

Chair's Summary of the meeting "Further development of regional cooperation among the countries of Central Asia in the management of information on the environment and water resources"

Almaty, 9-10 June 2014

The Inter-State Commission on Sustainable Development in its Decision No.3 on 3 April requested the UNECE to organize a meeting on the development of a regional space for water and environmental information in Central Asia. The meeting took place on 9 and 10 June in Almaty. Participants included representatives of relevant government agencies and IFAS organizations and institutions as well as interested regional and international organizations, the civil society and donors.

The UNECE opening statement underlined that Central Asia is facing growing challenges in the field of environment and water resources. Part of these challenges can be effectively met only through regional efforts. Regional cooperation requires, among others, effective decision support based on transparent and cooperative information management.

Participants received information on on-going work on defining the requirements, objectives, operational principles and institutional and legal frameworks for a regional information space, including reports on the updated "Survey on improving information service in the water sector of Central Asia", conclusions and recommendations of the Working Group Meeting on Information Management during the 63-d session of ICWC and an assessment of the needs for environmental information and capacity building for SIC ICSD.

Participants exchanged views on information needs for environment protection and sustainable development as well as water resources management. It was emphasized that eco-systems and natural resources in Central Asia are to a large degree shared and therefore access to reliable and regularly updated environmental information is crucial for needed coordinated regional action. While ICWC receives some information on water resources to support decision making, additional information is needed for integrated water resources management. There is an on-going information exchange on the basis of agreements between hydro-meteorological organizations, especially meteorological information, while exchange of hydrological information is restricted. Exchange of environmental data is even more limited.

It was pointed out that modern information technologies make it possible to develop a decentralized information system, properly balancing national and regional ownership. This approach offers the additional advantage of being collectively controlled by involved countries and regional stakeholders, first of all relevant decision-making bodies of IFAS. This would ensure ownership, transparency and open access to all legitimate users.

Participants discussed the fundamental principles, legal and institutional frameworks for a modern regional information space. Guidelines produced by the FFEM-EECCA project “Capacity building in data administration for assessing transboundary water resources in the countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia” among others underline:

- Easy access to information on the status and evolution of water resources and uses is one of the keys to a successful water policy.
- Most of the necessary data is produced at national level by various organizations.
- The necessary information exists usually in a fragmented, incomplete, dispersed and heterogeneous way.

The proposed strategy for improved information management includes, among others:

- Interconnected, shared information system managed by various institutions and actors.
- Support to countries in the development of their own national water information system as a precondition of improved regional information management.
- Creation of an enabling environment for a better inter-institutional cooperation on data management.
- Reinforcing capacity of human resources in information technologies and data management.
- Ensuring stable funding.

Presentations were made on the legal frameworks for the management of water, hydro-meteorological and environmental information.

Participants outlined the structure and scope of what could be established as a “unified regional information space”. The Representative of the World Bank provided an update on the development of a shared platform that would facilitate data collection and analysis and it was stressed that a broader use of publicly available information would be useful. The Road Map adopted after the 2012 Conference on Integrated and Adaptive Water Resources Management in Almaty includes national and institutional needs assessments and could provide support, including with the introduction of new technologies, for the unified regional information space.

There was broad agreement that since a central objective of a regional information space is improved decision support, it should be firmly anchored in IFAS structures. It was noted by some participants that the development of a web-based, decentralized regional information system in itself might not be sufficient for significantly improving decision support in IFAS. Since the chairmanship of decision-making and executive bodies rotate, effective decision-support have to rely on well-functioning permanent institutions – like SIC ICSD, SIC ICWC and the BVO-s. Stable and permanently located institutions can inform IFAS decision-making bodies, help shape their agendas, and prepare their decisions.

It was pointed out that a unified information space would have much broader functions than just decision support: among others, it would satisfy information needs for scientific research and education, help in awareness raising and the participation of Central Asian countries in international processes.

In the closing session next steps and challenges were discussed. The Chairman informed participants that the UNECE in a letter to the Chairman of ICSD, the Chairman of the next meeting of ICWC as well as the RCH and CAREC will offer assistance to the development of a regional space for water and environmental information. Based on the discussions during the meeting the Chairman concluded that a coordination group composed of representatives of SIC ICSD, SIC ICWC, RCH, and CAREC could provide guidance to such work. The coordination group could keep ICSD, ICWC and EC IFAS informed of on-going work and seek instructions on its main directions.

It also was concluded by the chairman that, based on the discussions of the meeting, the development of a regional information space could proceed in parallel in several directions:

- 1) Upgrading technical equipment and introduction of new technologies and latest knowledge as well as broader use of open-source information at the national, river-basin and regional levels

This work is already on-going: several donors are implementing projects to upgrade the technical capacities of countries that are behind the others in this field. The partly on-going coordination of national projects with efforts to develop a regional information space would create significant synergies.

- 2) Capacity building by using expertise, knowledge and experience that exist in the region

Well-functioning regional institutions of Central Asia with long-experience of analysis and decision-support, like SIC ICWC, could play an important role in building the capacity of other regional institutions. Such cooperation could take advantage of knowledge and experience which is based on and fully adapted to local conditions.

- 3) Confidence building

Strengthened confidence based on more intensive cooperation would allow all stakeholders in a unified regional information space to use more efficiently existing legal and institutional frameworks.

- 4) Strengthening legal and institutional frameworks

Operational improvements that would allow more effective use of existing institutions and legal frameworks within the IFAS structure would most likely be beneficial and projects under the Aral Sea Basin Program 3 can contribute to this objective.

- 5) A comprehensive regional agreement on the management of information on environment and water resources could be developed under the auspices of relevant decision making bodies of IFAS. The first steps could be an information exchange about the plans and programs of different regional bodies that are dealing with environment and water information management – e.g., the draft of the ICSD Road Map and the ICWC Concept on Information Management. Such an exchange could help streamline and harmonize these documents.

Ideas on how to develop a regional information space, together with an estimate of necessary resources, should be presented at the donor conference in October 2014 in Tashkent.