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The Reconfiguration of Water Policies in Central Asia: A Reflexion on the IWRM Implementation in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan

Teaser

In the framework of Political Geography of Water, this contribution examines the logics of water policies implementation in Central Asia. Reflecting on the interactions between water policies, political power, and hydraulic territories, it analyzes the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) implementation - the global water paradigm promoted by the development organizations since the mid-1990s - its logics and rationales, in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan at the basin / local level (Middle Zeravshan Valley, Uzbekistan / Arys Valley, Kazakhstan).

Based on detailed, actor-oriented and comparative field-research in two river basins, the main findings highlight how the IWRM implementation was reconfigured by the two states in order to pursue specific socio-political strategies, in contradiction with the paradigm's aims and the narratives of international development.

Key Words

IWRM, water policies, international development, Central Asia.

Introduction: A Reflexion on Water and Its Policies

Until the 1970s water resources management was considered a technical issue mostly under the control of state-centralized bureaucracies and their hydro technicians and engineers, but since the end of the 1980s, significant changes have occurred. Reflecting on different issues ranging from climate change and population growth, to land degradation and inequitable water access, it emerged that the management of water resources is not merely a technical matter, but a socio-political, economic, and environmental process which involves a wide spectrum of different actors in the society. Since the 2000s, different scholars - geographers, political ecologists, sociologists and political scientists - have started arguing the political nature of water resources management; Allan (2003), Mollinga (2007), Molle (2008) and others clearly state that the majority of water security issues and inequalities to water access has a relevant political nature. In the current context of globalization and related socio-political and economic reconfigurations, since mid-1990s several international agencies have started to promote, in particular in the developing countries, initiatives and programs to improve water resources management according to an

environmental and social sustainable development. However, this approach and related logics, have tended to depoliticize different social and environmental processes related to water management.

Reflecting on these processes and connected challenges, this contribution aims to analyze and understand the logics of water policies implementation, specifically the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) framework in Central Asia — an heterogeneous arid and semi-arid region which lie in the Aral Sea basin. These processes are analysed in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan focusing at the basin / local level according to a comparative approach; hence, the following questions arise: what are the logics which have affected the IWRM implementation? Were the national sociopolitical systems able to shape this process according to their strategies and aims? National policies to the IWRM, or processes which hampered its implementation have emerged? In the framework of Political Geography, this research is essential in understanding the logics and rationale of institutional water reforms implementation, and related socio-political reconfigurations, in a region where water resources play a significant role in the development of the two states' political and economic spheres.

Depoliticizing Water Policies: The IWRM Framework

Reflecting on the socio-environmental issues in connection with water resources management, since 1995 a number of international donors and development agencies - the World Bank, the United Nations, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Asian Development Bank among others- have sought to promote the implementation of a water management paradigm both worldwide and in developing countries in particular.

Since the organization of the International Conference on Water and the Environment (ICWE) - in Dublin, Ireland, in January 1992- , the IWRM framework has been launched. Based on the so-called “Dublin principles”, the IWRM framework aims to improve water resources management according to multiple-perspectives sustainability: environmental, economic, social, and political (GWP 1998; 2000). In order to implement the framework and achieve these aims, a guideline, characterized by different pillars, was designed; this guideline promotes the management of water resources according to the river basin units (instead of administrative ones), the integration of different water uses (irrigation, domestic use, and industry), the shift from a top-down vertical approach to a participatory horizontal one in the decision-making processes and the introduction of economic principles in water allocation services (water fees).

In 1996 the Global Water Partnership (GWP) was created to support and guide the worldwide implementation of the IWRM and to promote the framework as the new global water paradigm. Subsequently most of the international agencies seek to mainstream the framework through the establishment of different projects, in particular in developing countries, stressing the importance of reaching sustainable, efficient, equitable, and democratic use of water resources. The sponsor to the IWRM was integrated with the support of the following policy and related initiatives characterizing both the national and the basin/local level: the Irrigation Management Transfer (IMT), and the establishment of the Water Users Associations (WUAs).

According to Allan (2001; 2003) and Biswas (2008) the IWRM framework and related initiatives have a strong political nature because the paradigm implementation requires institutional and structural reforms, power reconfigurations, changes in hierarchies and authorities, and involves a complex political process to face with conflicting interests. Furthermore, as debated by Molle (2007), the international agencies supporting the IWRM have streamlined a specific narrative clearly oriented to a naturalization and linked depoliticization of the paradigm, supporting its practices and objectives as natural, and hiding its evident and complex political nature. Reflecting on this issues, Ghazouani et al. (2012), Molle (2012) and Mollinga (2008) argue that behind the IWRM support of multiple sustainability and democratization, the framework aims, according to a specific neo-liberal approach, to roll-back state control of water resources and seeks widespread decentralization, liberalization, privatization within political-economic structures, as well as the commodification of water resources through the introduction of market principles and fees.

