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## POLICY BRIEFS

# The United Nations 2023 Water Conference: Lessons from the Aral Sea Basin

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## KEY MESSAGE

The United Nations (UN) Water Conference in March 2023 marked a significant landmark in global water governance. However, despite efforts made towards inclusivity and over 700 pledges garnered to cooperate and solve the world's water issues, criticisms have arisen surrounding the event regarding accountability and ambition. This policy brief examines Central Asian water governance through the case of the Aral Sea Basin states—a region drastically affected by human-induced water scarcity—highlighting challenges and disagreements brought to the fore at global arenas like the UN Water Conference. The event demonstrated the region's unpreparedness and limited engagement with other nation-states and stakeholders, exemplified in the release of a Joint Statement of the Central Asian states—signed by only four of the five riparian states and holding a strong techno-managerial focus, obscuring possible cooperative and interdisciplinary paths forward. Here, we analyse the basin countries' experience to stress the necessity for proactive involvement of Global South countries in global water governance and make recommendations for future global event organisers to better foster cooperation among countries to accelerate progress towards SDG6.

## ONCE IN A HALF-CENTURY OPPORTUNITY: THE UNITED NATIONS WATER CONFERENCE

The United Nations (UN) Water Conference in March 2023—an inaugural event held at its headquarters in

New York City—marked the end of a 46-year meeting hiatus and a significant milestone in global water governance. Drawing considerable attention within the research community, it has been dubbed a 'Paris moment' for water following the announcement of its Water Action Agenda with over 700 pledges aimed at fostering cooperation to address the pressing global water crisis. Gathering more than 7,000 experts on water-related topics, the conference sought to provide member states with a wide range of opportunities for networking and upscaling their negotiation skills. However, despite its likening to a watershed moment akin to the Paris Agreement, it has faced criticism for missing "greater accountability, rigour and ambition"<sup>1</sup>. Important questions remain regarding the scope of these voluntary pledges, their transferability to policy and actionable initiatives, and the extent of accountability measures to which stakeholders may be held.

Long-standing challenges persist in translating the global agenda to regional and national opportunities, exemplified by the case of the Aral Sea basin countries in Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, the latter of which notably co-hosted the conference alongside the Netherlands. Offering unparalleled access to various water networks, international development partners, and representatives from other basin regions that Central Asian countries could leverage, the conference was a unique opportunity for the Aral Sea basin states following historic and lengthy exclusion from global dialogue and international negotiations during their tenure as part of the USSR<sup>2</sup>. Instead, the event exposed the limited preparedness of

these countries for regional water insecurity problems as well as inadequate local stakeholder engagement. Its location also proved financially restrictive for regional experts, impeding the creation of an enabling environment for basin states to fully capitalise on the opportunity.

## COMPLEXITIES OF CENTRAL ASIAN WATER GOVERNANCE

The Aral Sea basin has gained notoriety for its environmentally catastrophic conditions: a drastic reduction of 80% of its water surface since 1960 due to excessive water use for agricultural purposes<sup>3</sup>. Today, five countries in the basin—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—rely heavily on the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers to irrigate more than 80% of their arable lands (Fig. 1). It has been well-established that interstate disagreements arise from uneven water allocation, competing needs for water between downstream agriculture and upstream hydropower generation needs, interconnected water infrastructure, and large-scale water infrastructure projects in upstream countries<sup>4</sup>. However, water-related disputes in the region persist today despite numerous transboundary agreements such as the 1992 Almaty

agreement on transboundary water resources use, protection, and management, the 1993 Kzyl–Orda agreement on joint actions to address the Aral Sea problem, the 1993 International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), and the 1998 Syr Darya agreement on water allocation in the Syr Darya River.

While the UN Water Conference signified an opportunity for Central Asian countries to develop more inclusive preparatory processes at regional and national levels and consolidate their stance on water issues on the global stage, unresolved disagreements hindered effective engagement. Previous regional meetings of Central Asian presidents have seen collective declarations emphasising the need to strengthen legal and institutional frameworks for improved cooperation in the Aral Sea basin, as well as acknowledgement of the limited effectiveness of existing agreements and regional water organisations. In 2009, for example, a high-level statement by IFAS' presidents and founders indicated the readiness of states to join forces in revisiting organisational structure and legal aspects of cooperation.<sup>5</sup> However, despite two lengthy discussions of IFAS reforms between 2008–2011 and 2018–2023—heavily supported by international development partners—no consensus was reached, and profound disagreements emerged regarding the organisation's priorities, functions, and the optimal location for its executive bodies. Upstream

Figure 1: Map of Central Asia and the Aral Sea basin



Source: FAO. (2012). *AQUASTAT Transboundary River Basin Overview – Aral Sea*. Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). Rome, Italy

Kyrgyzstan, for instance, ‘froze’ its participation in IFAS in 2016 and its return is yet to materialise.

Regional tensions came to the fore at the conference: Tajikistan notably seized the event to assert its ambition to be a champion of the Global South in setting and implementing the global water agenda. However, other riparian states viewed Tajikistan’s chairmanship more as a platform to pursue its political ambitions rather than an opportunity to foster unity among countries. Seeking international limelight among other basin states is evident across different forums, with Kazakhstan joining France to co-host the One Water Summer in 2024, coinciding with a UN General Assembly high-level session.

