

# Non-Governmental Organizations and Development: The Concept of “Place” and “Space”

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents an assessment of the Non Governmental Organizations and their contributions to development and conflict transformation in communities around waters. The paper underscores the relevance of the place-centered approach to expound the possible contributions of local NGOs to the development processes. It presents the contributions of NGOs at the community level from three angles i.e. from the position of the water resources management, water consumption, and finally from the cultural perspective. Water is presented as a valuable source of development in the irrigation and hydropower sectors of Central Asia. The paper argues that much as water is a potential resource in development processes, it has also been a source of conflicts in particular localities such as Fergana valley. The paper presents a discussion on the possible role and contribution of NGOs in conflict transformation with particular respect to conflicts related to water issues. It argues that being active agents of change and development in societies, NGOs can use the “local context-oriented approach” in the development process and transformation of the tensions linked to the water resources.

**Keywords:** Non Governmental Organizations; Development; Water; Place and Space; Culture; Conflict Transformation

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union, fifteen new republics got their independence. Although during the Soviet time all fifteen states had common interests, after getting independence, separation of national interests occurred. During a short historical period, the conflict of national interests between states, particularly related to development strategies, increased rapidly. The Central Asian region was not an exception. The countries in the Central Asian region have chosen their own way of development, especially related to the water sector. Using the water, by both upstream and downstream countries, of the Aral Sea basin for different purposes created tensions between states at the regional level. Also, water shortages, drought, poor management of water resources and climate change caused difficulties for farmers both on the local and national level.

In my course paper I will explore the existence of the tensions related to the water resources by the farmers who live in the frontier areas between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Also, I will present the role of local NGOs as active agents, which can use the “local context-oriented approach” in development and reconciliation of the tensions linked to the water resources. The “local context-oriented approach”, would mean the approach, which takes into account the local culture and the needs of local people.

In the first chapter I will present water as a valuable source of development in the irrigation and hydropower sector of Central Asia. The next section is dedicated to the tensions and conflicts in the regional and local level that are linked to water resources and the development processes. The last chapter demonstrates the possible role and contribution of NGOs in development and conflict transformation related to water issues.

## **2. WATER AS A VALUABLE SOURCE OF DEVELOPMENT**

The significance of water in our life is undoubted. Issues concerning water are an essential and integrated part of development processes on global, state and community levels. On the global level it is connected with Millennium Development Goals, and different global policies related to development and management of distribution and consumption of water resources. On the state level, the water is an integrated part of development strategies related to agriculture and energy producing sectors. On the community level, water is essential part of development of livelihoods of families particularly in rural areas.

Since the collapse of the former Soviet Union and five Central Asian republics declaring their independence, each country has chosen its own development path that complements the national interests. In development processes related to the water resources, the countries separated into two blocks. The upstream countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, determined their main priority to develop and use the potential of producing hydropower. The downstream countries of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan continued to use their water resources to irrigate the current fields and develop new areas to cultivate different crops.

### **1. 1. Water and Irrigation**

During the Soviet time in 1950s-1990s, the so-called ‘virgin-land’ agriculture oriented policy for irrigation of new lands in the Central Asian region was implemented. The Soviets developed massive numbers of new fields and built large networks of irrigation canals. For instance, during several decades, the irrigated areas in the Central Asian region increased from 4.5 million hectares in 1965 to 7 million hectares in 1991. (Wegerich, 2008, 73)

The agriculture development oriented policy was aimed at achieving a reduction in food dependency in the region and exporting agricultural crops outside of the country. For instance, the cotton, which was cultivated in the region even before the Soviet time, was proclaimed as a “white gold” and it became the major export from the region. As a result of the policy, today Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are considered as one of the biggest world exporters of the cotton in the world market. (National Cotton Council of America, 2011)

Despite these achievements in the agricultural sector, the massive consumption of the water resources for irrigation of fields from the largest rivers, Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya, brought enormous negative impact to the ecosystem of the region. Moreover, the development of new irrigated fields is seen as the main reason for the desiccation of the Aral Sea.

