



# DELIBERATIVE WATER POLICY-MAKING IN KAZAKHSTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN: FOCUS GROUPS IN THE TALAS AND CHU RIVER BASINS

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*The paper reflects on the experiences of applying focus groups in water management decision-making for the benefit of the Talas and Chu Transboundary River Basin Commission between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The focus groups proved useful for getting an overview of the limits of tradeoffs participants are ready to assign for common benefit in water management. However, the paternalistic community relations impede lay water users and appointed experts consensus-finding from equal positions. The trust and credibility of existing water management institutions could be re-established by introducing social dialogue models that would offer possibilities for synthesising nominated experts' and lay perspectives for laying out common goals of water management. For ensuring the workability of this social dialogue, awareness building about stakeholders' rights, but also clarification and clear enforcement of the omitted responsibilities of existing water management institutions is needed.*

## 1 Introduction

Environmental management decision-makers are faced with difficult choices when trying to balance the objective of sustainability and multitude of social needs (Löfstedt, 2005). It is argued that an integrated water resources management (IWRM)

approach would help to better control, accelerate the integration and make the decision process more transparent (GWP, 2003). Involving stakeholders in policy development is a way forward from the technical control towards more adaptive resource management. However, the complexities in ecological assessments, the need to balance often-contradicting user interests and power-relations complicate implementation of IWRM principles (Mostert, 1998). In patriarchal Central Asian societies, the water management decision-making still follows the command and control approach.

This paper reviews an endeavour to enrich the

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limited technocratic decision-making process by enhancing a dialogue between the lay water users and nominated experts. The applicability of focus groups as an alternative way for decision-making in the Talas and Chu River basins between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan will be examined. The focus groups were conducted in the framework of a Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan-Estonian joint project "Support for the creation of a transboundary water commission on Chu and Talas Rivers between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan" in 2004-2005. This project was a joint endeavour of the Water Resources Committee of the Ministry of Agriculture in Kazakhstan, the Water Management Department of the Ministry of Water Management, Agriculture and Processing Industry of the Kyrgyz Republic; the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe; and the Peipsi Centre for Transboundary Cooperation in Estonia. The project aimed at identifying the stakeholders' needs; determining their awareness on water resources and willingness to participate in the decision-making (see report by Kangur et. al, 2005). This paper particularly focuses on determining and assessing the societal factors facilitating or limiting the process and outcomes of the focus groups. The next section will give a brief overview about the political conditions for water management in the Talas and Chu transboundary basins.

### 1.1 Political culture and water management principles in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

The Aarhus Convention (2000) establishes that sustainable development stems from conditions, where authorities are subordinated to the governance procedures in the public domain. However, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan cases, popular democracy is constrained and centralised power is prevailing in most domains of life. The presidents' concern for order and stability is interpreted as political ideology to legitimise their authoritarian role (Geiss, 2008). Kazakhstan has maintained a unitary and centralised administration in which the president fully controls the appointment of regional and municipal *akims* (administrative heads). Official argument against delegating some

of the responsibilities to *akims* is that regional authorities are neither financially prepared to hold elections nor ready for the responsibility. According to the Kazakhstan Water Code (2003), the central government ensures state management of water resources through the authorized national management body, the Committee for Water Resources under the Ministry of Agriculture, and River Basin Organisations. At the regional level, *Maslikhats* (local representative bodies) and *Akimats* (executive bodies) provide implementation and control of the national water management programs. Regional State Water Management organisations provide maintenance of the state-owned water facilities. Under the UNDP Project for the National IWRM Plan (UNDP Kazakhstan, 2005), the establishment of the eight river basin councils began in June 2004.

In Kyrgyzstan, President Akaev set the country on a rapid course of democratisation in the first years of post communist rule. However, a super-presidential order was established in the mid-1990s economic crisis. Despite the constraints imposed on the political opposition, some space for civil society and liberal economy has been guaranteed. However, in the minds of many ordinary Kyrgyz people, democracy has become associated with poverty and uncertainty. The Kyrgyz State's Water and Processing Industry and activities of the Department of Water Industry (DWI) under the Ministry of Agriculture focus on the management of national water resources. The structure of DWI is multilevel with regional and district branches.

