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# **Can “Integrated Water Resources Management” silence Malthusian concerns? The case of Central Asia**

The debate on international water problems is largely dichotomous. It is split between the more analytical perspective of International Relations (IR), on the one hand, and rather normative, problem-solving contributions, on the other hand. While the IR discourse focuses on resource conflicts, the prospects of water wars, and opportunities or problems of international water regimes, the normative discourse concentrates on prescriptive concepts like the Dublin Principles, international water law or “Integrated Water Resources Management” (IWRM).

The paper aims at exploring how these rather separate spheres can link up productively in order to ease the solving of international water problems. Therefore, it demonstrates the complementary character of the Malthusian discourse on resource conflicts and the concept of IWRM by scrutinising a regional example of severe water-related problems.

Central Asia – and the Aral Sea Basin in particular – clearly constitutes a water “hot spot”. Malthusian analyses highlight international upstream-downstream conflicts over relative water distribution (hydropower generation in upstream countries vs. irrigation in downstream countries), growing transboundary conflicts over absolute distribution (notably caused by ambitious Turkmen development projects and the expected recovery of Afghan agriculture), as well as regular intra-state violence motivated by competition over scarce water resources.

The paper shows how most of these problems could effectively be handled by adopting IWRM principles for water management: Basin-wide inter-sectoral integration creates

opportunities for win-win solutions, demand management could largely reduce absolute pressure on water resources, and decentralised management structures would mitigate local water conflicts.

However, neither Malthusian analyses nor the concept of IWRM contain receipts for effectively implementing these potential solutions. On the contrary, a perspective of political economy reveals how vested interests prevent reforms within the cotton-growing agriculture in downstream countries, which alone would enable inter-sectoral flexibility, a shift towards demand-management and a decentralisation and democratisation of local water management.

In consequence, both IR approaches and normative concepts like IWRM need to be complemented by a profound knowledge of domestic politics within affected states if they are to identify realistic ways for solving water problems.