

# Background

## 1

### **Central Asia: An Introduction**

The peoples and governments in Central Asia are faced with major challenges as they step into the new millennium. The challenges are to raise the standards of living while safeguarding the region's fragile environment and unique cultural heritage. Most countries have in common a very inhospitable environment and are thinly populated. With an average annual rainfall (in the plains) of less than 400mm, Central Asia belongs to the arid to semi-arid climatic zone.

Central Asia spans a large continental landmass with high mountain ranges and plateaus which form the source of Asia's great rivers. The ecological balance here affects the global ecosystem, yet much of Central Asia's arid and semi-arid landmass has already been seriously degraded and is subject to growing desertification. There is a crucial need to develop policies and technolo-

gies that are well suited to the unique environmental and social conditions of Central Asia. The respective areas and populations of the countries of Central Asia are shown in Table 1.

The political changes that resulted in the establishment of new countries have also caused far-reaching changes in the economy, trade, industry, and standards of living of the people in these countries. There is renewed interest to learn from the experience of others and participate in regional cooperation for the sustainable use of natural resources in the region.

The key question is how to balance economic and social objectives with environmental constraints and opportunities. How to promote development in a truly sustainable manner in environmental, social and economic terms is a common concern for all the countries of the region.

**Table 1: Statistical Information about Some Central Asian States**

Country	Area (1,000sq.km)	Population (Million)	Population Density (People/sq.km)	Urban Population (%)
Kazakhstan	2717	17.1	34	6
Turkmenistan	488	4.1	8	45
Uzbekistan	442	22.8	51	12
Tajikistan	142.5	6.1	43	32
Kyrgyzstan	198.5	4.7	24	39
Mongolia	1565	2.4	2	59
Nepal	140.8	21.4	156	12
Bhutan	47	1.6	34	6
Afghanistan	652	20	31	20

### **Background to CoDoCA**

The first Conference on Sustainable Development of Central Asia (CoDoCA I) was held in Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia, in September 1994. The conference was initiated by the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, and co-organized by the Central Asia Research Forum of the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London and Shambhala Foundation. The event was sponsored by the European Union, AusAid/AIDAB, and the UNDP. The conference, which was opened by the Mongolian President, P. Ochirbat, was attended by 120 people from many different countries.

In order to continue the debate started in Mongolia, the conference delegates agreed on the establishment of the Council for Sustainable Development of Central Asia (CoDoCA). CoDoCA was registered as a foundation in the Netherlands in 1995. CoDoCA's secretariat is based in the Netherlands but it is expected that it will be relocated to one of the countries in Central Asia.

The Council is a vehicle for the development of a network of organizations and individuals involved or interested in Central Asia. Although the region is defined in wide geographical terms, and spans many different countries and na-

tions, there are many common development problems and opportunities that provide a strong basis for regional exchange and cooperation among the many communities of Central Asia.

### **Objectives and Scope of the Second CoDoCA Conference**

The Second Conference on Sustainable Development of Central Asia (CoDoCA II) took place in Urumqi, China, from September 13-18, 1998.

The Conference was a joint initiative of the Council for Sustainable Development of Central Asia (CoDoCA) and the Xinjiang Environmental Science Research Institute. The conference was organized in association with the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), and the Xinjiang Institute of Ecology and Geography.

Urumqi was an excellent venue for such a meeting. As the capital of the most westerly province of China, Xinjiang occupies a strategic location for both old and new trade routes, serving as a bridge between China and new republics of Central Asia, between the Middle East, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region.

The conference received major financial support from the Ford Foundation, the Kingdom of the Netherlands (VROM) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Additional funding came from Soros Foundation, Asia Pacific Mountain Network, Shell Solar, and Triodos Bank.

As stated, the conference in Urumqi continued the debate started in 1994 by the first Conference on Sustainable Development of Central Asia (CoDoCA I) in Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia, at which a wide range of important issues affecting the ecology and economy of the region was discussed by experts from Central Asia and other countries from Western Europe and North America. The meeting was a breakthrough, because it marked the first step towards regional cooperation in the largely arid and landlocked landmass of the Euro-Asian continent with its typical geographical and environmental features.

The delegates recognised the need to seek special solutions for the development problems of Central Asia. Sharing common historic roots in great nomadic civilisations, the Central Asian nations could learn from one another in preparing for the challenges presented by the modern global economy whilst maintaining the integrity of their indigenous cultures and environment.

The CoDoCA II conference in Urumqi focussed on key issues affecting Central Asia, in particular the relationship between economic and social development and the protection of Central Asia's fragile resources. The central theme of the conference — the limited carrying capacity of Central Asia's arid plains and mountains — is at the heart of the region's common environmental and development problems. Solutions to these problems should take these geographic conditions into account. It is only on this basis that Central Asian nations can strengthen their local economies in an

age of increasing economic interdependence and vulnerability.

The conference addressed specialised topics such as sustainable land use, erosion control, protection of water resources, and pastoral economics. There were a number of 'technical' presentations on energy, biomass and wildlife management, and environmental problems. There were examples of appropriate technologies, community-managed irrigation, renewable energy systems, and innovative mechanisms for financing resource conservation and other local-level sustainable development initiatives.

The conference began on the morning of 13 September with an Inaugural Session which was attended by high-ranking government officials and senior academicians of the host country, along with distinguished participants from 22 countries. The gathering was addressed by representatives from different countries; these included representatives from the host country, the organizers, the co-organizers and the donors (see Chapter One).

*Day one* focussed on presentations dealing with Central Asia's unique natural resources and land degradation; these included pressures on the use and preservation of water, pastures, and wildlife and species' preservation. *Day two* focussed on Sustainable Development in Central Asia with presentations on economic planning perspectives, institutional and social perspectives, and the role of traditional and local communities. *Day three* focussed on the implementation aspect and discussed the role of state and other organizations; this included participatory and community-based initiatives, financing sustainable development initiatives, and the management of renewable energy programmes. The final day ended with the adoption of the Urumqi Declaration and the Altai Declaration.

The conference brought together organizations and individuals with interest in the sustainable development of the region. The audiences included policy-makers from different government organizations and researchers and representatives from non-governmental organizations that were committed to building an economically prosperous, socially harmonious, and environmentally secure Central Asia.

The conference provided a valuable and unique opportunity for Central Asians to meet colleagues from neighbouring countries whose borders, until recently, had been closed for decades. The conference also enabled Central Asians to meet with participants from other parts of the world that had a wide range of disciplinary and technical expertise relevant to their region.

### **Organization of this Report**

Beginning with a chapter on the Inaugural Session, this report is structured along the main themes of the conference. In order to retain consistency in the topics some presentations have been re-grouped and therefore do not necessarily follow the presentation sequence of the conference.

The participants from Central Asia made a strong commitment to work together to promote sustainable development in the region through a careful balancing of environmental and development activities at the local, national, regional, and international levels. This is reflected in the main outputs of the Conference which are the '**Urumqi Declaration**' and the '**Altai Declaration**' (see Chapter nine for details).