## 1. 2. Water and Hydropower

The land deficit in the upstream countries compared to downstream states, forced them to prioritize use of water resources mostly for production of hydropower rather than for agricultural purposes (Central Asian water info, 2011). In spite of existing hydropower stations that are producing almost 95% of electricity in the country, recently Tajikistan has built two new hydro energy plants “Sangtuda-1” and “Sangtuda-2”. The construction was financed by Russian and Iranian governments, which invested around 430 million US dollars into both projects. Also, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, and other international financial institutions have helped with loans and grants to make technical assessments, and rehabilitate and modernize the current hydropower sector. The total foreign investment in the hydropower sector of Tajikistan has reached 1.2 billion USD (MIWM RT, 2006, 47). Recently the government of Tajikistan has started mobilization of funds for construction of the Rogun dam and hydropower station with maximum capacity to produce electricity in the level of 3600 MW (Marat, 2010). The installed capacity of hydropower plant can fully satisfy the local market with electricity, and moreover Tajikistan can then export the energy outside to Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and India. The export of electricity and developing new markets are considered as the main interests of Tajikistan in the hydro energy sector.

Kyrgyzstan has one of the biggest Toktogul hydropower stations in the region with the capacity to produce 1200 MW energy. During the independence period from 1990 to 2006, the country increased production of hydro energy from 13.3 billion kWh to 14.5 billion kWh. According to the National Energy Program of Kyrgyzstan, the country is planning to produce an additional 3960 MW energy from newly built hydropower stations till 2025. Nevertheless, the program requires a sufficient amount of internal and external investments (Avilash, 2009).

## 2. THE CONFLICTS ON REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS LINKED TO THE WATER SECTOR

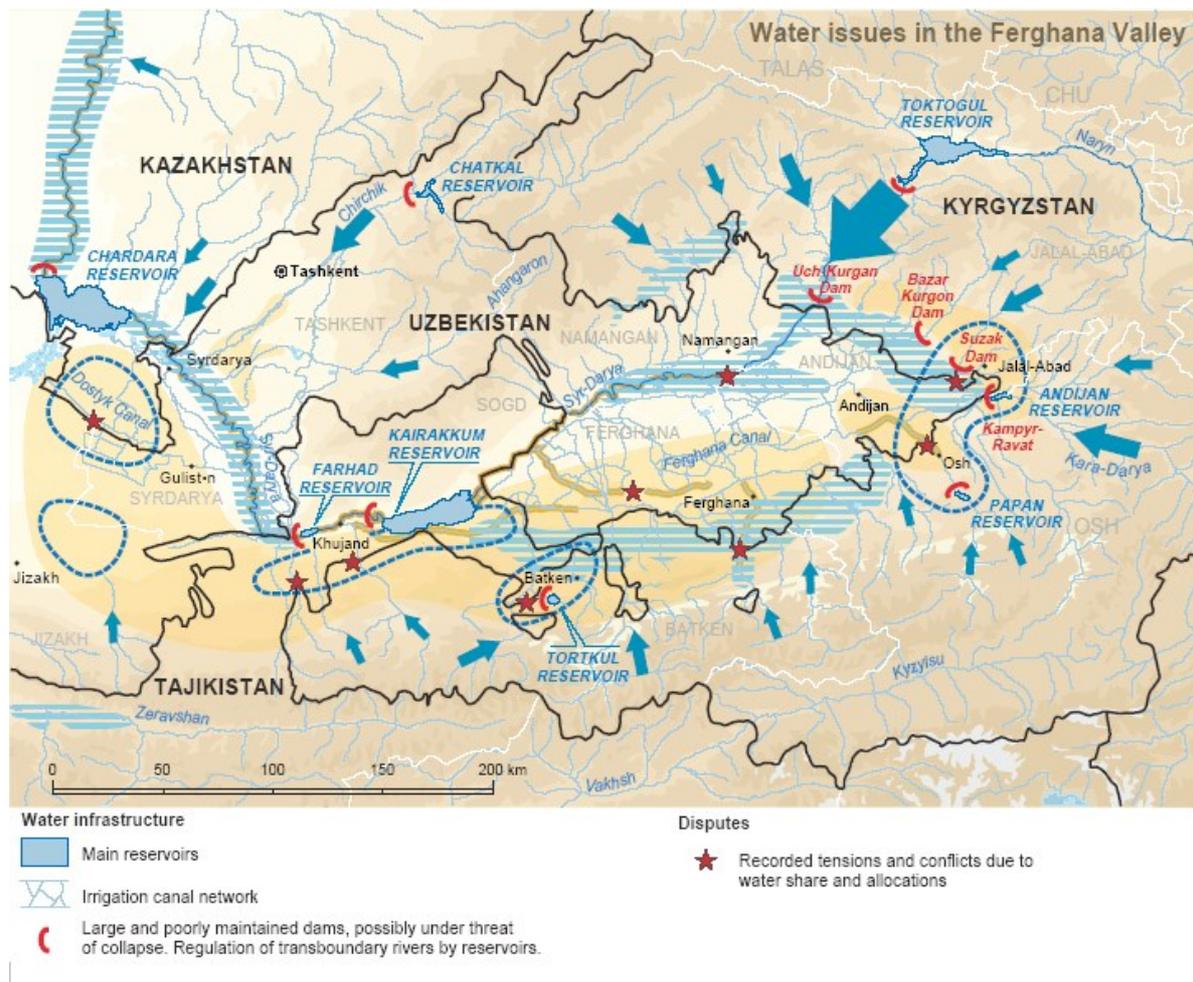
### 2. 1. Conflicts in the regional or “space” level

