



## **WHY BLUE PRINTS ON ACCOUNTABILITY OF WATER USER ASSOCIATIONS DO NOT WORK: ILLUSTRATIONS FROM SOUTH KAZAKHSTAN**

**Kai Wegerich<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union there have been two major changes in the agricultural sector in Kazakhstan. First agricultural production changed from centrally planned large scale state and collective farms to small scale private farms. Secondly, the water management of on-farm irrigation system was transferred from hydro-technical units to WUAs. The creation of WUAs in South Kazakhstan is based on blueprints, which promote equity and accountability. The paper critically evaluates the existing blue prints of WUAs. It is argued that even these blueprints do not live up to the spirit of equity and accountability of the organization to its members and between members. Examples of WUAs in South Kazakhstan are presented, which shows weak organizations, lack of accountability and farmers which are not empowered to change their own organization.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Kazakhstan, during the Soviet period, agricultural production was structured in state and collective farms and on-farm water management was organized by specialized hydro-technical units of these farms. Land reforms divided the large scale farms. Irrigation management transfer (IMT) and the creation of Water User Associations (WUAs) seemed to be a promising solution to keep up the irrigation infrastructure and to take over water management and delivery to a vast number of small private farms.

Fieldwork was conducted from October to December 2004. Within this period interviews were carried out with main stakeholders in international organizations working on training for newly independent farmers and WUAs, staff of district and province water management organizations in South Kazakhstan, as well as WUA staff and WUA members. The paper utilizes collected data from two districts in South Kazakhstan province, Turkestan and Makhtaaral.

---

1- Affiliation: Irrigation and Water Engineering group, Wageningen University, Nieuwe Kanaal 11, 6709 PA Wageningen, The Netherlands. Phone: +31 317 482750; Fax: +31 317 484759; e-mail: wegerich@yahoo.com; kai.wegerich@wur.nl

The paper continues with a short background section on land and water reforms in Kazakhstan since independence. This is followed by a discussion of the current blueprints of WUA organizations, their accountability, their rights and responsibilities towards their members and vice versa. The next section presents the data of the assessment study of the WUAs in the two districts in South Kazakhstan. The last section concludes.

## **BACKGROUND: LAND REFORMS, IRRIGATION AND WATER MANAGEMENT**

Even though Kazakhstan started its agricultural reforms in 1992 directly after independence, only the introduction of the Bankruptcy law (December 1998) led to a rapid expansion of private farms. By April 1999 already 84,766 peasant farms were established. The irrigation system in Kazakhstan was designed for large scale farms and mainly for one particular crop. The state and collective farms were responsible for the operation and maintenance of the on-farm water management infrastructure. Already during the Soviet Union period there were maintenance problems with the on-farm irrigation systems (Bucknall et al 2001, p.5). A TACIS report (1995) points out that often the most convenient method of irrigation for farm management was chosen. This implied low flow rates and long furrows (p.79). The irrigation system was a supply rather than a demand system. The report concludes, to establish a demand system is “either organizationally impossible [...] or the capital cost of installing such a system would be prohibitive” (p.83). Nevertheless, in 1997 water tariffs were introduced for agricultural water users. The water charge is supposed to be calculated per cubic meter, but because the infrastructure was built for large scale collective farms and not for small private farms, water distribution is estimated rather than measured by cubic meter. Only since 2003 farmers can become legal members of WUAs.

Even though the situation in the irrigation sector in Kazakhstan did not look promising in legal and organizational terms, the South Kazakhstan province bordering Uzbekistan has received special attention in the creation and establishment of WUAs since independence. In this province alone there are 80 WUAs, of which 27 are located in areas which are covered by rehabilitation projects of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. This seems to suggest that the WUAs in the region had special support and follow international blueprints on organizational structures of WUAs. However, do these blueprints address sufficiently the question of equity and accountability of the WUA to its members.