The re-distribution of large soviet collective farm lands and privatisation of the irrigation systems that were designed to support their needs has posed a great management problem for farmers who operate at the fringe of profitability. The institutionalisation of water users associations (WUA) in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, mainly promoted by international donors, is a step towards introducing grass-root representation in water management decision-making. In contrast to WUAs' initial aim of democratically elected boards accountable to its members, it has marginalised the village population, and local government structures

are dominating WUAs' decision-making instead (Sehring, 2007). Formal institutional change has failed, as the externally imposed WUA format has not fit within the existing cultural norms (Sehring, 2007; Geiss, 2008). In order to overcome WUAs' capacity issues, government support, training and guidance has been instituted for local non-governmental WUAs (Wegerich, 2008).

The transboundary context adds extra complexity to the water management issues in Central Asia. After the collapse of Soviet Union, the Talas and Chu Rivers became transboundary waters between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and from then on the riparian countries had to agree about the use of water resources. For example, Kyrgyzstan has to pay the costs for maintenance of the water reservoirs on its territory that, in fact, mainly serve the Kazakhstan irrigation farmers interests on the other side of the border. As these waters are formed on Kyrgyzstan's territory, its people feel that their national resources are exploited outside their borders and limits of power. In order to resolve a dispute, cost-sharing mechanisms for maintaining the water facilities have been instituted on the Talas and Chu Rivers between the two countries. From 2004-2005, the focus groups were carried out to facilitate water management related stakeholders' dialogue, which would feed into the work of yet-to-be-established Kazakh and Kyrgyz Joint Commission.

## 2 The role of stakeholders in water management

Information sharing, consultation and involvement processes are the basis of governance (PUMA, 2001) that could help to overcome the limitations of centralised state regulation. The democratic ideal of public involvement is expected to give competent authority a formal obligation to consider the results of wider deliberation. The foundation of public participation is the creation of a forum through which to achieve discussion between different, often competing social priorities and visions about the future, and to reach a balanced consensus (Arhus Convention, 1998; Renn, 1999; Catt & Murphy, 2003). Furthermore, public discourse needs to be fair and competent (Webler,

1995), but also effective in a sense of producing an applicable outcome (Armour, 1995). These criteria are further explained as follows.

Fairness is about "equity" of a particular arrangement among decision-making parties (Kasperson & Kasperson, 2000). People in discursive situations should be provided with an equal footing to determine the agenda and the rules for discourse (Webler, 1995; Habermas, 1991). The competence of deliberation entails the performance of the participants in constructing the best possible agreements, taking into account the knowledge available to them. However, the limitation of aiming at competent discussions is that critical analysis might be an unnatural exertion for the participants. The effectiveness of the deliberation depends on the extent to which the results of the deliberation have an effect on real policies. The consensus-seeking process might itself be strategically used to pursue a concrete political objective (Webler & Renn, 1995) and or to delay the decision-making (Stern & Fineberg, 1996). It necessitates a long-term trust and credibility relationship between the dialoguing partners to maintain the cooperation (Kasperson *et al.*, 1998; Lepa *et al.*, 2004).

The limitations of deliberative democracy make one question about the suitability of the western ideals of participatory governance in more constrained political circumstances. Acknowledging the limitations and finding the ways out of the political and operational constraints should be an aim of the facilitators of democratic decision-making (Webler, 1995). The history of deliberation has seen several models used for involving public into decision-making.

### 2.1 Tools for public involvement

The type of involvement will depend upon the nature of the political economy in which particular resource management decisions take place (GWP, 2003). Arnstein (1969) created the ladder of participation moving towards increasing levels of involvement: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering. The International Association for Public Participation suggests

means for satisfying these social goals (Table 1). Consultative methods such as questionnaires or stakeholder meetings are limited only to legitimise policy decisions. More complex citizens' jury, for example, is a way of giving a selection of citizens an opportunity to learn about the problem and come up with a knowledgeable decision about the solution for the issue.

Focus groups are widely defined as meetings to obtain public understandings on a distinct area of interest in a permissive environment (Morgan, 1997). In a relaxed atmosphere, a group of six to eight people share their ideas and perceptions. Within a smaller group, the participants usually feel that they have a larger influence on the discussion, and it is easier to tempt reticent participants to contribute. Focus groups can provide a method suitable for getting a brief understanding of an area not previously covered (Morgan, 1993; Wibeck, 2000). As the participants themselves are largely guiding the discussion, they might come up with completely new approaches to an issue (Uusküla & Kangur, 2006). The following section will give

an overview about the focus groups conducted in Talas and Chu River basins.

