

FOREWORD

It was in 1986 that we took a train from Helsinki to Moscow. Our plan was to travel around Central Asia and get acquainted with water management in that part of the USSR. One of our particular interests was to get a view on what was going on with the Aral Sea – there were some rumors and even news about the environmental disaster but a clear picture was missing at the international arena.

In Moscow, we were privileged to have meetings with distinguished Soviet water specialists such as Professors V. Voropayev and M. Khublaryan who were modest in describing what was going on in with the Aral Sea but the solution was clearly outspoken; the region needed large-scale water transfers from the Northern rivers, most preferably from Ob-Irtysh through Volga. Otherwise, there would be a massive catastrophe with millions of migrants away from the area.

The solutions became very different than planned those days of Perestroika. In fact, it seems that the solutions have by and large not really been found yet; the catastrophe remains.

On our trip with a team that dominantly consisted of water engineering students – among them one of the two editors of this book, Olli Varis as a young postgraduate student – we had no way to the Aral Sea but saw and heard many things. The region was and is rich with ages-old wisdom and culture. It strived to modernize its economy with massive agricultural systems and other water-related means. Many things went well we heard but we also already knew that many went totally wrong too.

Looking back is easy of course but looking forward is far more difficult. Central Asia needs solutions and new insights to its development and for its water sector. We at the University tend to believe in an optimistic way that we must give all the means that we can for the young generation and they most probably will be able to make things better than what they are now. Such is the history of this book too.

In autumn 2007, we organized a course at Helsinki University of Technology on Global Water Issues, with a special topic on the Central Asian water problems. This course has, over the years, targeted various regions, from China to Middle East and North Africa. The course on Central Asia was quite productive and nice, and as one of the consequences, to our positive surprise, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland asked for our willingness to take over the Finnish component of their co-operation with Global Water Partnership and Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia. We accepted this offer with great pleasure.

Along with the University's mandate, we thought to propose the distinguished partners to organize a seminar in the region with the scope to involve young water professionals from Finland and from the region to deliberate the water challenges of Central Asia. The partners were fond of this idea and consequently, the seminar will take place in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in late November 2008 with a background document which is the book in hand.

I sincerely hope that this contribution is useful to the region's water colleagues and will bring the attention of the young water professionals to this highly attractive region and to the region's water challenges in a solution-seeking way.

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