During the Soviet era, Central Asian countries were part of one economic and energy system, and the relationship was based on a barter scheme. The energy system was based mostly on thermal sources. Coal, oil and gas (80%) were mostly used to produce electricity. Irrigational farming was prioritized, while production of hydropower was in a secondary role. So, the countries upstream, which have low resources of oil and gas, covered the electricity deficit during the winter season by importing it from neighboring countries downstream, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. During the summer time, the dams and reservoirs of hydropower plants in upstream countries were used as an instrument to control the runoff of the rivers, and excess of electricity was exported to downstream countries as compensation (Petrov and Normatov, 2008, 115).

After getting independence, the states began to follow the national interests and market relationships. The upstream countries established their main priority as the development strategy to produce the hydropower. The countries that are suffering from lack of electricity, especially during the winter, have decided to use water in order to produce a relatively cheap and safe to environment type of electricity. However, the downstream countries have continued to use their irrigated fields and moreover develop new areas to cultivate different crops. The conflict of interests between upstream and downstream countries brought several tensions on the regional level, particularly among Uzbekistan from one side and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan from another (Najibulla, 2010), (Najibullah, 2010), (Marat, 2008).

## 2. 2. Conflicts in the local or “place” level

In spite of the existence of the conflict of interest between the hydropower ambitions of upstream countries and the irrigation-oriented policy of downstream states, which created tensions in the regional or “space” level, another phenomenon caused similar conflicts among frontier farmers in the local or “place” level.



**Graph 1.** The map of water based conflicts and tensions in Ferghana valley (Novikov and Rekacewicz, 2005).

The Graph 1 demonstrates the recorded tensions and conflicts on water share and allocation disputes in the Ferghana valley. The valley is located in the territory of three Central Asian countries Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. According to the Graph 1, there are three recorded water-based disputes on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and three areas of tension between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

In my course paper, I will mostly consider the water conflicts and tensions of frontier farmers between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, because both of the countries are upstream and have an enormous amount of water resources.

The roots of the tension between the frontier farmers began during the Soviet era, when a network of irrigation canals were built in the cross borders area. The distribution of the water flow in the canals, dams and reservoirs was managed and controlled by Moscow as a part of the centralized economy (Petrov and Normatov, 2008, 113).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, newly independent states established water management bodies and signed the agreements that regulate water flows on the trans-border farming areas. However, the farmers try to use as much water as possible in order to satisfy their needs. This situation brings disputes, conflicts and even physical violence between farmers from different sides of border and diverse ethnic groups (Khamidov, 2008).

The clear example of frontier farmers' disputes related to water issues can be the tensions between the Sogd and Batken regions of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Particularly, the Kyrgyz farmers complain about the water shortage created by Tajik communities who consume water from the Khoja-Bakyrghan canal to irrigate cotton fields. At the same time, the Tajik farmers accused Kyrgyz border communities of making a water shortage on the Vorukh-Shurab canal, which begins in and passes through Kyrgyzstan territory (Irin, 2006). That same year the Kyrgyz dam was destroyed by approximately 150 Tajiks, who justified their actions by stating that the construction was built in territories, where the border has not been approved (Khamidov, 2008). The tensions were resolved through the help of local authorities and international organizations (Irin, 2006).