### 3 Public involvement experiences in Talas and Chu River basins

The initial aim of conducting focus groups was to gather information for drawing guidelines for the work of the Transboundary Water Commission of Talas and Chu basins. Focus groups were chosen as it enables to get a quick idea of the area that has not been previously covered in research. Before assessing the suitability of the focus groups format in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan water management context, a short overview about the methodology and key findings is presented as follows.

Local water management experts were involved in planning the focus groups. In recruiting the focus groups, local water users, rural government bodies, and water facilities management bodies were approached to form groups of five to eight people. In order to cover diverse viewpoints of stakeholders from different locations, 13 focus groups were

Table 1. Classification of participatory approaches according to their social goals (Adapted from IAP, 2008)

INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT				
INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
<b>Public Participation Goals</b>				
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem. alternatives. opportunities and/or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis. alternatives and/or decisions	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public
<b>Examples of techniques</b>				
- Fact sheets	- Public comment	- Workshops	- Citizen Advisory Council	- Citizens Juries
- Web sites	- Focus Groups	- Deliberate polling	- Consensus Building	- Ballots
- Open houses	- Surveys		- Participatory decision-making	- Delegated Decisions
	- Public meetings			

conducted in Kazakhstan and eight on the Kyrgyzstan side of the Talas and Chu River basins. Appendixes 1 and 2 indicate the source, location and language of the conducted focus groups. Focus groups evaluation sheets were used to get more information on the participants' views on the effectiveness of the method. Recorded interview transcriptions were coded and categorised to find trends.

The inhabitants of Talas and Chu River basins were most concerned about water quantity issues: starting from water excess and flooding in certain regions and ending with dire water scarcity that inhibits farming. The participants of focus groups stressed that innovative water management techniques and updating the irrigation infrastructure would help to regulate water supply as well as to avoid water losses. It was stressed that private users and water management authorities have little informational or operational means to improve the current situation.

The focus group participants blamed irrational institutional compartmentalisation for diffusing the responsibilities of water management. The ineffective bureaucracy was held responsible for hindering stakeholder-considerate development of water management. People showed their discontent with the situation, where the decisions are made in inviolable political spheres. Due to poor capacity, the image of the WUAs is low and resistance to their activities hinders any useful progress in water distribution problem solving. Their initial aim of representing local needs has not found regional water authorities' support. Farmers find it unfair that despite the nominal accountability of the WUAs and the financial means designated to the associations, the farmers have very little means to determine the quantity and the timing of irrigation water reaching their lands.

Discrepancies appeared between lay farmers' and *akims*' problem perception. Thus, the solutions that different groups proposed for more equitable sharing of water and better management of the infrastructure differed largely from group to group. For example, the groups of *akims* blamed the

incapacity of the WUAs as a source of all troubles, and suggested that the solution would be the further centralisation of water management decision-making and funds allocation to the regional level. Some farmers' groups, to the contrary, argued that more operative financing according to the local needs, and enhanced cooperation from the local water administrations' side as well as tackling the dominating nepotistic relations would alleviate problems in largely agricultural areas.

The relations between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan concerning sharing the water resources are considered most critical. For example, Kyrgyz groups found it unfair that the Kazakhs contribute minimally to the management of the waterways that bring the water from Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan. In addition, farmers on both sides accuse the other countries of wasteful use of waters. For example, a farmer from Pokrovka expressed his sensation of injustice of water division between the Kyrgyz rural areas and Kazakhstan towns: "I cannot comprehend how is it possible that in Djambul there is water even in the most peripheral streets, but people in the close-by Kyrgyz villages do not get any water supply". Kyrgyz farmers and WUA groups doubt the correctness of the records on water quantities let over the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border and suspect the Kyrgyz reservoir managers of co-opting with Kazakh government. These are only a few vital issues frequently discussed in focus groups. Yet, from the point of view of this article, the assessment of the focus group process and outcomes are more important.

