

CAN ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE BE MANAGED IN CENTRAL ASIA? FOCUSING ON WATER SCARCITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential of civil society as an influential driver for environmental change in Uzbekistan and in promoting an inclusive approach, especially at the local community level. One of the main arguments is that effective efforts to ensure adequate and rational use of Uzbekistan's diminishing water resources both in urban and rural settings require a strengthening of environmentally conscious and water-oriented civil society.

Keywords: Civil society, Water scarcity, Uzbekistan, Decentralization

INTRODUCTION

As global, regional and local water problems continue to grow, affecting human prosperity and well-being, water scarcity also seems to provide a ground for discussions on integrated and inclusive decision-making. Grobicki (2009) suggests that multi-stakeholder processes are critical elements in tackling water problems and ensuring water security, precisely because more than technical options are involved. Most of those who need to be present in the vital debate over water security are not primarily water experts but represent diverse community interests. Therefore, because of their unique combination of private structure and public purpose, their generally smaller scale and direct connections to citizens and local communities, their flexibility and capacity to tap private initiative in support of public purposes (Salamon, 2010), civil society organizations should be empowered to perform a number of critical functions to preserve water resources, encourage change of people's largely consumerist attitudes, and highlight water as a key strategic area for investment in Uzbekistan.

One of the main arguments of this paper is that effective policies to ensure efficient use of Uzbekistan's depleting water resources will need the empowerment of environmental civil society through decentralization and integrated water resources management. This paper makes a case for complementing the ongoing discussions for an inclusive approach to understanding the role of civil society in facilitating an environmental change in Uzbekistan.

THINKING GLOBALLY, ACTING LOCALLY

People's requirements for water to meet their basic needs and collective pursuit of higher living standards, coupled with the need for water to sustain world's fragile ecosystems, make water unique among natural resources. The 5th World Water Forum has acknowledged that continuing human activities have become the primary drivers of the pressures affecting the planet's water systems, yet these drivers should not be considered in isolation of related socioeconomic and political factors (United Nations, 2009).

To the academic community, the "world is now changing the ways in which it deals with water" (Nickum, 2010). Having linked water to power, some authors define the prospects for

modern countries in terms of their access to water resources. They divide states between the “water haves” and “water have-nots”. Even such rising global economic giants as China and India will have to face the challenges that “will determine whether they lose their ability to feed themselves and cause their industrial expansion to prematurely sputter” (Solomon, 2010).

Others envision an approach to water management that seeks to harmonize relations between humans and nature, and between governments and the market. For Gleick, “access to affordable safe tap water would be universal and bottled water would become unnecessary” (Gleick, 2010). Others, including Rogers and Leal (2010) define water as a “fugitive resource”, which implies that it is a different good at different stages of the hydrologic cycle. At times when it is in the form of a cloud, a river, or a lake, water is an open-access source; at others as reserves in a dam or as sewage, it is a public good; as tap or irrigation water, it can be privatized. It is argued that if bold action is necessary and sometimes requires huge investments and large projects, they also call for more than that. Engagement on the part of the public, especially the people who will foot the bills for increased usage and buy the public bonds that will finance new infrastructure is also needed.

The last, but certainly not the least, scientific and policy debate about global water scarcity has been the “virtual water” concept, pushed forward in recent years by various academic institutions and development agencies (Kumar and Singh, 2005). The virtual water’s basic idea seems to be economic because more than 90% of globally exploited water resources is spent on food production, leaving 10% for drinking and other uses (Allan, 1998). Some authors argued that the resulting water scarcity problems can be solved and economic efficiency of water use increased by adapting global and regional food trade to special variations in water scarcity. In this view a net water-saving effect can be reached by concentrating production of water-intensive food crops and products with low water productivity in water abundant countries, while turning water-scarce countries into food importers and producers of less water-intensive crops (Roth and Warned, 2008).

What unites all these concepts is the assumption that “water issues are irretrievably connected, sometimes as a symptom and sometimes as a cause” (Nickum, 2010), to many other issues, including globalization, demographics, governance and civil society, energy, health, the role of women and children, the environment and climate change.

