

*Saving the Aral Sea: A cross-cultural communication
success*

Jérôme Dumetz
Nikolay Aladin

The Aral Sea was once the fourth-largest salt lake in the world. With a drainage basin crossing seven middle-Asian countries, it nearly disappeared at the end of the past century due to human activities. Since the '80s, an international mobilization emerged, carried out by leading hydrologists and biologists from around the world. Prof. Dr. Nikolai Aladin from the Zoological Institute of St. Petersburg is one of them, having dedicated the last decades to saving the Aral Sea (Aladin, 2020). Combining a shrewd academic talent with an empathic communication style, he managed to talk culturally and politically distant leaders into acting together to save this common good. Today, if the North Aral Sea is considered saved, it is not only an engineering and political achievement but essentially a cross-cultural communication success. This short paper is reviewing and analyzing this exceptional success, with the ambition to inspire others.

The international efforts to save the Aral Sea corresponded with the multinational awareness of a real, urgent, problem: The sea was not keeping the water in its natural bed and the disproportionate use of water by some countries aggravated the situation. At a time when some countries considered the development of new hydropower capacities, only an international answer could have influenced the situation. A number of actions were taken during a series of encounters. The start of the process is far from academia and can be linked to the activism of the famous Kirghiz writer, Chinghiz Aitmatov turned advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev during Perestroika in the late '80s. A chain reaction started.

In Kazakhstan, a powerful network of politicians was carefully built, first a mayor of a town, then a minister, then the prime minister of Kazakhstan, and finally its President. With time, the heads of states of all the neighbouring countries were to meet in a collective effort to

solve this common good. In a region known for lack of trust towards outsiders, a relationship-orientated attitude proved instrumental to build this step-by-step collection of sponsors. Prof. Aladin, a member of the Russian Academy of Science and laureate of the Pavlovskiy prize in Zoology, met in person each head of the countries surrounding the Aral Sea. Such an approach proved successful with representatives of hierarchical cultures with ascribed status (Trompenaars, 2011). This cross-cultural competence was built over the years through great knowledge of local cultures, adaptable communication skills (including foreign language fluency), and an open-minded attitude among people who may not share the same religion, values, or political objectives (Earley & Ang 2003).

A number of cultural and political problems threatened to derail a process with so many diverse players. Among others, the lack of cooperation spirit between Uzbek and Kazakh authorities regarding the reasons behind the Aral catastrophe. Respect and open-mindedness towards other cultures were essential in the establishment of the rescue project (Aladin, 2006). Scientific and personal relationship helped to reduce such opposition and once the first dam was built, Prof. Dr. Rustam Razakov from Uzbekistan became a strong supporter of the success of his Kazakh colleagues on the Small Aral. The atmosphere of international cooperation generated by the end of the cold war led to the organization of a conference in 1989 in then Czechoslovakia. Specialists from not only the USSR, Eastern and Western Europe but also the USA and Israel participated. Soviet politicians in charge of the environment also joined in, as well as representatives from international organizations such as the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and Salt Lakes fund. Finally, awareness went beyond the small world of specialists due to the coverage of journalists from the National Geographic magazine.

But success has many fathers and it is important to highlight the contribution of Spanish-speaking participants of the 5th Conference on Salt Lakes in spring 1991 in Bolivia. From a cross-cultural communication perspective, we can isolate the reason behind such support through the place emotions play in communication across cultures (Dumetz, 2018). During the conference, not only scientific data but also the expedition pictures were displayed by a truly emotional Prof. Aladin. The showcase of such level of emotion created a strong interest among South American colleagues receptive to high context communication styles. A written article would not have triggered such emotion and led to active support from this part of the world.

Some biological hazards prevented the proceeding of the project, such as the case of bubonic plague in the region of Aralsk and its subsequent quarantine imposed to all wanting to access the Berg Strait forced a year-long postponement. The situation was met by fatalism by externally-controlled members of the expedition originating from cultures surrounded the Aral Sea. Nevertheless, if such cultural characteristic is often illustrated as a fatalistic ex-

cuse not to act (Smith, 1995), the careful introduction of vicarious experience from Australian farmers who successfully controlled and regulated level and salinity of surrounding local salt lakes proved successful to promote a decentralized approach by the Aral Sea.

Today, the North Aral Sea is saved (Aladin, 2018). Several dams were built under the patronage of scientists from a great number of countries (Aladin, 2005). The necessity to involve all countries of the area guided the creation of the International Fund to saving the Aral Sea, the IFAS. The mission of IFAS is to coordinate cooperation at national and international levels in order to use existing water resources more effectively and to improve the environmental and socio-economic situation in the Aral Sea Basin. IFAS serves as a platform for a dialogue among the countries of Central Asia, as well as the international community. This carefully crafted mission statement is holistic and follows a typical polychronical approach of projects where several goals can be reached in a parallel fashion. Instead of a linear, step-by-step process, polychronic cultures will prioritize tasks according to their relative importance towards greater goals, sometimes hidden goals (Hall, 1959). For instance, the regional geopolitics at play might have been the real reason behind a sudden halt to the project, but also could have been the key to its sudden unblocking.

In an endeavour such as the international project of saving the Aral Sea, personal relationship was paramount, trumping any technical, task-orientated discussions. Regional stakeholders displaying hierarchical, relationship-orientated, ascribed cultures were dealt with high-level, sometimes emotional, meetings in a successful case of cross-cultural communication adaptation. Such an approach is an inspiring roadmap for not only the future of the Aral Sea, but also for any other environment project involving multiple players from different cultures.

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