### 3.1 Participants' views on the focus groups

Participants were presented a questionnaire where they could comment on their expectations before the meeting and the fulfilment of these expectations. Furthermore, their information gain and alignment to take part in the focus groups discussions again was asked. The participants were willing to contribute, as their objective was to get new information about the water management institutions (including Kazakh and Kyrgyz Joint Commission) and expertise for better water management (44%). The discussion group members expected to reach concrete solutions for their problems (e.g. how to

get funds for renovations, cooperation partners etc.). 20 % of the participants were enthusiastic about participating for socialising with representatives of other organisations and neighbouring villages. One of the focus group participants expressed his support for inclusive decision-making: “Water is the source of living, hope for the life and every man has to be able to decide”. Some people explained that they had turned up to the meeting as they felt it was their duty.

Participants assessed their fulfilment of expectations on the focus group results on the five rank scales. Over three quarters of the participants showed their contempt with the results of the focus groups (Table 2). It appeared that up to half of the participants gained a lot of information, whereas 35% gained no new knowledge. Participants found out information on water management and related organisations as well as on the activities of the Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Joint River Basin Commission. Participants appreciated the possibility to get in touch with possible partners for cooperation in the modernisation of water supply and irrigation systems. Except for the local government officials and regional water management authorities, the participants’ impressions about the meetings were generally positive. The possibility to raise problems, discuss them openly and propose solutions - contribute “their heart and best vision” as one expressed, was appreciated.

Despite the generally positive response of the participants, some focus group attendees also remained cautious about the long-term effects of the focus groups meetings. For example, a Talap village WUA member explained his unrest: “We can only judge the success of the meeting when

the water questions are solved!” Many of the focus group participants were discontented with the fact that the focus groups did not suggest any solution for systematic and coordinated management of water in each country as well as in terms of the stance that should be taken towards the neighbouring country. Reasons given for willingness to participate again in the focus groups type of activities was to get information about developments in the water management issues and come up with solutions.

In order to get an overview of the general dynamics of discussion groups, the atmosphere was observed by the assistant as well as the moderator of the meetings (Figure 1). In several focus groups younger people and female persons were quieter and listened to what older people had to say. Status hierarchies appeared to be important as other participants and water specialists only talked after *akims* had had their say. For example, in one of the WUA representatives’ group, their leaders also tended to dictate the discussion. Regional water management authorities’ representatives and local government officials demonstrated their irritation regarding the situation they had been set into. They found it inappropriate that they would have to explain and protect their views among the lay water users invited to the focus groups.

## 4 Discussion

Water management in Talas and Chu river basins offers compelling material for analysis due to the complexity of social impacts and ambiguities related to water use. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have the main components of water management in place. However, the political capacity of the interest groups varies: technical experts and bureaucracy

Table 2. Evaluation of focus group process from the point of view of involved stakeholder representatives (% of respondents)

	TO A LARGE EXTENT	1	2	3	4	5 NOT AT ALL
Fulfillment of expectations		53	22	19	5	1
Gained new information		49	19	23	4	5
Possibility to utter one’s opinion		73	7	16	4	0
Readiness to participate again		76	12	3	7	2



Figure 1. Focus group with farmers from Birdik village

have gained the ruling position, while silencing lay water users. Introducing participatory discourse in water management could help to determine the different ideas of participants on the goals of development and the limits of tradeoffs that they were ready to assign for common benefit.

The WUAs are expected to facilitate interaction between the lay water users and the regional management authority. However, due to their co-opt ties and overlaps in recruitment, the WUAs' agenda is often determined by the regional and local administrative bodies. As the model does not make an explicit commitment to the autonomy of the individual members, there is a danger that the consensus could be a "fake" consensus, as some participants might feel pressured to conform. Thus, domestic water users and irrigation farmers have little means to make their views known and represented in the water policy-making and its operations. Enhancing dialogue and cooperation on different spatial and institutional dimensions requires more effective means for communication. One of the possibilities for fulfilling the information

gap between the lay people and the transboundary commission was carrying out focus groups for identifying the grass-root needs.

Focus groups fulfilled the task in getting first hand information about the stakeholders' views and needs. However, the representativeness of focus groups was minimal. The focus groups reflect opinion of a fraction of more active people, or members or community with higher sense of duty. Due to the cultural setting and due to the selection of members, focus groups did little to facilitate constructive dialogue among different stakeholders' communities. Comparison of the water users' associations and focus groups mode of participation in decision-making is presented in Table 3.