Although warnings that water stress is imminent has a long history - there are increasing signs that the management of water resources in most parts of Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, is now reaching a tipping point. Most rivers are vanishing, and the quality of those remaining is deteriorating. Ground-water supplies are under pressure from overuse and pollution. Climate change may already be rearranging rainfall and snow-melting patterns in region’s mountains, thus making life in arid areas increasingly uncomfortable.

According to the *United Nations*, available freshwater resources in Uzbekistan are estimated at 67 billion m³ per year. Of this amount, 55.1 billion m³ comes from surface waters and 7.8 billion m³ from groundwater. The rest is reclaimed in the form of return water from leaking irrigation channels and infiltration from irrigated fields, which collects in localized depressions. Agriculture plays an important role in the economy, employing over 60% of the population. Although only 10% of the 444,000 km² of arable land is irrigated, the irrigation efficiency is low, so this water demand amounts to 92.5% of overall annual water consumption in Uzbekistan. With demand for water growing in all sectors, it will be impossible to meet the combined needs in the medium term. Projections based on existing consumption trends indicate there could be a water deficit of up to 14 billion m³ by 2015. (UNWWDR3, 2009)

Since most of Central Asia's watercourses shared between its countries, water management can be a major source of tension, especially between the countries downstream (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), which feel that they are left having unpredictable supplies of water for irrigation and economy, and the countries upstream (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), which often claim to have sovereign rights over the water while it is on their territory. According to Dadabaev (2004) "the waters communications of the Aral Sea region are interconnected and constitute a very sensitive area, where the unilateral actions of one state – especially those upstream – directly affect several downstream states".

In such a volatile regional atmosphere even intra-state trends related to water consumption may have a negative impact on the regional inter-state relations. One of such intra-state tendency is a growing urbanization, including in Uzbekistan, which drives the need for enlarged and better infrastructure, and also makes greater demands on consumption, most of which is linked to water. In the longer run, as population's income rates will grow, its demand for water-intensive high-end products would also increase. As Francesca de Châtel (2007) suggests, technology and the impact it has on daily life and the functioning of society at large is an important cause for water's undervaluing. The author is straightforward in suggesting that modern technology deeply affects the way people think about water and use it: "as soon as water starts flowing from a tap, it is taken for granted; by making its source invisible, water's existence is divorced from the elements and the seasons, and it becomes paradoxically omnipresent. The user can comfortably assume that it flows from an endless supply".

Today it is evident that Uzbekistan's water problems are increasingly linked, often in complicated ways, to the role of environmentally conscious civil society. Therefore, solving Uzbekistan's current and future water problems will require thinking across traditional intellectual boundaries.

MAPPING AN ENVIRONMENTALLY-CONSCIOUS CIVIL SOCIETY

For an understanding of the place and role of environmental civil society in Uzbekistan, it is useful to turn to a wider view of civic institutions and social relations. Importantly, in the past two decades, there has been no shortage of academic writings and discussions on civil society. Civil society is not only a valuable concept to discuss the roles of participating citizens as they relate to the state, the market, or other societal domains, but civil society is also an important ideal for people to construct, maintain, and preserve (Zompetti, 2006).

Linz and Stepan (1996) have provided a starting point for this broad perspective, in which they distinguish between five interacting and mutually reinforcing "arenas of democratization": (1) civil society, (2) political society, (3) economic society, (4) the rule of law, and (5) state bureaucracy. Stemming from this model, Howard (2003) suggests that the conceptual and empirical feature that differentiates civil society from political society and economic society is the important distinction between the elite and the mass level. In other words, while political society and economic society are composed primarily of elite actors and institutions in pursuit of power or profit, civil society is the realm of ordinary citizens, who join and participate in groups and associations because of their everyday interests, needs and desires. Therefore, civil society is seen as the "the realm of organizations, groups, and associations that are formally established, legally protected, autonomously run, and voluntarily joined by ordinary citizens" (Howard, 2003).

