

INTERNATIONAL WATERS EXPERIENCE NOTES

Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia in Transboundary Water Resources Management



Abstract: The surface and ground waters in the Kura river basin are the principal source of water for all sectors and users in both Azerbaijan and Georgia, including: industry, agriculture, hydropower, and municipal water uses. Potential over-extraction of surface and groundwater resources, uneven development rates and uncoordinated utilization of the shared natural resources represent challenges faced by both countries.

In the framework of the UNDP-GEF Kura II project, the main principles of regional and national cooperation were introduced through the establishment of working groups to discuss water management issues and share data and information including water quantity and water quality within and between sectors. The main objective was to build strong ties between the main stakeholders in both countries and allow them to exchange views and share available data and information on transboundary water resources.

The Kura II Project framework for transboundary water cooperation created a momentum and commitment to address relevant water related matters and generated tangible outputs. Joint meetings were regularly held in which status reports on water quantity and water quality were presented, data were exchanged and work plans and ToRs were discussed, determined and implemented.

Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia in Transboundary Water Resources Management

Experience of the GEF – sponsored

UNDP GEF/IW: Kura II: Advancing IWRM across the Kura river basin through implementation of the transboundary agreed actions and national plans

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

UNDP-GEF Kura II Project was developed to address the priority needs in the ministerially endorsed Strategic Action Plan (SAP) through implementation of the SAP and national Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) Plans to strengthen and harmonize coordinated conjunctive transboundary ground and surface water management. It comprised five components: Support for institutional governance protocols; professional development and capacity building for water managers across sectors; stress reduction measures in critical areas; stakeholder education and empowerment; and, enhanced science for governance.

THE EXPERIENCE

Issue

The Kura River Basin is the main transboundary water system in the geopolitically challenging region of the South Caucasus. The countries of Azerbaijan and Georgia have undergone significant political and economic transition and are now developing rapidly across a wide range of water dependent sectors. Azerbaijan and Georgia cover 94,760 square km and represent 88% of the Kura basin. The two countries have demonstrated strong commitment to cooperate towards transboundary integrated water resources management.

Azerbaijan and Georgia identified the main transboundary challenges for the Kura River Basin as:

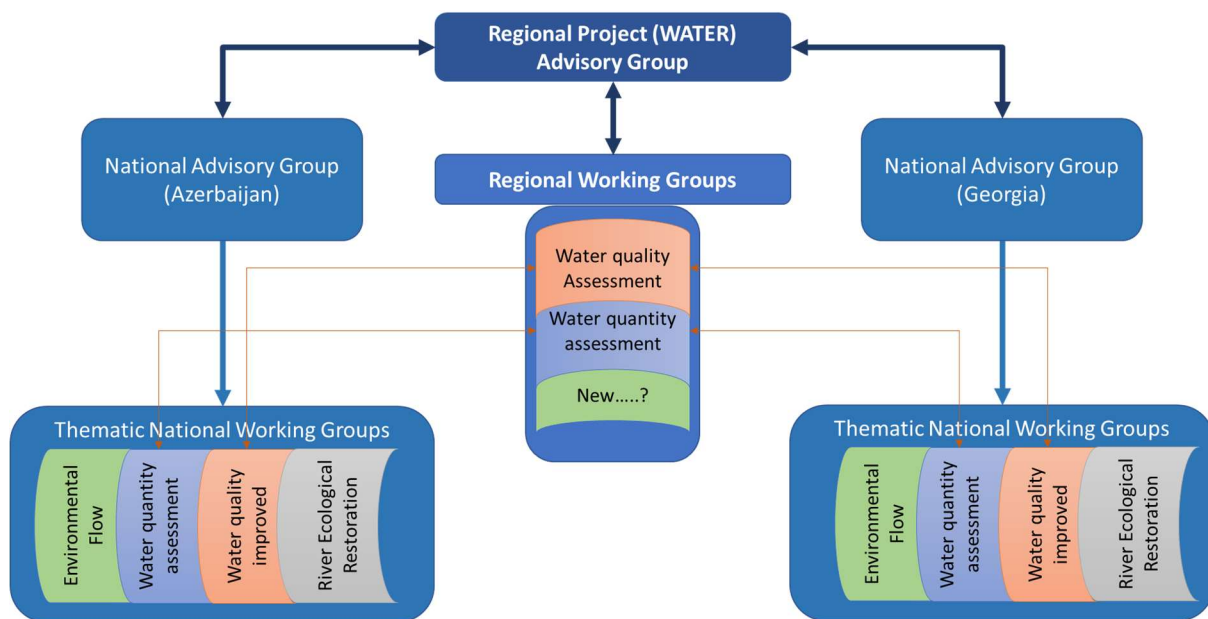
- Improved Hydrological Management;
- Reduced loss of water resources;
- Improved water quality monitoring programs;
- Pollution reduction and prevention;
- Harmonization of water quality standards;
- Assessment of the status of river ecosystems;
- Conservation & restoration of river ecosystems;
- Mainstreaming river ecosystem protection in development planning;
- Reduction of hazards due to floods and drought and Harmonized Climate Change Adaptation

Addressing the issue

The top priority has been given to five pillars framing transboundary cooperation:

- institutional strengthening and updating for sustainable IWRM,
- capacity building for professional water managers across multiple sectors,
- demonstrating applied solutions to improve water management in critical areas,
- increasing stakeholder awareness, education and empowerment,
- improving the use of science for governance.