#### 4.1 Ensuring powerless discussion

It is an important structural requirement of rational discourse that all the parties share equal positions (Habermas, 1991; Renn & Tyroller, 2003). The reality of focus groups showed that it is very difficult to reach this ideal. Involved members of the public belong to various social groups, and therefore,

Table 3. Qualities of water users' associations in comparison with focus group method

TECHNIQUE	Focus Group	Water User's Associations
DESCRIPTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group of ordinary citizens sharing a common background deliberate on a set of issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group of stakeholders representing water users interests or expertise, to provide informed input (advisory body assisting decision makers)</li> </ul>
REQUIREMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both systematic and anecdotal knowledge</li> <li>Need team of skilled moderators</li> <li>Free discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Define roles and responsibilities upfront</li> <li>Be forthcoming with information</li> <li>Use a credible process</li> <li>Select members carefully</li> </ul>
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5-10 people members of public</li> <li>Number of focus groups: until the saturation of gained information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Small group of (10-20) stakeholders</li> </ul>
DURATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting: 90 minutes</li> <li>Process: 1 month</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recurring meetings</li> <li>Eventually institutionalised</li> </ul>
APPLICATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early phase of decision-making to obtain views of different social groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At any point in the decision-making process but seems to be mostly effective in the early stages</li> </ul>
ADVANTAGES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunity to develop various views on development</li> <li>Possible consolidation of interest group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides for detailed analyses of issues</li> <li>Commissioning of expertise, sanctioning and veto depending on mandate</li> </ul>
DISADVANTAGES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No deliberation among the stakeholder groups</li> <li>Find participants able and willing to dialogue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Neither general public nor river basin councils may embrace committee's recommendations</li> <li>Time- and labour-intensive</li> </ul>

embody numerous and sometimes conflicting responses to water management. Traditional patriarchal community relations are dominant among the inhabitants of the Talas and Chu River basins. The overrepresentation of older male persons is a sign of a social system, where possibly more experienced men are expected to come up with decisions important for the community. Gathering into deliberation groups was acceptable to many. Even after the years of communism, close-knit community relations and joint decision-making is familiar to the people living in the basin. Thus, deep-rooted patriarchal legal culture provides steady regulating principles that guide decision-making even in changing political environments.

For a discussion to be called deliberative, it is essential that it relied on the mutual exchange of arguments rather than decision-making based on the status of the participants or sublime strategies of persuasion (Habermas, 2001; Renn & Tyroller, 2003). In focus group discussions quieter and more dominant, outspoken participants appeared. The presence of people sharing power positions (heads of water user's associations or *Akimats*)

determined the span of the process. Following the conventions of patriarchal system, the lay people let the representatives of power positions dominate the discussion. The *akims* showed eloquence in public speaking and articulated their views in a more convincing manner. Despite the moderators' numerous attempts to encourage contributions from quieter participants, the dialogue often remained restrained, as the participants appeared to be scared to step out against the regulator. The aim of the public participation practitioner should be to identify and compensate for these social, cultural contexts of unequal access to setting the agenda and contributing to decision-making.

#### 4.2 Lessening bounded rationality

Deliberation is expected to lead to changes in attitudes amongst the participants, and to lessen the bounded rationality of the individual members of the community. Free-will based groups might mirror the opinions of a more interested and/or more reactive segment of population. Focus groups evaluation sheets demonstrated that the participants valued the opportunity to get to know

other perspectives on water issues, talk about the related problems and elaborate possible solutions in a common circle. In a pleasant atmosphere, focus groups participants facilitated each others thinking, and as a result, even some innovative solutions (e.g. less bureaucratic financing schemes) were prompted. However, the focus groups lagged behind in offering possibilities for synthesising and enriching nominated experts and decision makers' views with the lay perspectives on water management and development needs. Of course the focus group model does not provide a very good means for balancing the participants awareness building through exchange of experiences and brainwashing them.

Focus groups worked as a tool for mapping the needs of the stakeholders, though the participants did not suggest any means for integrating and evaluating recommendations from the point of their overall importance. Groups of farmers and water users did not promote critical inquiry into the broader issues of water management and sustainable use of water. To the contrary, when discussing vital water management issues, participants often became whipped up emotionally and made what could appear from the point of view of experts' irrational choices. Thus, it can be argued that the discursive process, where participants have to come up with well-supported insights under group pressure sets deliberators in an artificial situation that may divert them away from their everyday thinking patterns. Furthermore, as the status hierarchies appeared among the discussion participants, it is hard to distinguish between awareness building and brainwashing regarding the water management options.