The water disputes among frontier farmers require a "local context-oriented" approach in order to transform the hostility into something positive like cooperation and partnership. In the next chapter I will present the possible contribution of NGOs in transforming the water-based conflicts and avoiding the escalation of the tensions from local to the regional level.

### **3. THE ROLE OF NGOS IN DEVELOPMENT AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION**

In his article "One World," Wolfgang Sachs observes the relation between universal space-centered and local place-centered approaches. He states that in the diverse world, the universal strategies clash with local oriented-strategies that are based on culture, custom and traditions of a specific location (Sachs, 1992, 112). However, since space and place are always interconnected, we should take into consideration both approaches by finding a hybrid version. By the hybrid, I mean the strategy that will not reject universal issues like human rights and at the same time will be more concentrated on the specific place.

In this chapter I will concentrate more on a place-centered approach and present my views on the possible contributions of local NGOs to the development processes and conflict resolution of water-related conflicts in a specific location like Fergana valley. I have divided the contribution of NGOs on the community level into three points: water resources management point, water consumption point, and cultural level.

Indeed, usually the local NGOs do not possess technical personnel who can help to design and manage the strategy on water allocation and sharing between frontier farmers. However, the local NGOs can help communities to establish and design water-based projects. The projects can include technical consultations from different professional institutes. Also, by proper assessment of the local capacity and culture, the NGOs can develop the concept of sustainability and long term planning in the process of designing and implementation of the water-based projects by local communities. Moreover, the organizations can help local communities to arrange the fund-raising campaigns and play the role of negotiator between the local farmers

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and potential donors for funding the future water-based projects. For instance, recently the United Nation Development Program in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has used the capacity of local NGOs in order to train local communities in the Fergana valley. The topics of trainings were: Conflict Prevention, Financial Management, Project Design and Resource Mobilization, Community Mobilization, etcetera (United Nation Development Programme, 2002, 8).

On the water consumption level, the NGOs can raise the public awareness on the issue of decreasing the over consumption of water resources and analyzing the interconnection of the frontier farmers from both sides of the border. Also, the NGOs can grab public attention to the issue of using old drainage systems and how these cause an impact on the local environment like erosion of soil (Ongwen, 1996, 278). The campaigns will be aimed at creating the culture of co-operative and efficient use of water resources in domestic and irrigation level among frontier communities.

On the cultural level, NGOs can make contribution on transformation and reconciliation of water related tensions and conflicts. The organizations know the local culture and the history of living together both ethnic groups, Kyrgyz and Tajiks. They can use the traditional instruments like the culture of the teahouse to resolve conflicts to something constructive. For many centuries the tea houses in the Central Asia has been used as a place to share knowledge and discuss different disputes (Coffee and Tea, 2009). Communication as a conflict-prevention measure or conflict resolution strategy is very important. The informal setting of tea houses can create a trustful and friendly environment for both parties. This atmosphere would be a complement to peaceful reconciliation of the disputes. The NGOs could actively participate in this process by organizing these meetings and mediating the water-based tensions.

There are many other areas where NGOs as active agents of Civil Society can make valuable contributions in the development and conflict transformation. However, unfortunately in the universal strategies that are space-centered, the role of local agents like NGOs is undervalued or even forgotten.

#### Conclusion

The local NGOs as place-centered agents can make a contribution to avoid the escalation of the local tensions between frontier farmers. Moreover, the organizations can prevent the transformation of local water based disputes into interstate conflicts. The work of organizations can be address to bring a change to the notion of state borders from the tool of protection of national sovereignty to the meeting point between two communities. The meeting point for communication, where the knowledge and experience sharing will benefit the mutual interests of both sides.

In my course paper I have tried to be not homogeneous and prescriptive about possible role of NGOs as active agents in development and conflict transformation. Our diverse world requires a different approach in development that will take into consideration the culture, traditional and local context of specific place. Moreover, in my paper, I am not arguing which approach is better, the universal space-centered or local place-centered. Both approaches, like a coin, have two sides. In my opinion, in a diverse world we need to use local context-oriented approaches; however we must not forget about the interconnection between “place” and “space”, because what we are doing in the “place” will or could affect the “space”.

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