

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

# What **UNECE** does for you

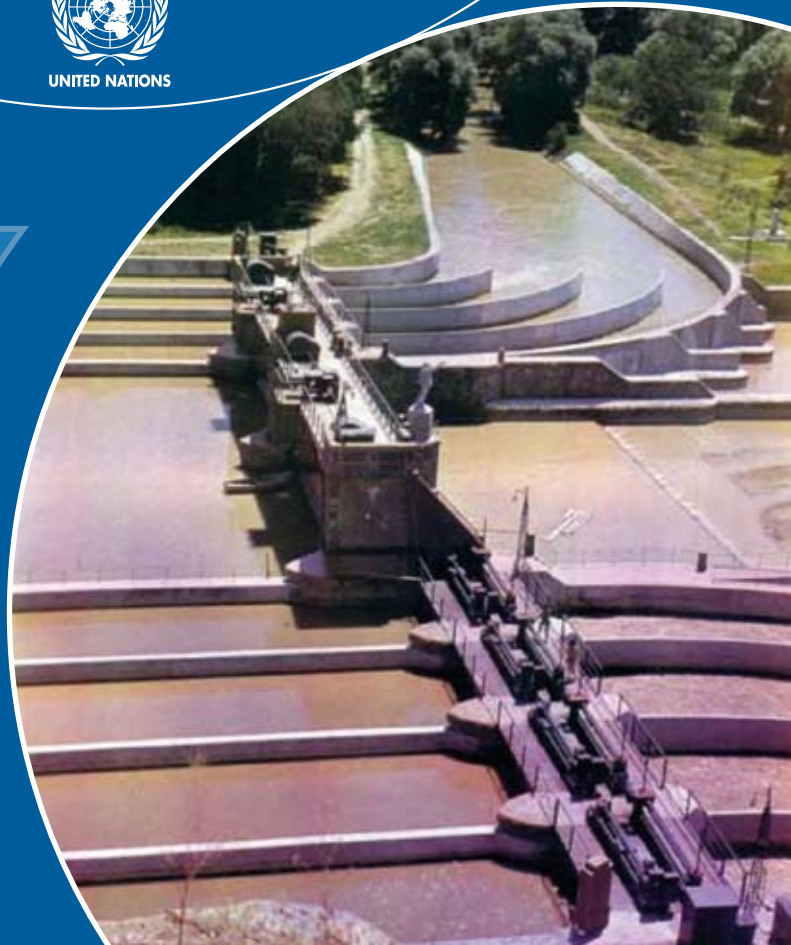


UNITED NATIONS

**...UNECE** works for  
better water management  
in Central Asia

The water situation is difficult in Central Asia and it is important to develop water cooperation between countries further in the region. As a response to this challenge UNECE is intensifying its work on water management issues in the region.

Bo Libert, Regional Adviser on Environment, describes some of the activities being carried out by UNECE.



## UNECE water activities in Central Asia

Over the past years, UNECE has intensified its engagement in Central Asian water issues. The situation in the region is difficult – the Aral Sea is still shrinking, upstream and downstream countries are not agreeing on water release regimes and water distribution, energy and irrigation sectors are competing, water ecosystems are deteriorating further, and climate change may decrease even more the water availability irreversibly for the future. It is likely that Afghanistan will in the future use more water from the AmuDarya river.

The stabilization of the Northern Aral Sea is one positive development - a more stable ecosystem and possibilities for the population to develop fisheries as a source of income.

This is the result of Kazakh efforts to build a dam for the inflow from SyrDarya.

UNECE work to improve water management and cooperation in Central Asia builds on two pillars; the SPECA Water and Energy programme of work and the application of the UNECE regional Environmental Conventions.

The SPECA working group on energy and water resources in Central Asia produced in 2004 a Regional Cooperation Strategy to promote the rational and efficient use of water and energy resources in Central Asia. This strategy, approved by four of the five Central Asian States, outlines the needs for action in the water and energy sectors in the longer and shorter term for the benefit of the whole region.

The UNECE regional Environmental Conventions establish rules for

cooperation between neighbouring countries on the environment and shared natural resources. The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Waters and International Lakes is of particular importance as the basic international legal framework for transboundary water cooperation. Recently Uzbekistan ratified the Convention, but this was only the second ratification in Central Asia after Kazakhstan.