Since the 2000 a wide debate on the IWRM among water professionals, donor members, and academia has emerged, focusing on and discussing its definition (GWP, 2000), its pillars, and in particular the implementation procedures and the benefits which it could lead to throughout the world. The next paragraph discusses these processes and connected issues.

The IWRM in Central Asia

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Focus

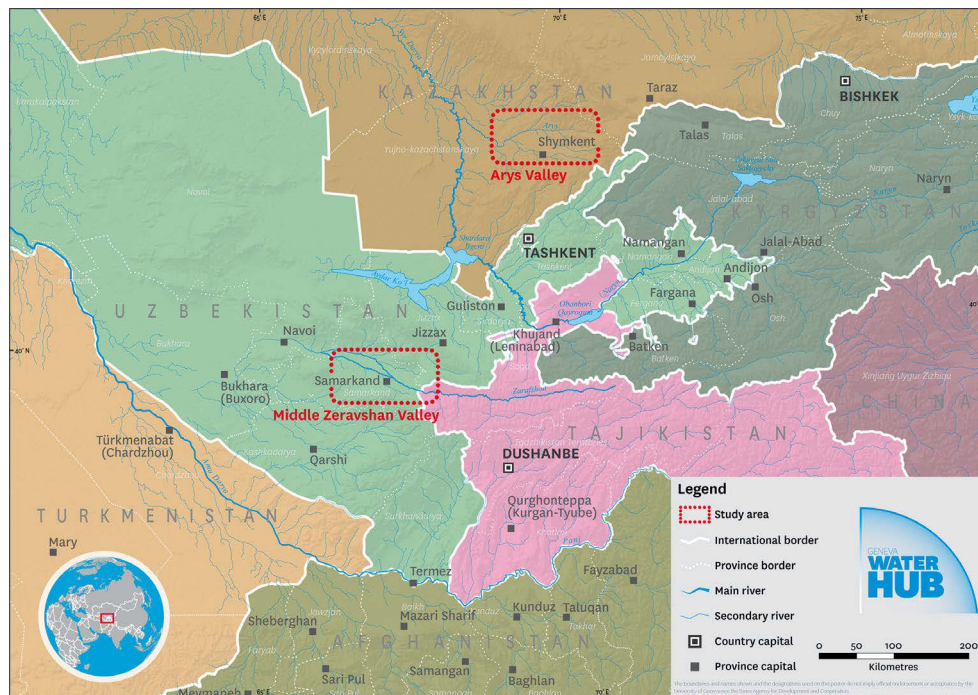
The research focuses on Central Asia, an arid and semi-arid territory where water has always played a strategic role in the development of societies and the state-building; by diverting the flows of the two main rivers, Amu-Darja and Syr-Darja — flowing from the Tian-Shan and Pamir mountains to the Aral Sea — and others, extended irrigated areas were designed in the last decades, specifically since the 1950s during the Soviet hydraulic mission.

In order to answer to the research questions presented above, an in-depth analysis of the current and former socio-political structures, meaning the strategies in conducting water reforms, of the relations among the different actors involved in water processes, and of the institutional and organizational structures of water organizations at the meso / local level is conducted. Moreover the attitude of the water users is crucial to understand the complexity of these dynamics.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are chosen since they are the downstream countries where irrigated agriculture is more developed and plays an important role (25-30% GDP of Uzbekistan), and are the states with the largest water consumption of the whole Aral Sea basin. Since, as also stressed by Mollinga (2008), the meso - local level is the scale where the implementation processes of national policies are more evident and understandable, this level was chosen for empirical research. Therefore, in Uzbekistan the Middle Zeravshan valley is chosen as it represents one of the most important and large irrigated areas of the state; while in Kazakhstan, in the Arys valley, which is located in the southern part of the country, irrigated agriculture is mostly widespread. In order to answer the research questions, the IWRM pillars were taken into consideration (river basin management, integration of water uses, participatory approach in decision-making processes, and commodification of water resources -Irrigation Service Fees-) focusing on their implementation, and related challenges, in the water authorities and water users organizations at the basin-local level. Therefore, the research focuses on the institutional/organizational and operational structure of the state water authorities at the basin level on one hand, and on the district water departments and the Water Users Associations (WUAs) at the local level on the other hand.

Hence, three districts for each valley are chosen according to their physical location and territorial characteristics (upstream / downstream - proximity to canals): Urgut, Nurabad, and Pastdargom (Samarkand province, Uzbekistan) and Tyulkibas, Ordabasy, and Otrar (South-Kazakhstan province, Kazakhstan), (Fig.1).

Figure 1. Study Area Location



Methodology

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A comparative qualitative approach is used in order to collect the data (during the period 2011-2012). Since the research mostly focuses on social processes and connected issues, this method is chosen because it allows a complete and deep understanding of these dynamics. Semi-structured interviews to the international and national experts are conducted to specifically understand the institutional and organizational framework of water resources, followed by interviews with a wide range of stakeholders involved in water management processes at the basin and local levels: members and staff of the basin agencies, district water departments, and of the WUAs. Furthermore, both interviews and informal talks with the water users, peasant farmers, and household plot owners are conducted; in addition, field surveys are undertaken in order to understand the physical characteristics of the canal networks and related irrigated areas, and the water allocation procedures.