### UNPACKING THE JOINT STATEMENT OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

Regional tensions and competition have contributed to ambiguous outcomes from the UN Water Conference. During the event the basin states released a Joint Statement of the Central Asian states, reaffirming the region’s ambition to utilise “the platform of the UN 2023 Water Conference to inform the world community about the existing problems in the region and attract attention and resources to solve them, as well as to demonstrate the solidarity of the countries of the region on issues related to water resources, the readiness to jointly combat today’s and future challenges”<sup>6</sup>. However, this statement was issued on behalf of four out of the five Central Asian countries, excluding Kyrgyzstan, revealing regional disagreement.

The Joint Statement does however highlight the importance of transboundary water cooperation to ensure peace, stability, and development in the region, and the need to accelerate action towards achieving SDG6 and other water-related SDGs. Nevertheless, it does not provide any clear implementation plan as to how countries would jointly address unresolved issues and tackle emerging ones, nor how regional cooperation could be strengthened. There was also little resolution regarding the accountability of regional stakeholders, with questions remaining on how to improve IFAS’s institutional capacity given Kyrgyzstan’s absence and resolving internal conflicting interests on reforms. As a result, concrete outcomes for joint projects and programmes to cooperate and solve joint water problems were noticeably absent. The longstanding history of the Aral Sea Basin Program since 1994 and its implications for the Aral Sea crisis underscore the complexities involved: implementation challenges were evident for transboundary river projects, with most development initiatives in the water sector being bilateral or nationally focussed. Perhaps most alarmingly, the statement lacked clarity on how countries plan to coordinate their climate agendas.

The Joint Statement missed an opportunity to reflect on the interdisciplinary nature of the conference. Instead, it emphasises joint actions on the integrated management and rational use of water resources, the introduction of water resources saving, as well as ‘green’ technologies, which reflects the region’s overt focus on technical and engineering knowledge relating to water resource management. This techno-managerial tone is at odds with nuanced debates on inclusivity, good governance, and sustainable development held at the event, and reinforces the role of water as a matter of national security in top-down decision-making systems.

### PITFALLS OF THE UN WATER CONFERENCE

In a world where most water-insecure transboundary river basins are located in the Global South<sup>7</sup>, it remains a stark reality that global events are predominantly shaped by experts from the Global North. A major drawback of the conference was the profiting of Western-led water-related concepts and notions, which are not commonly used in the realities of water management in the world’s developing economies. It tried to emphasise inclusive processes by allowing a broad range of stakeholders to contribute; nevertheless, hardly any NGOs from Central Asia took part, and only some youth representatives from the region were included, propelled by strong donor lobbying. Despite significant efforts made by event organisers to co-develop the agenda with various stakeholders, the conference proved that limited headway has been made to establish a suitable ‘language for all’.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A WAY FORWARD

The UN Water Conference provided opportunities for countries to initiate stakeholder engagement and basin-specific preparations to contribute to the global Water Action Agenda and make individual commitments. However, as the Aral Sea basin case demonstrates, some countries with developing economies struggle to harvest opportunities provided by such global events.

A clear and critical advanced assessment of potential entry points to solve regional challenges would have laid a foundation for the Aral Sea states to capitalise on the conference. More specific commitments to achieve the Joint Statement and address growing water challenges are needed, as are robust regional coordination mechanisms. These will all require political will.

This policy brief makes five recommendations for future organisers and participants of global events to foster better engagement with Global South countries tackling analogous issues to Central Asia:

1. Profile conference goals and anticipated outcomes by improving preparations within the basin, involving local stakeholders, fostering widespread coordination among stakeholders at all levels within the basin, and implementing tailored regional and national public engagement strategies.
2. Communicate various opportunities and platforms provided by the event (such as South-to-South exchange), and dispel misconceptions about countries from the Global South solely seeking financial support from the Global North.
3. Take into account the diverse needs and inclusivity of stakeholders, especially from the Global South, by offering accessible and affordable venues.
4. Formulate actionable commitments and consider their local, national, and regional implications.
5. Support regional representatives to develop implementation plans or roadmaps, integrate local actions into the global agenda, and monitor the progress of these commitments.

Global water problems require shared accountability and responsibility when discussing and implementing solutions between Global North and Global South countries. Full-scale and proactive involvement of Global South countries is needed, especially from regions where water governance is complex. To make progress towards SDG6 for equitable and sustainable water management, we must ensure that lessons learned from events like the UN Water Conference pave the way for inclusive and effective solutions to tackle shared water challenges.

## A NOTE TO READERS

This policy brief is part of discussions on “After the UN Water Conference: Examining the global dissonance”. Further details, including a recording of a webinar event can be found on the King’s Water Centre webpage (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/kings-water>)

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- 2 USSR- the Union of Social Socialist Republics
- 3 Gaybullaev, B., Chen, S. C., & Kuo, Y. M. (2012). Large-scale desiccation of the Aral Sea due to over-exploitation after 1960. *Journal of Mountain Science*, 9, 538-546

- 4 Xenarios, S., Schmidt-Vogt, D., Qadir, M., Janusz-Pawletta, B., & Abdullaev, I. (Eds.). (2019). *The Aral Sea basin: water for sustainable development in Central Asia*. Routledge.
- 5 Executive Committee of the International Fund for saving the Aral Sea. (2009). Joint Statement of the Heads of IFAS States-Founders. [http://www.cawater-info.net/bk/water-law/pdf/ifas\\_almaty2009\\_e.pdf](http://www.cawater-info.net/bk/water-law/pdf/ifas_almaty2009_e.pdf)
- 6 Joint Statement of the Central Asian states at the UN 2023 Water Conference
- 7 MacAlister, C, Baggio, G, Perera, D, Qadir, M, Taing, L, Smakhtin, V. (2023). *Global Water Security 2023 Assessment*. United Nations, University Institute for Water, Environment and Health, Hamilton, Canada

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