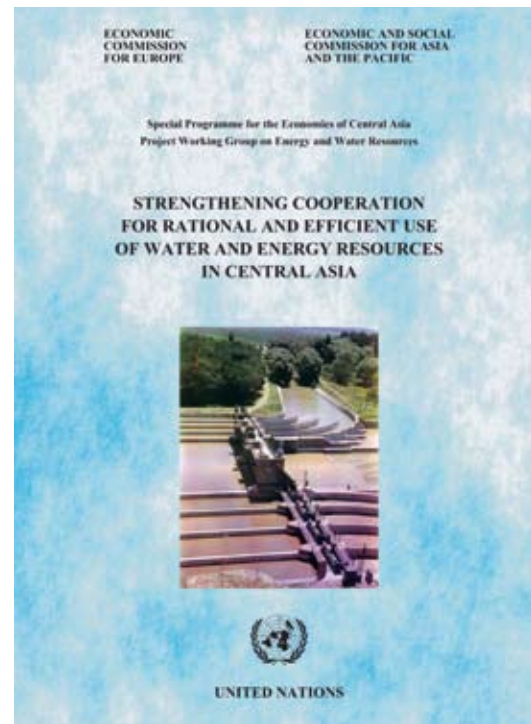
UNECE activities in Central Asia are developed in close cooperation with the authorities in the region and with international organizations and other actors. OSCE, UNDP and UNEP in the Environment and Security Initiative are particularly important partners, as is UNESCAP, the International Fund for the Saving of the Aral Sea (IFAS) and Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). In collaboration with the EU Water Initiative and the European Commission, UNECE will also be involved in national work to promote integrated water resources management in several of the Central Asian countries.

All UNECE projects in the region have extrabudgetary funding from different donors.

## Dam safety to protect the population

Central Asia has more than 100 major dams and other water control facilities, mostly on rivers shared by different countries. The dams are aging and are not adequately maintained. Meanwhile,

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the number of people living downstream from dams is growing. For example, the Fergana valley, which is divided among Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, has 9 million inhabitants. If a dam upstream from this valley were to break, the consequences could be disastrous.

The first phase of a UNECE-UNESCAP project was implemented in 2006 and resulted in an analysis of the present situation.<sup>1</sup> A funding agreement was recently signed with Finland for a continuation of the project in 2008-2010.

The first phase of the project resulted in: (i) a model national law on safety of large hydraulic facilities, including dams, intended to be a basis for national harmonized legal frameworks for dam safety and (ii) a draft of the regional agreement on cooperation on dam safety, which stipulates, inter alia, exchange of information and notification of other countries in case of accidents with dams.

The Central Asian countries are active in this work to improve or revise the existing legal provisions and institutional modalities for dam safety. In Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, it has been decided to develop a national law on safety of hydraulic structures including dams by adapting the model law; in Kyrgyzstan, the creation of a national commission on safety of dams is underway; in Kazakhstan, changes in the Water Code have been proposed in order to incorporate provisions for regulating dam safety. In Uzbekistan, work is underway to enforce the Law on safety of hydraulic structures, adopted in 1999. All the countries are willing to pursue regional cooperation on dam safety by setting up a legal and institutional framework along the lines of the proposed regional agreement.

<sup>1</sup> See UNECE publication « Dam Safety in Central Asia: Capacity Building and Regional Cooperation », Water Series No. 5

## Development of new water relations – The Chu and Talas rivers

Water relations in Central Asia took a significant step forward on 26 July 2006 when the Kazakh-Kyrgyz Chu and Talas Rivers Commission was inaugurated with the support of UNECE.

The Chu-Talas Rivers Commission (<http://www.talascchu.org>) gives a mutually beneficial way for Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to share the responsibility for water infrastructure used by both countries. As part of the bilateral agreement, Kazakhstan has agreed to pay part of the operating and maintenance expenses for a number of Kyrgyz dams and reservoirs supplying water to both countries.

This addresses a contentious issue and is a breakthrough in water relations in Central Asia, as the sharing of water resources, in particular between upstream and downstream countries, is often characterized by tension and insecurity.

A new project that started in 2007 supports the further broadening of the cooperation to improve the management of water resources in the Chu and Talas rivers.