While defining civil society as non-state and non-economic entities which influence, shape and participate in society at large, it is useful to see how post-communist societies, including Uzbekistan's, develop their arena of "concerted action and social self-organization" (Bryant,

1993). Speaking at the joint session of the Uzbek Parliament in 2010, republic's president Karimov emphasized the increasing role of civil society organizations in accomplishing an effective public control over the activities of the government and power structures. It was mentioned that 'the institute of public, civic control through functioning NGOs and other related organizations is becoming an important instrument of providing accountability of the government to the society and identifying the public attitude towards the ongoing reforms in the country' (Press Service of the President of Uzbekistan, 2010) .

Such presidential statements can be viewed through the *normative* approach in the analysis of post-communist civil societies, which considers civil society as vital to the development of civic skills necessary for sustaining democratic patterns of behavior, including the political leverage and influence that result from participation in interest groups and parties. Civil society can thus promote a stable and functional mechanism of addressing urgent social problems (Feldman and Blokov, 2009). This normative category is often used with aim to balance the *instrumentalist* approach (Inglehart, 1995) which focuses on how, in post-communist societies, levels of civic engagement widely vary. This variance can be measured as an expression of trust in political and governmental institutions, as an inclination to join and participate in various types of voluntary associations, and as participation in public activities generally.

In order to illustrate the current state of environmental civil society in Uzbekistan, it is helpful to employ the methodological framework known as the *Civil Society Index* (CSI), introduced by Helmut Anheier and his colleagues. The basic model of the index is a so-called 'Civil Society Diamond', displaying a horizontal and vertical axis with four central dimensions: (i) *structure*, (ii) *environment*, (iii) *values*, and (iv) *impact*. Each of these dimensions is assessed by a group of indicators. (Anheier, 2004; Civicus Civil Society Index, 2006). At the core of the 'Civil Society Diamond', as in most of the conceptions mentioned earlier in the paper, is the view of civil society as "the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market where people associate to advance common interests" (Heinrich, 2004).

Structure and Associational Strength

While studying the *structure* of Uzbekistan's environmental civil society it is possible to provide key indicators for assessing its genuine associational strength. According to the presidential speech mentioned earlier, currently there are more than 5,100 NGOs in the country, while the number of the citizens' local self-governance bodies is exceeding ten thousand. Meanwhile, recent Environmental Performance Review of Uzbekistan published by the UN Economic Commission for Europe indicates that less than 200 of these NGOs declared environmental protection to be their main area of activity. In reality, only some 45 environmental NGOs are considered by the review to be active. This document points out that there are only three active environmental NGOs in Tashkent City and the Tashkent region, possibly because of complicated state regulatory rules (UNECE, 2010).

The State Committee for Nature Protection of Uzbekistan (SCNP) financially supports environmental NGOs using its National Fund for Nature Protection. The grants are provided through a tender procedure. From 2004 to 2009, the annual number of grants provided to NGOs increased by more than 300 times from 250,000 to 77,000,000 sum. It appears, however, that grants are provided to a small number of country NGOs, namely the International Fund for Ecology and Health (Ecosan), Logos, Living Nature and Ekomaktab. So far, such grants have been provided for environmental education purposes.

According to the UNECE report (2010), with aim to promote cooperation with NGOs, the SCNP plans to sign a memorandum of understanding with the European Eco Forum. It has

prepared recommendations for its territorial departments on the procedures and areas of cooperation with NGOs. The SCNP is considering establishing in the near future a consultative public council, which would be chaired by the director of the SCNP and consist of SCNP senior officials, academics and NGO representatives. Yet, experts are suspicious about potential effectiveness of the council as a mechanism of cooperation with civil society.

The structure of Uzbekistan's environmental civil society has not yet formed enough to provide a healthy platform for action or deliberation. First, local environmental civil society groups are often unable to represent the interests of a variety of social groups, thus they themselves do not represent a real social force. Secondly, they are experiencing serious financial difficulties and problems recruiting qualified experts, in addition to complicated state regulatory rules. Thirdly, public trust of general civil society organizations still remains low, so the public remains passive in their reactions and do not participate broadly in their activities.

Political and Legal Environment

Having indicated some problems in the structural dimension, we can turn to the analysis of the overall political-legal *environment* in which general and environmentalist civil society in Uzbekistan exists and functions. There is one view that suggests that despite the increased requirements for their operation set forth by the government in recent years, many civil society groups working on environmental issues have continued to operate and achieve positive results (Tookey, 2006). Their current work is seen as an acknowledgement by the government of Uzbekistan that grassroots efforts are an integral component of the national response to these challenges.

