

Post-conflict Afghanistan and the need for energy

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Water is a flashpoint issue in Central Asia and few people realise that Afghanistan is a potentially significant player in Central Asian water management as 40% of its territory and 33% of its population reside within the Aral Sea Basin. Around 12.5% of the total water supplied to the Aral Sea Basin, which embraces vast areas of Central Asia, originates in Afghanistan, yet very little land in Afghanistan itself is irrigated.

Map 18: The Aral Sea Basin (Source: Micklin 2007)

Future Central Asian water management plans must consider the needs of Afghanistan. Water is already a source of potential conflict in Central Asia, with many dams, canals and reservoirs in the downstream countries like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, draining water away from the two main river systems – the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, ostensibly to irrigate vast swathes of thirsty crops like cotton and even rice. Most of these dams, canals and reservoirs are mud-lined and



lose huge amounts of water from ground-seepage and evaporation. The result has been the disastrous desiccation of the Aral Sea which has shrunk to a fraction of its former size in only a single generation.

Experts claim that when the current conflict in Afghanistan is finally resolved, there will be great efforts to rehabilitate the Afghan agricultural sector. The scientists say it would be naive to expect this to happen without a significant increase, perhaps even a doubling in water extraction from the rivers Afghanistan shares with the five Central Asian republics.

The Amu Darya River, in ancient times known as the 'Oxus', originates from glaciers and snowmelt in the Pamir Mountains and is formed at the confluence of the Panj and Vakhsh Rivers at the Tajik-Afghan border. The Amu Darya is approximately 2,600km long and marks out part of the borders between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Additionally, the Amu Darya Basin encroaches on both Iran and Kyrgyzstan. In its final reaches, the Amu Darya flows through the Karakum desert before crossing the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan and entering the southern or 'Large' Aral Sea.

Tajikistan contributes 80% of the flow generated in the Amu Darya followed by Afghanistan (8%) and Uzbekistan (6%), with Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Iran each contributing under 3%. Despite contributing relatively little of the water resources in the basin, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are the major water users, mainly for irrigated agriculture. In Turkmenistan, the Karakum Canal (1,110km long) carries water from the Amu Darya near Kelif across Turkmenistan to Ashqabat and supplements the flow of the Tejen and Murgab rivers. Aside from the effects of the Aral Sea Disaster, one of the main causes of tension between water users in the basin is the overuse of water for commercial irrigation practices. In the Karakalpakstan region of Uzbekistan, the deficit of water is so severe that crop losses of up to 50% at harvest-time are commonplace.

Discussions on mitigating the effects of the Aral Sea Disaster do not traditionally include Afghanistan. There have been no recent bilateral water agreements between Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbours and Afghanistan has been ignored as far as inter-state water management of the Aral Sea Basin is concerned. Although the international community has invested in development projects in the Aral Sea Basin through the World Bank, GEF, USAID, UNEP, UNESCO and the EU, early attempts at social reconstruction in Afghanistan have already increased the strain on water supplies. Internationally sponsored aid programmes are helping to ensure food security and agricultural development in Afghanistan but conditions in the Amu Darya Basin will soon deteriorate still further due to the greatly increased diversions of water. It is therefore imperative that development agencies resist the temptation to assume that Afghanistan's needs automatically outweigh those of the Central Asian states.

Farming is extremely important in Afghanistan and before conflict erupted in the late 1970's, Afghanistan was famous for its pomegranates, grapes, apricots and other fruit. However, decades of violence cut trade routes and isolated the country from regional and global markets. As a result of western health crazes, there is an increasing international demand for fruit such as pomegranates and it is thought that meeting the demand for the crop may be one way to promote development and economic recovery in the country. Pomegranates are now seen as beneficial for anything from heart disease to prostate cancer and they are a potential billion-dollar product. The increased demand comes because westerners have realised that the fruit is packed with antioxidants and pomegranate juice has even been suggested as a natural alternative to Viagra, hence the need to stimulate the growth of the industry and erect infrastructure capable of exporting the crop to western countries. International agencies such as USAID have seized upon the pomegranate industry as a means of boosting the economy and promoting development-centred stability, encouraging Afghan farmers to grow pomegranates instead of heroin poppies. In 2009, Afghanistan's Agriculture Minister – Mohammad Asif Rahini - described the crop as a "path to prosperity", stating that "the security and stability of Afghanistan is dependent in a huge way on employment; if you have people out of work, especially in rural Afghanistan, I can assure you that there will not be peace and security in Afghanistan, even if you double the number of soldiers", he said. Although expanding the pomegranate industry may promote stability and development in Afghanistan, the increased use of water from the Amu Darya River which the crop will require, may have serious consequences for inter-state relations with Central Asian neighbours. Increased agricultural production will obviously require water for irrigation and pomegranates are a particularly water-intensive crop. Any such cropping that takes place in the northern part of the country will likely draw water from the Amu Darya, which may then cause deteriorating relations with downstream countries in the Aral Sea Basin and hinder the rehabilitation of the Aral Sea.

One of the strategies recommended to recuperate the Aral Sea is replacing the cotton monoculture in Uzbekistan with less water intensive crops, but increasing production of pomegranates in Afghanistan would obviously contradict such a policy and increase the likelihood of conflict over the shared water resources. The international community must take care that in, hopefully, resolving the problems of conflict in Afghanistan and boosting the Afghan economy, they do not create the circumstances for mini-conflicts to erupt downstream in neighbouring countries. The solution seems to be clear. While limited expansion of agriculture in post-conflict Afghanistan is to be encouraged and assisted by the international community, much more emphasis should be given to job creation in Afghanistan through the development of business and industry. But business and industry require power and there is currently a significant lack of electricity in Afghanistan and indeed in some of its neighbouring upstream countries in the Aral Sea Basin, like Tajikistan. But now, it seems as if the Tajiks have the answer in the form of their monumental

hydropower development at Rogun on the Vakhsh River. When fully operational, Rogun will have six turbines with a total capacity of 3,600 MW and will produce 13.3 TWh of electrical power per year.

Clean, green hydropower will be exported from the completed Rogun Hydropower plant to neighbouring countries like Afghanistan and nearby Pakistan. A 500 kV transmission line is already being built between Tajikistan and Afghanistan and could help international efforts at restoring peace and re-building Afghanistan's shattered economy. The mammoth Rogun project will therefore not only help to create jobs and bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, it will also, through averting overuse of water from the Afghan tributaries of the Amu Darya, help to avert potential conflict in downstream Central Asian republics brought about through water shortages. The Rogun project in Tajikistan represents a win-win situation for Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the wider international community.

STRUAN STEVENSON, MEP

Struan Stevenson is a Conservative Euro MP representing Scotland in the European Parliament. He is President of the Climate Change, Biodiversity & Sustainable Development Intergroup and in 2010 was Personal Representative of the Chairman in Office of the OSCE, responsible for drawing up a report on the environmental problems of Central Asia.

In June 2011 he travelled to Tajikistan where he toured the Rogun Hydro Power Project in the company of President Rahmon of Tajikistan and several high-ranking Tajik government ministers.

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