## **ARE WUAS ACCOUNTABLE, AND TO WHAT EXTENT? IS IT A MYTH?**

Accountability is defined as “the means by which individuals and organizations report to a recognized authority (or authorities) and are held responsible for their actions” (Edwards and Hulme, 1996 p.967). In the case of a WUA, it is reasoned that the staff is doubly accountable to the members through both electoral and financial channels. Current international recommendation is to separate the governing body and management body. Hence there is an electoral accountability channel to the governing body and a financial accountability channel to the management body. While internationally an egalitarian perspective of equity is recommended, by which each

member has the same right and voting power, an IWMI/SICWC manual (2003) on how to establish WUAs in Central Asia recommends a proportional perspective, by which membership rights to vote in the WUA are connected to land size (p. 22). This proportional perspective on equity institutionalizes the inequity on the local level. One of the consequences could be that the weight of complain of a small holders counts less.

It is still assumed that financially autonomous irrigation agencies, such as WUAs, provide better services, because WUAs are created to serve the interests of their members and non-members. The obligation of the members and non-members in a WUA is the prompt payment of water service fees (Hodgson 2003, Salman 1997). If members or non-members do not pay their fees or take more water, it is reasoned that gradual sanctions, starting with small fines, can be imposed (Ostrom 1990). In addition, if members or non-members damage the infrastructure they would have to compensate the organization for the destruction.

On the other hand, what happens if the organization fails to provide the water service, either partially or completely? Ul Hassan and Nizamedinkhodjaeva (without date) argue that “if the quality and quantity of the service falls below the agreed standards, the users can, for example, hold part of the service fee payment as a fine.” (p.7) Taking into consideration that the service fee could be below the incurred losses, (in most cases this would be the case) then this option does not seem to be satisfying for the members. Instead of making the WUA accountable for not effectively controlling and therefore not being able to provide the service according to the contract, the standard recommendation is to create a dispute settlement committee within the governing body of the WUA. Even though the water rights and water charges are supposed to minimize inter-personal conflicts, the WUA turns again to its users, to let them find an agreement by themselves. Hence, disputes are not minimized, but they are only given a formal space. However, would a small landholder accuse a large landholder and press for compensation? Therefore subjecting him/herself to face repercussions on issues which are not related to water, such as having access to formal or informal credits, to other inputs or outputs, or risk loss of employment possibilities for him/herself or a family member? The blue print ignores the heterogeneity of the WUA members and their embedded status in a wider social and economic context.

### **ARE THE WUAS IN SOUTH KAZAKHSTAN ACCOUNTABLE TO THEIR MEMBERS?**

Recent reports on WUAs in South Kazakhstan have emphasized that local authorities and senior officers of the former collective farms have hijacked the newly established WUAs. (Zimina 2003, Mott McDonald/DfID report 2003). This would imply that the WUA managers would not necessarily represent the interests of the farmers, but the interests of those at higher levels, or have their own benefit in mind. To substantiate the issue of non-accountability of WUAs to its members, data from Makhtaaraal and Turkestan district in South Kazakhstan is presented.

While in Turkestan district farmers could not elect the WUA heads, in Maktaraal district the WUA heads were elected by the WUA members. However, in Maktaraal farmers in the WUA K23 complained that they were not able to reelect a new head and that only the district administration could dismiss the current head. Neither in the Turkestan nor

in the Maktaraal district was a separation between the governing and managing bodies. Even though, in Maktaraal district international projects provided training on the blue print of WUA organizational structures.

In both districts farmers in complained that the staff of the WUA was only interested in fee collection. These complaints were even raised by the District Water Department in Maktaraal. Farmers complained that the system of water tariffs was not transparent. In different interviews with farmers in the K26 WUA, it became evident that the fees even vary within the same WUA. A farmer of the WUA K23 stated the “WUA staff does not do anything, just takes money. We do not ask what they do with it, we just give it”. Similar complaints were raised in Turkestan district.

In all visited WUAs was evidence of tampering with the irrigation infrastructure. While in WUA K23 a farmer admitted that he broke a large piece out of the irrigation channel, in K26 the farmer complained that his outlets were blocked by a tail-end farmer. According to the interviewee, the farmer at the end of the channel was the former governor of Maktaraal district, who had 120 ha agricultural land. The interviewee stated that the large farmer pays a higher price for water and therefore receives all the water he needs. Hence, the farmer implied that the WUA staff blocked some of his off- takes, or accepted that his off-takes got blocked, so that the rich farmer could receive the water. The farmer himself, did not make any attempt at unblocking the off-takes himself, and did not feel that he could complain to the WUA.

