



## CASE STUDY

# Transboundary: Rural livelihoods and irrigation management transfer in Fergana valley



## Summary

With the collapse of the USSR, water sector seized to be subsidised leading to deterioration of basic infrastructure. Action was taken to partially transfer the responsibility for operation and maintenance of irrigation systems to water users. Nonetheless, this has had limited success because it has been seen as an additional cost rather than benefit. This illustrates that for this action, the returned benefits need to be higher than the costs.

## Background

The water sector used to be subsidized in Central Asia, which became unaffordable after the Federal Soviet Union's break-up. The period of transition proved to be very painful for the rural populations in the Fergana Valley, shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. While, the irrigated agriculture contributes 30-40% to the Gross Domestic Products (GDPs) of these three Central Asian countries, in a considerable number of cases, rural poverty is caused by worsening access to irrigation water. As a result of which, the basic infrastructure started to deteriorate and agricultural yields dropped.

The governments decided to introduce institutional reforms in the water sector and transfer partly the responsibility for operation and maintenance of irrigation systems to water users. A key element of irrigation management transfer (IMT) became the creation of Water Users Associations and public bodies within Canal Management Organizations.

The primary solution was seen in water management reorganization, implying that the water users have to take-over full or partial responsibility for water services through collection of fees whilst gaining greater rights to govern water management services and ensuring improved access to

irrigation water.

The intention of this reform was to benefit farmers due to improved efficiency and reliability of water service as a result of their participation in decision-making process.

## **Actions taken**

The practical project was conducted in period 2002–2008 under so-called “IWRM-Fergana Project”, locating its activities on three big canals, namely South Fergana Canal, Khodjabakirgan Canal and Aravan-Akbura Canal, administratively located in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan respectively. In 2004, the project had pre-defined three pilot WUAs for livelihoods research in order to assess the capacity of rural households to take over O&M of irrigation systems.

One of the key methodologies used in the project was livelihood analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Also, questionnaires to farmers were important part of knowledge

gathered.

The analysis showed that the current impact of IMT was mostly seen by the interviewees as an additional cost rather than a benefit. The interviewees shared that they would be willing to pay ISF only if there were more benefits than costs in returns. Also, the assessment of WUAs performance has proved that an intended institutional reform did not resulted in more effective management.

The observed WUAs in three Central Asia countries operated as water departments of the former Kolkhozes: WUA was perceived as another state organization by the rural poor; the rural poor did not participate in the WUA governance process and were not aware of their rights; WUA management was not accountable to the water users; and water users did not get a better quality service.

## **Outcomes**

This case study seeks to answer two questions:

- How important is the access to irrigation water for rural population?
- What is the current impact of IMT on the rural poor?

The observation findings confirm that the limited access to water is one of the principal constraints for improving rural livelihoods in the Fergana Valley. Firstly, agriculture appears to be the major source of income and food security for the rural poor. Secondly, the better access to irrigation water enables the rural people to diversify their income sources, including non-farming livelihood activities, and to make savings. Therefore, the improved access to water has a considerable potential to decrease livelihoods vulnerability and reduce poverty in the research area.

## **Lessons Learned**

Regardless of a number of differences in the state policies and legislation, these countries still have a similar process of IMT implementation i.e., insufficient design of irrigation service fees (ISF)-less than

a half of required level for meeting O&M costs."

The project recommends reconsidering policies that are related to land, water, markets, taxation, banking system and institutions. Then IMT will have a great potential to benefit the rural poor and succeed.

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**Related IWRM Tools**

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