

## Scenario Thinking to Support Transboundary Water Cooperation in Central Asia

### THE PROJECT

In 2012, FAO implemented a 'scenario thinking' project in Central Asia, jointly with EC-IFAS and the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia (UNRCCA). The project aimed to support water cooperation among the Aral basin riparians by encouraging systematic thinking about the future. Through a joint scenario thinking exercise, participants from all Central Asia states and Afghanistan developed a scenario set for the year 2040 about the regional water-agricultural-energy nexus.

Given the importance of water resources to the national economies in Central Asia, effective regulation of the shared Aral basin waters is among the most significant areas of intergovernmental cooperation in the region. Discussions about alternative water management regimes are ongoing but parties have very different views about the principles that govern water allocation. It can be argued that delays in establishing effective cooperation pose a risk to the overall development effort in the region



### THE SCENARIO APPROACH

Many organizations have institutionalized the practice of scenario thinking to explore strategic questions, expose risks, or strengthen their operational processes to react to outlier events. More recently, however, scenarios are being used to support complex negotiation processes or as a tool for societal change – so called 'transformative scenarios'.

Scenarios are internally consistent stories of alternative plausible futures. They explicitly acknowledge the inherent uncertainty of the future, and therefore do not predict what will happen by extrapolation from the past. Rather, scenarios show how relevant elements *might* evolve over time, and describe the logic behind these possible developments.

Scenarios are developed in a systematic and highly participatory process. The methodology is robust and proven, and involves a rigorous analysis of the driving forces that affect the problem situation. The scenario development process builds on the perspectives of a broad group of actors, and therefore considers the functioning of the system as a whole – the bigger picture. This is important, because compartmentalization – considering only some aspects of the problem instead of the full system – is a real risk when dealing with complex problems in natural resources management.

As you think about the system, spend part of your time from the vantage point that lets you see the whole system, not just the problem that may have drawn you to focus on the system to begin with.

Donella Meadows, Dancing with Systems, The Systems Thinker, March 2002

## TRANSFORMATIVE SCENARIO THINKING

Over time we learned that ‘scenario thinking’ is not only valuable in a strategic planning context, but also a highly useful tool for helping to create “common ground” in dialogue processes. The group process encourages participants – often from different parties having different outlooks and interests – to share views, ideas, and ‘mental maps’. It leads to a convergence of views and reframing of the problem situation, and enlarges the solution space among parties.

Adam Kahane summarizes how scenario thinking supports ‘wicked social problems’:

- transformative scenario planning helps us to see the bigger picture; we cannot be effective in changing what is happening if we only see our little part;
- it provides a framework to think and talk with strangers and opponents, not just friends and colleagues; in this way the actors learn to work across differences in perspectives and interests;
- it helps us not to be blindsided by futures we do not want, and which we effectively ignore;
- an interactive scenario project builds diverse alliances of actors; most problems are too complex to be solved by any one person or organization; the scenario project provides a practical way for diverse actors to begin working together.

## SCENARIO THINKING IN CENTRAL ASIA: FOLLOW UP

The first phase of the project was completed in December 2012, and resulted in a set of comprehensive scenario logics. They were developed in a highly participatory process and agreed upon by all Central Asian States and Afghanistan.

We now need to enlarge the impact of the scenario exercise, and communicate the process gains and insights to a larger audience. The second phase of the project comprises three components:



- 1) Capacity Development: establish institutional and national capacity in scenario thinking;
- 2) Policy Dialogue: a series of national and regional workshops in which diverse and varied groups of stakeholders and decision makers examine relevant policy questions using the scenario set as back drop; these facilitated discussions conclude with a dialogue about insights gained, strategic directions to follow, and joint actions to take;
- 3) Communication: insights communicated to high-level decision and policy makers through a series of targeted policy briefs and a number of regional scenario thinking events.

## CONCEPT NOTE AND FURTHER INFORMATION

We are now seeking funding for the second phase of the project. For further information, please contact: Ines Beernearts, FAO Ankara ([Ines.Beernearts@fao.org](mailto:Ines.Beernearts@fao.org)); Giovanni Munoz, FAO Rome ([Giovanni.Munoz@fao.org](mailto:Giovanni.Munoz@fao.org)); or Fedor Klimtchouk, UNRCCA Ashgabat ([Klimtchouk@un.org](mailto:Klimtchouk@un.org))