin management. This provides a unique opportunity for researchers, both local and global, to start following, documenting and sensitizing this important work-in-progress more thoroughly, closely and with more far-reaching implications.

Just to demonstrate, the establishment and development of Basin Councils and their Basin Plans in the region have been actively supported in the last five years by at least two more major donors apart from USAID - the World Bank and the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC). Two projects under the identical names of National

Water Resources Management Project (NWRMP) have been specifically focusing on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In Kyrgyzstan, the project facilitates the delineation, establishment and/or strengthening of five major Basin Councils on a country scale along with the development of their basin plans (the river basins of Chu, Talas, Issyk-Kul, Naryn-Syrdarya and Karadarya-Syrdarya: NWRMP-1, 2020). The focus in Tajikistan is on the Tajik part of the Syrdarya where project has been facilitating the establishment and functioning of the Working Group and the Syrdarya River Basin Dialogue as prototypes for the future River Basin Organisation and River Basin Council, respectively, as well as the development of the Syrdarya River Basin Plan for 2020-25. Most recently, a specific consultation paper was produced to consult with the basin-wide stakeholders as well as national and development partners on the draft Basin Plan and receive their comments and proposals prior to approval (NWRMP, 2019).

Overall, the donor community in the region seems quite set and willing to continue and step up their support to both water sector reforms and transboundary water cooperation including the basin stakeholders engagement schemes. There have been new calls from the donors most recently inviting proposals in similar domains. The fact that suggests that the donor community is quite confident with how things they have been supporting over the last decade to promote and shape both water sector reforms and regional water cooperation, are developing against the set targets, so they want to see these further strengthened and scaled up. This further suggests that the basin stakeholders engagement schemes such as presented in this policy paper will continue getting an important boost to sustain and become the important factor for promoting successful integration processes.



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This Policy brief is made possible by the support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the sole responsibility of the CAREC and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