#### 4.3 Effect of deliberation on policy making

The case study under analysis shows that the restrictive political culture in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan could be more supportive of public involvement in water management decision-making. Reproducing western patterns of policy-making cannot be successful if they are not integrated into local cultural and communal traditions. The benefit of the conducted focus groups lies in the articulation of some interest groups' problems. However, the

solutions proposed lie on hypothetical grounds as the focus groups format does not allow feedback to the elaborated position from other stakeholder groups nor from the authorities. The deliberative model does not suggest any means to evaluate the proposals from the point of their overall importance. Thus, the discrepancies between, for example, *akims'* and irrigation farmers' problem perceptions and solutions could not be overcome.

The outcomes of discussions were communicated to representative institutions and thereby fulfil a complementary role in the decision process. Since the Joint Commission for the Management of the Talas and Chu Rivers only started its work in 2006, it is early to say how much effect the deliberations had on real policy outcomes. It is also not in the scope of this project to determine the extent to which the problems highlighted in focus groups have been taken into account in the Joint Commission's work. However, the process has been unsuccessful in a sense that the participants have received little or no comments about their suggestions, and the deviations from the recommendations have remained unjustified.

Deliberative processes take time and financial resources to organise, but the investment may be worthwhile as the participatory models may build up the contributors' self-consciousness. The Talas and Chu River basin focus groups evaluation sheets indicated high satisfaction related to opportunities for exchanging thoughts and finding cooperation partners among the participants. Contributing to focus groups may have been a good exercise for the people whose participation in policy making is restricted to the mal-functioning representative democracy. Therefore, it can be assumed, that experiences of political involvement can be especially emancipative for the societies in transition from the command ruling to the more democratic forms of governance. However, the therapeutic effect of public involvement may remain short-term if regulators do not acknowledge its results.

Means for socialising and finding partners for joint actions were considered an important outcome of the focus groups. This suggests that the current

means, WUAs, are do not offer fully legitimate representation and successful protection of the local's needs. Lack of means of the water users to satisfy their needs in the water management can be attributed to the shortage of social capital to influence the decision-making. However, a look beyond the community level relations shows that the clarity of responsibilities of multiple water management institutions on different levels is lacking. Thus, the lay water users confusion and disappointment in being able to address their needs and seek for liable assistance. Prior introducing any new techniques of involvement, would they be sporadic events like the focus groups conducted for informing Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan Joint Commission or more institutionalised practices, the functions and responsibilities of informants and decision-makers needs to be clarified and ensured.

## 5 Conclusions

Conducting focus groups in the Talas and Chu River basin for informing the Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Joint Commission taught several lessons regarding the factors limiting and facilitating the deliberative decision-making in Central Asian water management. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan political systems could be more supportive of public involvement in water management decision-making.

Although close-knit community relations and joint decision-making is familiar to the people living in the Talas and Chu River Basin, the prevailing patriarchal conventions are also the root cause of the hierarchies in consensus-finding processes. As the focus groups showed, despite the nominated equal positions of all members of the groups, older and male persons, as well as the representatives of local administrative bodies dominated the consensus-finding process.

The focus groups showed that alterations to current decision-making institutions are direly needed and welcomed at least by the rural inhabitants whose interests are poorly represented. Lost trust and credibility of the WUAs and regional water management administrations may also extend to the Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Joint Water Commission, and thus inhibit its functions. Well-

thought through models of public involvement could offer possibilities for synthesising nominated experts' views with the lay perspectives on water management and development needs. Despite the limitations, the focus groups type of models could play a complementary role for clarifying the variety of needs and development views from outside the water management bureaucracies. However, caution should be born in mind when reproducing western patterns of policy-making if they are not supported by local cultural and communal traditions.

The knowledge about alternatives for current management practices is still scarce among the environmental regulators that are used to command and control approaches. Prior introducing any further models for involvement, it is important to acknowledge and endeavour to tackle the limitations of participatory democracy. A major step toward this would be clear clarification and enforcement of the rights and responsibilities of (inter)-state water management institutions, civil society based organisations (e.g. WUAs) and the individual members of community. A clear set of rules for incorporating the social partners in decision-making would allow power institutions to maintain their initiative and the leader position in policy making.