The collaboration between the two countries was achieved by establishing working groups for regional cooperation. Groups were established as Regional Project Advisory Group backed by National Project Advisory Groups in each country as well as technical working groups pursuing the technical transboundary challenges mentioned above.



The Regional Project Advisory Group (RPAG) consisted of representatives from the main stakeholders' organizations in the two countries, such as the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources (MENR) in Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Environment Protection and Agriculture (MEPA) in Georgia, which is the former Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection (MENRP). The group was established during the project inception phase. The task of this group was to analyse, discuss and support transboundary water resources issues pertaining to project implementation at the regional level. The group members communicated and discussed specific aspects of the project and served as the Secretariat to the project Steering Committee. The RPAG reviewed the project progress and discussed the transboundary water resources issues in the Kura river basin.

A National Project Advisory Group (PAG) was established in both countries with members from the main water resources management stakeholders in each country together with water experts from national universities and active NGOs. These groups were established during the project inception phase. Similarly to the PRAG, their tasks were to analyse, discuss and support issues pertaining to project implementation at the local, national and regional levels throughout the entire project's duration. PAG members communicated and discussed inter-sectoral cooperation between different sectors at the national level.

Two technical working groups were established, one for water quantity issues and one for water quality issues. The members of these two technical working groups represent top experts in each country in these two subjects.

RESULTS AND LEARNING

Summary of work and outputs

The process of regional cooperation was facilitated by the UNDP-GEF Kura II project through aforementioned mechanism of the advisory and technical working groups. The regional cooperation was framed around the following topics but not limited to:

- Data and information exchange
- Development of a conjunctive use of surface water and groundwater management Guideline including roles and responsibilities
- The design and installation of an online groundwater monitoring system and training
- Determination of shared water quality indicators including the harmonisation of sampling, frequency of sampling and reporting procedures
- Sharing data and knowledge on current hydrological conditions in the Kura basin
- Discussion on water availability and recommendations for sharing water resources
- E-flow studies in both countries
- Ways to ensure sustainability of the regional cooperation on transboundary water management.

The available surface water and groundwater resources in the river basin were assessed and gaps identified and challenges in managing these resources at both national and transboundary levels prioritized. The technical working groups generated a set of recommendations and strategies for conjunctive use of surface and groundwater resources. The results of the working group are meant to harmonize and priorities national plans as to ensure more sustainable development through integrated planning in both countries.

Kura II project also aimed at having protocols in place to support data and information exchange for sound IWRM decision-making at national and transboundary levels. Azerbaijan and Georgia acknowledged the principles of data and information exchange including water quantity and water quality within and between sectors. It was also considered a top regional priority to meet commitments regarding bilateral exchanges of information in line with modern water management practices with respect to the EU WFD.

REPLICATION

It is strongly recommended to continue the tangible output that was already accomplished during the Kura II Project. The most obvious next steps should embrace principles like joint warning and alarm procedures, joint hydrological and environmental impact assessments or the determination of joint emission limits.

It is worth noting that continuing regional cooperation and addressing these principles constitute an underlying foundation for programs of organizations funding cross-border water management. In addition, UNECE as the responsible body of the Water

Convention, has ongoing activities shaped around water related disaster prevention and climate change adaptation in a transboundary environment. Adaption to climate change has become an essential part of transboundary water management and must be further prioritized. Adverse effects of climate change are often amplified by socio-economic development such as high population growth rates, migration from rural to urban areas, settlements in flood prone areas and expansion of economic activities in areas which are exposed to water related hazards.

The momentum, the Kura II Project has created with regards to transboundary water management, must be sustained and a process of action addressing relevant water related matters and generating tangible output must be continued and further developed.

SIGNIFICANCE

Transboundary cooperation on shared water resources is considered one of the most important strategies for effective water resources management and for water security. Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia is not an option, it is a must.

There are two lines along which regional cooperation will be fostered between Azerbaijan and Georgia. The first and long-term solution is to establish a legally binding agreement based on the principles of the UNECE Water Conventions. The two countries have started negotiations on acceding the UN Water Convention and are already in touch with UNECE.

The second line is the continuation of the process that was established during the Kura II Project on the basis of regional and national working groups with regular meetings and specific TOR that are updated and endorsed by the two countries.

Both negotiations on a legally binding agreement and the successfully implemented approach should be pursued in parallel and do not exclude each other.

REFERENCES

UNDP-GEF Kura II Project: <https://kura-river.org/>

KEYWORDS

Water Use Efficiency, Pilot sites, Drip Irrigation, Sprinkler Irrigation, Adaptation to Climate Change, Advance Irrigation Technology