

Preface

Water has always been the most limiting factor for the inhabitants of Central Asia. Historically, the countries of the region have adapted to the water scarce conditions through a legacy of sustainable water management that dates back several thousand years.

The Global International Waters Assessment (GIWA) of the Aral Sea Basin describes how since the 1960s water abstraction for economic activities, particularly irrigated farming, has become unsustainable and now exceeds the carrying capacity of the region's ecosystems. Insufficient water is allocated to the lower reaches of the region's rivers and the Aral Sea, which has resulted in an environmental catastrophe. The inhabitants of the region are now forced to survive under conditions of increasing water stress. Against this backdrop, poverty and poor health are rife throughout the region, from the Tajik mountains to the waterlogged wetlands of Karakalpakstan.

The assessment takes a holistic approach to analysing the transboundary environmental concerns of the region and in identifying the root causes behind these problems. Specialists of various environmental and socio-economic disciplines expressed the immanency of the situation and the need to take urgent action. Recent progress in addressing water management issues is also discussed in the report and various options are proposed to reverse the negative trends in the condition of the aquatic environment of the Aral Sea Basin.

Donors for over a decade have funded various initiatives aimed at resolving the causes of freshwater shortage in the region, but with

limited progress realised. In fact, a sardonic proverb concludes that, "If all visiting experts had brought a bowl of water with them the Aral Sea would have been filled up again."

With the present global agenda set on achieving sustainable development and eradicating poverty, the countries of Central Asia must foremost address the root causes of its water problems. The UN International Decade for Action 2005–2015, Water for Life, was launched by the President of Tajikistan who also raised international awareness of the water crisis in Central Asia. In the forthcoming years water policies, aimed at achieving the Millennium Development Goals, will be implemented in all the countries of the region.

In this context the GIWA assessment serves as a useful tool for decision makers when exploring new mechanisms to resolve the situation. Complementary to the GIWA assessment, the Global Water Partnership (GWP) provides a neutral forum for regional stakeholders to discuss relevant water issues and formulate solutions through sustainable and equitable water management practices.

During the GWP Central Asia and Caucasus stakeholder conference in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in January 2005, the outcomes of the GIWA assessment were presented and discussed by participants. While the global community may assist in catalysing change, restructuring the water agenda of Central Asia into a sustainable framework must be undertaken by regional policymakers.

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