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Irrigation Management Transfer and WUAs' dynamics: evidence from the South-Kazakhstan province

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The importance of water resources management in the arid and semi-arid lands can not be overestimated being related with environmental, economical and socio-political issues. In Central Asia, due to the physical and climatic features, water control and irrigation have always played a strategic role in territorial and societal development. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in Kazakhstan, as in the other Central Asian republics, significant changes in both the water and agricultural sector have emerged; water management shifted from a purely technical issue to a sociopolitical and economic one leading to several institutional and organizational changes. To address this transitional water management context and the related governance and technical issues, since the 1990s several development organizations and donor agencies (such as the World Bank, United Nations, USAID, and others), according to the international water community, have sought to streamline the Irrigation Management Transfer (IMT) and the establishment of the Water Users Associations (WUAs); this initiatives are sponsored and related to the IWRM framework, the water program globally supported by the Global Water Partnership and widely debated and questioned in the last years. This paper aims to discuss these transitional water management processes focusing on the meso-local level in the Arys valley, administratively included in the South-Kazakhstan province, ten years since the enactment of the law formalizing the WUAs. Three districts (Tyulkibas, Ordabasy and Otrar) were selected to analyse and understand the specific local transitional water institutional/organizational framework and to highlight the differences among them. The fieldwork was conducted in two different phases, April-May and November-December 2012. Within those periods, semi-structured interviews were carried out to the members of the state organizations (river basin agencies and district/province water departments) as well as the WUAs' members and independent farmers. The evidence has showed that the IMT has been implemented in different and ambiguous methods and times, reflecting specific district socio-political dynamics and related issues. Furthermore, overall the state support to the IMT has significantly decreased leading to unexpected changes in its role in local water management, making the reforms' process questionable and uncertain, and a reconsideration of the future scenario.