In Turekstan district the water situation was aggravated by farmers changing to more water intensive crops. In the Solnak village, during the period of the collective farm the main crops were grass, corn and grain, while today farmers plant cotton. As consequence the water demand of the district has increased, while the district water allocation continued (Solnak village governor). Farmers at the head and tail-end complained that they did not get enough water and that they do not get the water in time. A tail-end farmer complained that “even if I pay additional money for water, it does not mean that I will get the water in time. Maybe I will get the water with the next turn, maybe in the next season or the water department can pay the money back.” In one case a farmer received 3 out of 4 irrigation turns. At the time of the fourth turn, the WUA could not provide any water and therefore could not fulfill their side of the contract. The farmer lost his harvest and the WUA paid back the irrigation fee. The fee is quite low and paying back the fee did not prevent the farmer from going bankrupt. In the case where the WUA would have provided the water within the next turn the crops would have received the water too late and it would have had a negative effect on the production. In either case, the WUA did not fulfill the contract and did not take full responsibility for their mismanagement.

## CONCLUSION

The case study of South Kazakhstan demonstrated the negative consequences of a rapid and ill planned withdrawal of the state and the consequences of weak blueprints.

The presented cases of the WUAs in South Kazakhstan show that the created WUAs did not represent the interest of their members, but seem to utilize the WUA to generate income. In this sense the WUAs reflected more the interests of individual power holders and the WUA staff and not the whole farmer community. Either the former hierarchical

structure or a high level of heterogeneity amongst the members seem to stabilize the system and make individual WUA members accept the situation. That farmers still pay fees could be related to two issues, first that the WUA staff has enough authority to enforce fee payment and second that the fee is low and therefore is minimal in relation to the total cost of farming. Hence, to pay fees could be seen as a formal obligation but which does not guarantee (sufficient) water delivery.

The blue print of WUAs has shown significant weaknesses in terms of accountability. The question is, are these kinds of “accountability” mechanisms in a WUA sufficient, when the livelihood of a farmer depends on it? When participants of the WUA have to compensate for damages, but the WUA itself does not? This raises the question whether one has to understand the WUA as an accountable service provider or a facilitator? In case a WUA should be a service provider with meaningful contracts on water delivery, what could be a solution? To be fully accountable not a conflict committee is necessary but the WUA should compensate for its failure to deliver the service it contractually agreed upon.

## REFERENCES

1. Bucknall, J., I. Klytchnikova, J. Lampietti, M. Lundell, M. Scatasta, M. Thurman. 2001. Irrigation in Central Asia: where to rehabilitate and why. World Bank Group. Washington.
2. Edwards, M. and D. Hulme. 1996. Too close for comfort? The impact of official aid on nongovernmental organizations. *World Development*. 24(6): 961-973.
3. Hodgson, S. 2003. Legislation on water users' organizations: a comparative analysis. FAO Legislative Study 79.
4. IWMI/SICWC. 2003. How to establish a WUA: practical steps for social mobilizers. Tashkent. [http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/centralasiawaterusers/files/pdf/WUA\\_eng.pdf](http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/centralasiawaterusers/files/pdf/WUA_eng.pdf)
5. Mott MacDonald / Department for International Development (DfID). 2003. Privatisation/Transfer of Irrigation Management in Central Asia. Final Report
6. Ostrom, E. 1990. *Governing the commons – the evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press
7. Salman, S.M.A. 1997. *The Legal Framework for Water Users' Associations: a comparative study*. World Bank Technical Paper 360
8. TACIS. 1995. WARMAP project report IV: irrigated crop production system.
9. Ul Hassan, M. and N. Nizamedinkhodjaeva no date. *Social Mobilization and Institutional Development Approach and Strategy*. IWMI Tashkent. [http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/centralasiawaterusers/files/pdf/SMID\\_StrategyEng.pdf](http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/centralasiawaterusers/files/pdf/SMID_StrategyEng.pdf)
10. Zimina, L. 2003. Developing water management in South Kazakhstan. in S. O'Hara (ed). *Drop by drop: water management in the southern Caucasus and Central Asia*. LGI Fellowship Series. Budapest.