As for the existing legal platform for the activities of civil society organizations in country, some critically-minded analytical groups defined it even as 'impressive' (Expert Working Group, 2010). Officially, since the year of independence in 1991, Uzbekistan adopted more than 200 laws and bylaws directly or indirectly relating to strengthening the role of country's "third sector". This list includes, for instance, the "Law on Guarantees of the NGO Activity", the "Law on Public Foundation", the "Law on Charities", the Presidential Resolution "On Measures to Promote the Development of Civil Society Institutions in the Republic of Uzbekistan" and others. If there is a solid legal base and political consent for an active involvement of civil society organizations in solving addressing country's environmental challenges, where is the problem then? The answer is twofold.

First, Uzbekistan's legislation does not provide for genuine public participation in developing legal acts or regulations. Since 2006, draft laws are not published in the National Newsletter. Nonetheless, the SCNP involves members of the public in the discussion of such documents by inviting representatives of specialized NGOs to the meetings of its management board. Although the SCNP had invited NGOs to comment on the draft law on waste management, it provided no subsequent feedback on whether or not the comments had been taken into account. Similar doubts apply to the public hearings organized by the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Management to draft a concept on forestry protection in Uzbekistan for 2008–2009 (UNECE, 2010). It seems that such attitude toward public involvement is due to technical and bureaucratic reasons at different institutional levels, rather than to official policy.

Second, the possibility for the general public to access environmental information through communication means is considered limited in the country. According to the same UNECE data, NGOs claim that the mass media avoid discussing acute environmental problems in Uzbekistan. It is pointed out that barriers to public access to information include: (i) the poor

dissemination of environmental information by the Center of Hydro-meteorological Service, the State Committee on Statistics, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Management, and the State Committee on Geology and Mineral Resources; and (ii) the lack of periodic environmental publications aimed at the general public, rather than at technical experts and academics. As a result, the public in Uzbekistan is not sufficiently informed about environmental issues of concern such as the degradation and pollution of ground-, surface- and drinking water, urban air, soil and foodstuff.

Assessing the Impact

Since the work of environmental civil society groups can be far-reaching and might touch on themes such as freedom of information and equality in economic opportunities, we need to assess their *impact* dimension and how strong their influence is on the public policy and on people's lives. The overall impact of civil society in Uzbekistan is not strong and as the analysis of most of the sources demonstrates its role in holding the state and private sector accountable is the weakest link.

While the environmental civil society in Uzbekistan remains fairly inactive in influencing public policy, its achievements, however, must not be under-estimated. According to the UNEP, while Uzbekistan has not signed the Aarhus Convention, the state has undertaken many measures to promote its implementation. After the conclusion of the Aarhus Convention, the government distributed copies of the Convention's text to raise awareness about its provisions for promoting public access to information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice. With support from the OSCE and the American Bar Association, the SCNP held approximately 30 seminars and roundtable discussions around the country to raise public awareness of the Convention and about environmental democracy more generally (UNEP).

Meanwhile, the government has started to apply provisions of the Convention to increase public participation in regulatory development. For example, the Urban Building Code of Uzbekistan was developed and adopted pursuant to the Convention's procedural requirements for participatory decision-making.

Tookey points out that although the environmental NGOs are few and based mostly in the capital, Tashkent, and other large cities throughout the country, their work is vital to environmental protection efforts in Uzbekistan (Tookey, 2006). There are a number of examples of civil society groups providing free legal consultations to local citizens, carrying out a countrywide series of trainings about Uzbekistan's environmental laws for governmental staff and community leaders, gathering quantitative data about environmental problems that pose security threats. Other environmental civil society groups work on conservation efforts in the Tian Shan Mountains shared by Uzbekistan with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, contributing to regional efforts to create a trans-boundary nature reserve, as well as working in fields related to eco-journalism and Uzbekistan's implementation of international conventions.

