
WATER CAN BE A TRUE SOURCE OF PROSPERITY FOR CENTRAL ASIA

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As Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe on June 20-21 hosted the High-Level International Conference Water for Sustainable Development 2018-2028, we are publishing the following opinion article by Cyril Muller, the World Bank's Regional Vice President for Europe and Central Asia, who attended the conference:

Earlier this week, I met with colleagues in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, where I heard from them about the difficulty so many Tajik households still face in accessing that essential ingredient for life – water. The challenges are especially acute in remote, rural areas of the country, where many communities have no direct access to safe drinking water, or to an irrigated water supply for farming. This is all the more surprising given that Tajikistan is rich in water resources.

In one story, I heard about the experiences of people in Lolazor, a village in Vahdat District, who had struggled for years to access irrigated water. This meant that they had perpetually low crop yields and therefore little income from the land. Job opportunities were scarce and times were hard.

But we also talked about how change and progress can happen. For example, recent improvements in farm irrigation and water drainage in the area around Lolazor have led to better lives for the villagers, as they no longer face a shortage of irrigated water. Indeed, the benefits go far beyond this: more agricultural crops are being yielded, more jobs are being created, and there is more hope now that fewer people will migrate abroad to find work.

Although Tajikistan is landlocked, its elevation and topography, largely consisting of glaciers and mountains, mean that water is abundant. Yet, poor water management and dilapidated irrigation infrastructure have meant that the country has not fully capitalized on this valuable resource. With more than two-thirds of Tajikistan's population of 9 million people living in rural areas, lack of access to water continues to be a serious impediment to the country's development.

A recent World Bank report, Glass Half Full, shows one in four households in Tajikistan do not have enough water. It also reveals long service interruptions because of breakdowns in water supply infrastructure, with rural residents experiencing more service interruptions that last a week or more.

Like Tajikistan, other countries in Central Asia have an abundance of natural resources, including water. But similarly, they face challenges in effectively managing water resources, and providing access to clean water and sanitation for all of their citizens. In some rural parts of the Kyrgyz

Republic, for example, villagers only have access to water from irrigation ditches to wash clothes and even for cooking. In Uzbekistan, the households of more than half the population of roughly 31 million people remain unconnected to a piped water system.

And if that was not enough, climate change is also having a major impact – melting glaciers in Central Asia and shifts in the timing of water flows are increasing the risk of torrential floods and reducing the amount of water available in summer months. The effects can also lead to a decrease in hydropower output by up to 20% in Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, which are both highly reliant on hydropower.

So, how can countries in Central Asia address the challenges and fully capitalize on the development opportunities offered by water?

I was highly encouraged by the productive discussions that took place this week, and in which I participated, at a High-Level International Water Conference in Dushanbe, hosted by the Government of Tajikistan and the United Nations. This conference brought together Presidents, Prime Ministers, and many others from around the world to find ways to address major water-related challenges.

Everyone agrees that the challenges cannot be solved by individual countries. Climate change – with its impacts on water resources, the hydrological cycle, and surface and groundwater flows – shows no respect for national boundaries. Adequate responses to climate change and effective management of water resources require the cooperation of all countries at the national, regional, and global levels.

Cross-border cooperation is also economically beneficial. Research suggests that regional cooperation in managing shared water resources could generate an additional US\$ 4 billion per year for Central Asia. And as part of the High Level Panel On Water, Tajikistan has contributed substantially to cooperation.

Water permeates all aspects of life, which is why it has been interwoven into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG № 6 is dedicated to ensuring access to water and sanitation for all people around the world. Strategically, the SDGs are aligned with the World Bank Groups twin goals of ending extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity.

Together with our member countries, other development partners, the private sector, academia, and civil society, the World Bank is actively supporting Tajikistan, and other countries in Central Asia and around the world, to address water-related challenges and deliver on the 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals.

As I think about the road ahead, I am reminded of Lolazor village. When my colleagues visited there a few months ago to view the irrigation works, one local woman told them, We came together as a community and jointly resolved the most pressing issue we were facing – the lack of water.

If a similar approach is taken more broadly, at the regional-level, water can truly be a source of development and prosperity for the citizens of Central Asia.

<https://www.timesca.com/index.php/news/26-opinion-head/19907-water-can-be-a-true-source-of-prosperity-for-central-asia>

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