

Regional Partnership for Prevention of Transboundary Degradation of the Kura-Aras River Basin
UNDP Sector: Environmental Conservation and management

Background:

Kura River is the largest hydrological watercourse in the South Caucasus. It originates in the springs located at the 2720 meters above the sea level on the northeast slopes of Kizil-Giadik (Turkey). It flows through territory of Georgia and the lower reaches of the river are in Azerbaijan and flows into the Caspian Sea. The total length of the river is 1515km and the total area of the basin 188 000km². Together with its major tributary river Aras the entire basin occupies the greater part of the South Caucasus. Pollution of trans-boundary Kura-Aras River is one of the most critical issues for the countries of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), therefore it is reflected in national action plans and forthcoming programmes. The National Environmental Action Plan of Georgia, while prioritising water resource management, lists the Kura river as one of the most polluted watercourses and consequently requires immediate and concerted action both on national and regional levels. The River pollution poses serious health risks to the riparian countries as the waters are used for drinking, irrigation and fishing purposes. Municipal, industrial and medical wastewater is discharged in the river. Concentrations of heavy metals, phenols and nitrogen are considerably higher than the national and international standards. The Kura-Aras basin is heavily populated. The three countries of Trans-Caucasus possess the greatest concentration of the major municipal areas and industrial centres in the Kura-Aras river basin. Therefore, anthropogenic pressure over the ecosystem is enormous (the basin is populated by 6.8 million people). The river is essential for national and local economies as its waters are used for drinking, hydropower and irrigation. Therefore, addressing the problems of this trans-boundary water artery, both in qualitative and quantitative terms are of critical significance. Increasing qualitative and quantitative problems are due to: 1) limited capacity of the institutions and organisations in charge; 2) Inefficient control and lack of financial mechanisms to prevent pollution; 3) Underdeveloped legislation on water at national and regional levels; 4) Fragmented system of water monitoring and unavailability of reliable data on pollution; 5) Lack of regional co-operation mechanisms, commitments and action plan. This initiative aims at maximising impacts by facilitating and supporting dialogues among riparian countries and strengthening existing institutional mechanisms.

Objective:

The overall objective is to ensure that the quality and quantity of the water throughout the Kura-Aras river system meets the short and long-term needs of the ecosystem and of the communities using the ecosystem. Related to this, a second objective is to reduce pollution in the Caspian Sea. The immediate objectives of the project are: to foster regional co-operation; to increase national and regional capacity to address water quality and quantity problems; and to promote changes in the economic sectors causing pollution, water shortages and habitat degradation. The focus will be on trans-boundary issues.

Strategy:

By promoting regional co-operation policy the project will pursue the objective of resolving problems of unsustainable water management paying particular attention to: a) raising awareness of trans-boundary water pollution issues among decision-makers and general population to foster political will and leadership; b) improving and strengthening institutional, legal and financial mechanisms for sustainable water resource management.

Activities:

1. Establishment of international steering committee;
2. Establishment of regional consulting group comprised of national and international experts;
3. Conducting Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis (TDA);
4. Conducting series of regional workshops to bring all the stakeholders and facilitate concerted action;
5. Establishment of regional communication and information technology systems;
6. Initiation and conducting NGO network support activities.

Expected outcomes:

1. A trans-boundary diagnostic analysis of pollution sources and hot spots in the Kura-Aras basin;
2. Structured and developed Regional Strategic Action Plan that will further translated into national strategic action plans for each country of the basin;
3. Structured and established trans-boundary river basin authorities functioning for the region;
4. Built regional capacity for trans-boundary water management;
5. Increased harmonisation of legislation, standards and monitoring;
6. Structured and developed policy framework of Integrated Water Resource Management for the basin;
7. Strengthened and operational Kura-Aras NGO network.