Associational Values

While the analysis of the structure and environment in which civil society sector evolves along with its impact is crucial, what civil society actors in Uzbekistan really promote becomes clear through understanding their *value* dimension. Notwithstanding the aspirations of human rights organizations to imply that Uzbekistan has an isolated and static society, this paper takes one case to show that the country has a rich experience of associational life of citizens. Several studies indicate that a community-level civil society in Uzbekistan is a vibrant force in promoting positive social values and practices such as tolerance,

transparency, poverty eradication, as well as environmental sustainability and preservation of natural resources (Coudouel et al., 1998; Micklewright et al., 2004).

While it is true that there continues to be a relatively low level of public spiritedness at the national level, the general socio-cultural context is characterized by a relatively higher level of public participation in local communities and neighborhoods, also known as *mahalla*. Some scholars suggested that it represents a distinctive type of social organization because the mahalla in itself is an indigenous, neo-traditional type of community, and participation through it is inclusive. Historically, the mahalla had been important for solving various issues related to daily life as traditional street-level units of self rule in cities and large villages of the region (Masaru, 2006; Seiple, 2005).

Since everyone in Uzbekistan technically belongs to one or another mahalla, Sievers (2002) points out, that “complementing this technical point, the society abounds with truisms about the inseparability of individuals from mahalla, and, especially in contemporary and traditional mahalla, these residential community associations overlap pervasively with kinship, professional, and social networks”.

This assertion can also explain why in recent years, various development agencies have begun to shift from local NGOs to mahallas in their search for surrogate civil society organizations, because of their presumed familiarity with local needs as an indigenous, grass-roots, and long standing association of citizens. Whereas formal organizations represent business, laborers, and consumers connecting the public and private are largely underdeveloped, the mahalla has become virtually the most attractive alternative in Uzbekistan. For example, the USAID had offered technical assistance to several mahallas in Fargana Valley for providing clean water to the rural population through its program, while smaller undertakings include conferences with mahalla leaders on ecology and entrepreneurship sponsored by OSCE (Masaru, 2006). Accordingly, many civil society development organizations trumpet mahalla as essentially NGOs and as the bedrock of Uzbekistan's civil society (Sievers, 2002). Thus, the local orientation as well as strong values of collective responsibility and mobilization makes mahalla a potentially dynamic facilitator of development and environmental sustainability in Uzbekistan.

It is clear that priority needs to be given to the task of strengthening the ability of civil society to positively address Uzbekistan's environmental concerns generally, and water management in particular. This means that activities in improving the structural characteristics of environmental civil society, the external atmosphere in which it operates, and its internal value system should be undertaken concurrently and in coordination with an increase in social efficiency and influential capacity.

DECENTRALIZATION OR DECONCENTRATION?

Uzbekistan continues to face a number of internally-induced challenges to effectively manage its water reserves, mostly due to lack of resources or outdated bureaucratic mechanisms. Various agencies at regional and local levels lack the capacity and will to respond effectively to these challenges.

This paper suggests that civil society organizations (local NGOs, unions, associations) along with traditional community and neighborhood groups should be empowered to ensure that the policies or plans developed address people's needs and bureaucratic impediments removed. However, it will not happen unless a *decentralization* of functions, powers, and responsibilities from central government to local communities occurs as a way to involve them in capacity-building. The participation of civil society organizations, including mahalla, should be considered critical to create positive outcomes of decentralization.

As some experts suggested, because of decentralized governance, efficiency and equity are likely to increase since it is an effective tool to tap local knowledge in management decisions, strengthen democracy and reduce the cost of central government (Manor 1999; Ribot, 2002a). Pointing to the fact that people's attitudes towards national policies are frequently shaped by their interests, but only to the extent to which the government helps them locally in addressing every-day problems, Hoffschulte (2001) notes that "the consequence of decentralization will be not the weakening of the state but, on the contrary, its strengthening".

Although decentralization is generally defined as "an act in which a central government formally cedes powers to actors and institutions at lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy", depending on every individual case the process of decentralization can be either *democratic* or *administrative* (Ribot, 2002a).

