

FOREWORD

Independence for the countries of Soviet Central Asia¹ has not been an easy “gift” to manage. During the ten years following the breakdown of the Soviet Union these countries struggled with the daunting challenges of being independent states, dealing with economies based on a rationality that no longer existed, coping with deep socio-economic crises that had impoverished large sections of the population and at the same time developing models of statehood and nation.

International organisations have been key players in this “transition” process. By providing access to considerable funding, (in comparison to the budgets of the states themselves), and by promoting or imposing certain political and economic models, they have contributed to shaping the countries and, in some ways, the societies of the region. During the early 90s the main item on the international agenda was rapid integration of Central Asian states into the world markets, almost certainly in order to access the large energy resources of the region. With time, the euphoria over energy has faded. In its place came disenchantment over the slow progress in over-

coming the challenges and conflicts of the “transition” processes.

Stability of the region has been seen as the main factor in protecting energy sector investments without over involvement in more political structural reforms. International donors put “conflict prevention / management” on their agenda only in the late 90s. It is a hypothesis that has still to be proven, but there is probably a link between the disenchantment of the international organisations and the development of “conflict prevention” programmes.

The development of such programmes has also to be seen in the light of the discourse on development assistance at international level. Since the cold war and the massacres in Rwanda, the international community has more and more recognized the need to work “upstream” when dealing with conflict. This means that investing in prevention is less expensive than intervening after a conflict has taken place. In this perspective, some donors (including Switzerland) have seen Central Asia as a “testing” region for approaches based on “conflict prevention” ideas.

After a period where Central Asia was no longer a priority for international donors and organisations, the region found itself abruptly back on the agenda of the international community after the events of September 11.

Switzerland has been present in Central Asia since the mid-90s. The interests of Switzerland in Central Asia are linked to the fact that Bern represents most of the Central Asian countries at the Bretton Woods Institutions rather than to its own energy agenda. Its technical and financial assistance programmes, as well as humanitarian aid, have continued to expand - both geographically² and in terms of Swiss government and non-government actors.

The Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Political Division IV Section, mandated the present document for Civilian Peace Operations at the end of 2001, as a basis for analytical development of its engagement strategy in the region. The document should provide an overview of “peace promotion and conflict management initiatives” in Central Asia. It tries not only to assess programmes supported by international donors but also to look at local mechanisms of conflict management³.

¹ Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

² From Kyrgyzstan to Tajikistan and then Uzbekistan as well as with regional programmes covering all countries (mostly with the exception of Turkmenistan)

The bulk of resources for conflict management programmes and projects seem to go to multi-issues, often to cross border programmes mostly targeted to the Fergana Valley. Several donors and organisations have developed similar programmes in this region. This is a cause of concern not only in terms of coordination and competition for local implementing partners but also because focusing on "conflict" may lead donors and countries to concentrate on the short-term causes of conflict (such as military security, which is high on the agenda of the regimes of the region), instead of on the root causes of conflict. Water management programmes are also attracting a considerable amount of resources (often with a doubtful impact, especially in the case of the Aral Sea disaster).

International organisations have contributed considerably in the creation of local NGOs with a perspective for creating a "civil society" that is an instrument of democratisation and conflict prevention/ resolution. However, in this case, the impact of these programmes is unclear.

If the impact of internationally sponsored programmes have still to be evaluated, the structures developed by Central Asian states for dealing with regional cooperation issues, such as economic development, water resources management, military and security cooperation, have been confronted with bilateralism. The fact is that these regimes have preferred to develop bilateral, case-by-case solutions marked by the protection of perceived national interests more than engaging in significant cooperation with each other. This situation

has often exacerbated competition among regional actors and has diminished the impact of regional cooperation, institutions and initiatives

In general, internationally supported "conflict prevention/ management" programmes face the following challenge: to become more than simply an answer to short-term security concerns. It is still not clear if these programmes will be capable of developing local structures and institutions able to deal peacefully with the difficulties of the "transition"⁴ processes.

3 Unfortunately the knowledge of the latter would benefit from more extensive and specific research work.

4 Creating and maintaining statehood and national identity, access to political participation and social justice as well as the role of political Islam and the stability of Afghanistan will be factors influencing the conflict and cooperation dynamics of Central Asia and the capacities of societies and governments of the region to respond to crisis