## Better water information for better water decisions

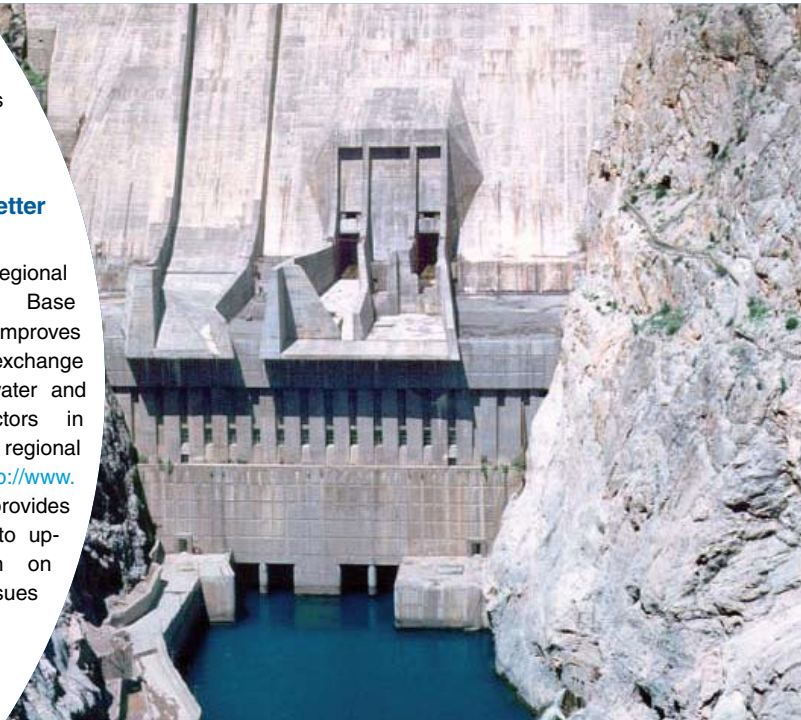
Central Asian Regional Water Information Base Project, CAREWIB, improves the availability and exchange of information in water and environmental sectors in Central Asia. A regional Internet portal <http://www.cawater-info.net> provides immediate access to up-to-date information on water and related issues in Central Asia.



*Chu-Talas Commission*

The portal is based on existing though not yet always easily accessible information maintained by the Scientific Information Centre of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination in Tashkent SIC-ICWC. Publications in paper format are regularly produced and distributed to increase outreach towards policymakers, NGOs and the general public.

What started as an effort to improve information exchange and coordination between donors is now a much more ambitious project aiming to make information flow on water issues more efficient and transparent in Central Asia. A second phase of the project started in autumn 2007.



## Environmental impact assessment in a transboundary context

The assessment of the environmental impact of objects and activities at an early stage of planning, including their cross-border impact, is a well recognized procedure in modern environmental policy and an important condition for good neighbourly relations between countries. The UNECE Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context obligates States to notify and consult each other on all major projects under consideration that are likely to have a significant adverse environmental impact across borders.

In the water sector of Central Asia it is essential that new projects such as production facilities or dams with a possible impact on ecosystems be communicated to and discussed with downstream countries.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are Parties to the EIA Convention and they share the rivers SyrDarya, Chu and Talas. Activities upstream in Kyrgyzstan should be communicated at an early stage to Kazakhstan if the EIA Convention is to be adhered to and Kazakhstan should, according to the Convention, have the opportunity to present its point of view on any planned projects. Projects in Kazakhstan with a possible significant impact on the environment in Kyrgyzstan should similarly be communicated to Kyrgyzstan and other neighbouring countries.

The project demonstrates the effective implementation of the EIA Convention in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, two Parties to the Convention. For more information on the project visit [http://www.unece.org/env/eia/central\\_asia.htm](http://www.unece.org/env/eia/central_asia.htm).

## Improved cooperation – improved water quality

Downstream on the major rivers SyrDarya and AmuDarya, the low quality of water has serious negative health effects. Management of water quality is highly inefficient and insufficient both on the national and regional levels - national policies and regional cooperation need to be improved with the ultimate aim to improve water quality.

The UN Development Account has made funding available to UNECE for a project to improve the cooperation and policies on water quality. A first step is to establish common principles for the measurement, exchange of information between countries and joint assessment. The development of more efficient national policies including the standards and principles applied in the permitting of environmentally harmful activities is another key aspect. As the monitoring of water quality has seriously deteriorated since the beginning of the 1990s, it is also a challenge to establish a monitoring network.

For more information:  
<http://www.unece.org/env/water/welcome.html>

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