Central Asia is facing increasingly severe environmental challenges. The combined impact of climate change, which has started to reduce water flows by shrinking the glaciers that feed Central Asian rivers, and rapid population growth is likely to exacerbate some of the region’s problems, with implications for economic development, security and migration.

The diversion of rivers to cultivate cotton in Soviet times was responsible for the depletion of the Aral Sea, which straddles the border of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Moreover, the quality of water in the water bodies of Central Asia has been deteriorating for decades. The EU is offering help to the region to turn these challenges into opportunities. Enhancing environmental, climate and water resilience is a substantial element of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia.

Tajikistan, just like Kyrgyzstan, is an “upstream” country, while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are “downstream” countries. Uzbekistan, Central Asia’s most populous country, depends on the rivers that rise in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to irrigate farmland.

As these challenges are transboundary in nature and require mutual trust and cooperative solutions, the EU will continue to pursue a regional approach to cooperation in the field of the environment, water and climate change. Projects include:

- Training of experts
- Promoting integrated water resources management
- Reducing water waste
- Improving water quality
- Modernising infrastructures
- Promoting modern agricultural irrigation systems

With the support of EURACTIV Research.