Comparing the Logics of the IWRM Implementation in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan

National Institutional Water Framework

Reflecting on the evidence from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, at the national level the first significant difference which emerges between the two states concerns the national institutional water framework. In Uzbekistan, although in 2009 amendments to the 1993 “Law on Water Use” that were issued somewhat support the IWRM rationale, a new water code or law formalizing the IWRM framework has not been enacted. In comparison in Kazakhstan the IWRM was officially formalized through the 2003 new Water Code. However this institutional difference is less significant concerning the government procedures that have occurred since the 2000s until nowadays. Despite the difference regarding the institutional national water framework, a strong similarity emerged among the two case studies: both the governments, in the IWRM implementation process, focused on and chose to support the most convenient pillars, implementing them according to a national interpretation which did not interfere with their political and economic systems. Both countries, although with differences, preferred to maintain a conservative approach, in terms of limiting the institutional changes and in implementing reforms without questioning their governmental systems and related hydraulic bureaucracies. It is clear that the whole IWRM implementation would have required major changes in their respective governmental structures, district and local hierarchies, sociopolitical procedures and relations within the civil society.

Evidence at the meso-local level

Concerning the establishment of WUAs, processes significantly differ between the Middle Zeravshan valley and the Arys valley. In the Uzbek case study, the analysed WUAs, Urgut - Nurabad - Pastdargom, represent a reinterpretation of the former Soviet local water framework supported by the local government hierarchies, involving mostly just a change in names; the WUAs were established and are still guided by members of the province and district hydraulic bureaucracies in contrast with the IWRM rationale and the national institutional framework. Hence water users have not been involved in WUAs’ decision-making processes, limiting the widespread adoption of a participatory approach. Furthermore, although Irrigation Service Fee has been introduced, the majority of the users do not pay water allocation fees; since most of them are involved with State crop production (cotton and 50% of wheat), they also receive water for free to comply with the State plan without charge, as happened during the Soviet era. Therefore it emerges that the WUAs are not independent associations of water users, but rather organizations strongly subsidized by the province and district level state water authorities.

Differently in the Arys valley, Kazakhstan, on the one hand the WUAs have been established by water users according to the IWRM rationale, while on the other these processes were interfered by local and district powers related to the bureaucracies of the district departments and of the former state and collective farms. Nonetheless, similarly a top-down approach between the WUAs’ governing board and the water users, in the decision-making processes is still present — although in Uzbekistan it is even stronger; therefore, bottom-up practices have not emerged. Subsequently, a participatory approach has similarly not been widespread, although the Kazakh government, in contrast to the Uzbek government, tried to support it among the water users and in the relations between the water users and the governing boards of the WUAs. Concerning the water fees payment, although the Irrigation Service Fee was officially introduced in 1997, part of the water users do not pay, due to a lack of fair water service and to the increased fees in comparison with the former district water authority.

During the last years, since 2010, these lacks of technical capacities and financial budget have led to the failure and bankruptcy of different WUAs. In these local contexts water resources management would be controlled by province

level state authorities, due to the failure of irrigation management transfer, in contrast with the IWRM and IMT rationale.

A Political Reconfiguration of the IWRM

Whereas Uzbekistan between 1991 and 2015 is keeping a strong state-centralized approach in its sociopolitical structure and in water management procedures, Kazakhstan, after a decade of supported reforms and a slight shift towards decentralization (from the late 1990s to 2010), in the last years is undertaking a nationally based re-centralization process. The evidence shows that the IWRM is not implemented as initially sponsored by the international donors; although with differences between the two states, discussed above, the IWRM implementation is strongly influenced and shaped by local governments, somehow upsetting the framework's aims. Only the pillars which did not question and change the current hydraulic bureaucracies and related structures are selected and implemented, in order to achieve their national political-economic strategies; two different national pathways to water reforms, in contrast with the IWRM, emerged.

In conclusion, the evidence from the meso/local level shows how water resources are strongly embedded in the political economy of the two states, Uzbekistan in particular. In contradiction with the aims of the donors, the IWRM implementation has been significantly shaped and re-politicized by the two states to pursue national strategies of hydro-politics reconfiguration; on the one hand the Uzbek government consolidated its state power and authority, and its social control through a centralized water resources management, while on the other hand Kazakhstan takes advantage of the IWRM, re-centralizing water management through a rescaling process at the basin and local level. Contributing to Political Geography of water, this contribution enables the understanding of how a depoliticized water narrative is shaped and reinterpreted to consolidate and reconfigure national hydro-sociopolitical interactions and related waterscapes.

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