This classification is crucial, since prospective decentralization of central government's functions in local water management in Uzbekistan is viewed in this paper as being essentially democratic, rather than administrative. The point here is that because democratic decentralization aims to increase popular participation in local decision-making and is an institutionalized form of the participatory approach, the central government could transfer powers and resources to authorities representative of and downwardly accountable to local populations, i.e. mahalla committees, water users associations, and other civil society organizations.

On the contrary, administrative decentralization, also referred to as *deconcentration*, would involve the transfer of power to local branches of the central government, such as *khokimiyats*. Although they may have some downward accountability built into their functions, these upwardly accountable bodies are local administrative extensions of the central state, thus their primary responsibility is to central government. Ribot (2002b) considers deconcentration is a "weaker" form of decentralization because the downward accountability from which many benefits are expected is not as well established as in democratic forms of decentralization.

To understand the specific ways in which environmental civil society in Uzbekistan may encourage the effective water management through democratic decentralization and downward accountability, this paper briefly turns to the environmental policy model established in Brazil. Because decentralization of country's water resources management has been ongoing for several years, the case of Brazil seems well suited to find out how civil society organizations have generally influenced the success of reforms and the prospects for meaningful participation.

A research conducted by a group of experts indicates that from the outset, Brazilian federal water law envisioned water management at three geographical levels: (i) a national council aiming to oversee central water agency and state water councils; (ii) state-level bureaucracies supervising catchment-level committees; (iii) watershed committees - the smallest territorial unit for decision-making - created by state governments that should include members of "civil water resources entities with proven activities in the watershed", defined as associations of water users, technical, research or teaching institutions and NGOs oriented to society's collective interests (Brannstrom et al., 2004).

Importantly, Brazilian states crafted reforms based on these principles and the idea that water is a public and finite good with economic value, giving highest priority to drinking water among multiple uses. In order to implement these ideas, state reforms created watershed territories in which committees and agencies received powers of deliberation, oversight and planning of water investments

Using qualitative data obtained from interviews with actors of decentralization, the research team evaluated the participation of civil society in three Brazilian states: Bahia, Parana, and Sao Paulo. Interestingly, all three states pursued relatively different versions of decentralizations of water resources governance. While Bahia opted for a deconcentration of state offices, despite claiming to pursue decentralization, Parana empowered firms and municipalities as water users in powerful watershed agencies, relegating civil society participation to less powerful committees. Sao Paulo, however, mandated equal participation of municipalities, civil society and state agencies in watershed committees, but delayed the formation of watershed agencies (Brannstrom et al., 2004).

Overall, the findings of the mentioned study support the general idea that civil society may strongly contribute to improved water resources management. For instance, in two of the three cases (Sao Paulo and Parana) civil society groups promoted downward accountability using new geographical scales and issue framing.

Although administrative structures and internal socio-economic and political environments in Uzbekistan and Brazil vary significantly, the latter case-study may be helpful in determining some aspects of civil society participation in decentralized resource governance. The first aspect is related to bureaucratic and regulatory barriers when, for example, state authorities fail to issue guidelines giving some legal basis to local actors, thus preventing civil society organizations from full participation. Secondly, the environmental civil society can play a key role in up-scaling useful local knowledge resulting from the territorial basis of grassroots civil society actors, including farmers, academics, and environmental activists.

What is clear about the possibilities of a decentralized water management under the current socio-economic and political conditions in Uzbekistan is that the process will have to be gradual and it should not underestimate the role that the government can play. The primary reason is that the state will remain the most powerful institution capable of creating the conditions under which all the actors having a stake in a particular issue can become involved and can negotiate amongst themselves to achieve acceptable solutions to water problems.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to reinvigorate the point that it is difficult to focus on enhancing a state without strengthening the civil society. The latter will have to act robustly in order to facilitate checks and balances, offer alternative policy options, demand accountability, question existing policies, and articulate demands from different social, economic, and cultural actors (Layachi, 1995).

Considering the case of Uzbekistan, this paper argued that it is the right time to help develop advocacy skills within environmental civil society, helping organizations and the people they represent to act and interact with “political” and “economic” societies in finding viable solutions to emerging environmental challenges. Moreover, the government should also acknowledge the fact that alone it cannot adequately respond to the country’s emerging ecological problems, and that the work of the “third sector” will only complement its efforts.

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