



STRATEGIES FOR
SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION
OF SUSTAINABILITY IN EUROPE

Third project workshop:

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SUCCESSFUL
COMMUNICATION OF SUSTAINABILITY

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Challenges of making movies related to sustainability

*(Joachim Tschirner, documentary film director & Gero Fedtke,
Caucasus and Central Asia Coordinator, WECF, Munich)*

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by Hans-Jörg Rother

Once there was a sea now there is nothing but desert sand: "The Aral Sea"



Atlases from the seventies show the Uzbek city of Muynak as a port located where the Syr Darya flows into the Aral Sea. Today the river that originates from glaciers high in the Pamirs trickles into desert sand and the shoreline has retreated 100 kilometers to the north. In the heart of Central Asia, one of the largest ecological catastrophes on the planet was orchestrated by the unbridled gigantism of Soviet agricultural policies. With little thought as to the consequences, the river water was diverted to irrigate rapidly growing huge cotton plantations. Once the water reaches the fields, it evaporates or, at best, tainted with pesticides, seeps into the groundwater used for drinking by the residents of Muynak, who work in the cotton fields.

One of the most absurd scenes from Joachim Tschirner's documentary film shows exuberant people, most of them women, loaded with cots and food, heading out for the harvest. Do they not realize, or do they refuse to believe, that it is precisely the cotton that is destroying the very basis of their existence? Seventy percent of the 1.3 million inhabitants of the autonomous Uzbek republic of Karakalpakstan, which includes the zone around Muynak, suffer from bronchial and lung diseases. Forty percent of the children come into the world with birth defects. The filmmaker chose only to show mild cases, lethargic infants, some with emaciated faces, a

gallery of horrors. As we watch children romping around on playgrounds and yards, and see them take a refreshing drink of gushing water from a pipe, the voice of narrator Hannelore Hoger informs us that it will probably be the death of them all. Pure drinking water can only be bought at the local market for a dollar a bottle – an exorbitant price for most people who live in Muynak.

Another absurdity comes to light when we visit a canning factory. Fish of questionable quality are still caught in ponds or in the contaminated remnants of the Aral Sea. Once in a while, trucks arrive carrying a load of a few tons of fish from the Caspian Sea, which lies a thousand kilometers to the west, and the production line at the plant starts rolling again. The workers in their brightly colored clothing laugh and sing, as if they believed that the past idle days were nothing but a bad dream. One former fisherman, however, does not feel like singing. He whiles away the hours of the midday heat, sitting on a cushion in his yard, and complains: "Something has happened to my soul. My soul aches." He has a collection of submissive letters of complaint that he and his neighbors wrote to the Uzbek president. Their requests for aid to the dying region have fallen on deaf ears.

Tschirner resisted the temptation to indulge the melancholic mood that easily overcomes "disaster tourists" when they see satellite images of the Aral Sea, and is even more pronounced when people actually witness the advancing desertification with their own eyes. To avoid waxing nostalgic, the director has purposely left out archive material with roaring waves, nets bursting with fish, and cheerful work brigades. Following his first visit, he founded the non-profit organization "Water for the Children of the Aral Sea" and convinced celebrities such as Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis to become members. In addition to taking us on a tour of the town, the film shows a convoy of trucks filled with medicine and medical supplies. Later, viewers find themselves across the Atlantic, where a bold Uzbek doctor is allowed three minutes to portray the plight of her homeland before the General Assembly in New York during a UN environmental conference. Hardly anyone is listening.

An old man with a thinning beard recites a Central Asian proverb: "When you only have water for one tree, don't plant a second one." He has followed the advice of his ancestors, and his bountiful vegetable garden is proof of their wisdom. Self-restraint is the key to solving the region's environmental problems. The solution lies not with the World Bank, which Tschirner calls into question with an accusatory undertone concerning its commitment to the Aral Sea, but rather in the common sense of local residents, who alone can help Mother Nature find some sense of equilibrium again. When the director is not busy expounding and pleading the cause, we are treated to the film's most convincing moments. Christian Maletzke's camera work reveals a deep sense of perspective, as if constantly searching the horizon for the vanished sea. Scenes of rusting old fishing boats rising out of the wind-swept desert sands make all words superfluous.