More research should be encouraged on the suitability of the participatory tools adjusted to the specific socio-cultural, economic, and geopolitical conditions. Better understanding of the limits and advantages of the inclusive models would enable governments to establish standards for public involvement.

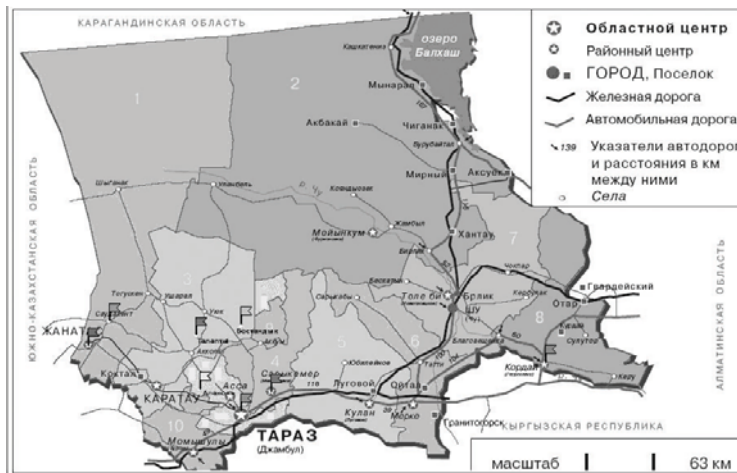
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Место проведения фокус группы	Тип фокус группы
с. Вирдик Бёсөк – Атинского района Чуйской области, Кыргызстан	Представители крестьянских хозяйств (КХ)
с. Чуй Чуйского района Чуйской области, Кыргызстан	Представители Районного Управления Водного Хозяйства
с. Ивановка Бёсөк – Атинского района Чуйской области, Кыргызстан	Представители крестьянских хозяйств
с. Кельин Кельинского района Чуйской области, Кыргызстан	Представители Районного Управления Водного Хозяйства
с. Кен-Будун Бёсөк – Атинского района Чуйской области, Кыргызстан	Представители органов местного самоуправления (МСУ)
с. Кенеш Бёсөк – Атинского района Чуйской области, Кыргызстан	Представители Ассоциации водопользователей (АВП)
с. Красная Речка Бёсөк – Атинского района Чуйской области, Кыргызстан	Представители НКО (некоммерческих организаций)
с. Милифан Бёсөк – Атинского района Чуйской области, Кыргызстан	Представители Ассоциации водопользователей (АВП)
с. Кызыл-Жылдыз Манасского района Таласской области, Кыргызстан	Представители НКО (некоммерческих организаций) 2) Представители Ассоциации водопользователей (АВП) 3) Представители крестьянских хозяйств (КХ)
с. Покровка Манасского района Таласской области, Кыргызстан	Представители органов местного самоуправления (МСУ) 3) Представители Ассоциации водопользователей (АВП)
с. Аманбаево, Карабуузинского района Таласской области, Кыргызстан	Представители органов местного самоуправления (МСУ) 2) Представители Ассоциации водопользователей (АВП)

Appendix 1. Focus groups conducted in Talas and Chu River Basins in Kyrgyzstan



с. Саудакент, Джамбыльская область, Казахстан	1) Представители Управления Водного Хозяйства (частный сектор) 2) Представители Управления Водного Хозяйства (РПП) 3) Акимы сельских районов 4) Представители крестьянских хозяйств (КХ)
г. Жанатас	Представители Управления Водного Хозяйства (Горводоканал)
с. Бостандык, Джамбыльская область, Казахстан	Представители крестьянских хозяйств (КХ)
с. Атакел, Джамбыльская область, Казахстан	Представители Управления Водного Хозяйства
с. Сарыкмер, Джамбыльская область, Казахстан	1) Представители Сельских кооперативов водопользователей 2) Акимы сельских районов
г. Тараз, Джамбыльская область, Казахстан	Представители НКО (некоммерческих организаций)
с. Талыпты, Джамбыльская область, Казахстан	3) Акимы сельских районов
с. Кордай, Джамбыльская область, Казахстан	1) Представители Управления Водного Хозяйства (РПП) 2) Представители Управления Водного Хозяйства (РПП) 3) Акимы сельских районов 4) Представители крестьянских хозяйств (КХ)

Appendix 2. Focus groups conducted in Talas and Chu River Basins in Kazakhstan

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