



Goascorán Basin: Honduras and El Salvador

Revitalising cooperative management through
expanding stakeholder involvement





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GOASCORÁN BASIN: HONDURAS AND EL SALVADOR

Revitalising cooperative management through expanding stakeholder involvement

Patrick R. MacQuarrie, Rebecca Welling, Nazareth Porras and Rocio Córdoba

The waters of the Goascorán River are shared between Honduras and El Salvador. Since 2011, BRIDGE has worked to promote better cooperation over transboundary waters, taking a non-conventional approach to water diplomacy. One of the challenges was the level of involvement in the institutional arrangement existing in the basin. The initial makeup of the Binational Management Group (BMG) had a limited representation of Municipalities only giving the institution a narrow scope and legitimacy with stakeholders. There was a need to revitalise the BMG expanding the level of participation across scales and across sectors.

Responding to these challenges, BRIDGE has played an essential role in enabling and facilitating changes through a multi-level water diplomacy programme to build good water governance capacity. It uses a combination of knowledge and information tools, procedural advice and technical support, and capacity building and training to strengthen relations between stakeholders across local, provincial, national, and regional levels.

There have been several key lessons learned from the Goascorán experience. Water diplomacy does not necessarily follow a straight line. Effective strategies need to incorporate several dimensions and in a stepwise approach working with existing structures in the basin. Promoting good water governance in the Goascorán included supporting existing transboundary institutions while advocating constructive reforms and broader representation. It involved providing *timely* legal and procedural assistance on water governance and international water law. It involved facilitating discourse and dialogue with stakeholders on integrated water management. And it involved developing national, provincial, and local capacities to manage transboundary water more effectively. A combined multi-layered approach to water diplomacy yields greater cooperation in the Goascorán.

Highlighted results

- 👉 The Binational Management Group (BMG) strengthened and given a greater dynamic.
- 👉 More sectors included in the planning process such as associations of municipalities, local development associations, NGO's and State's Institutions.
- 👉 Strategic Territorial Development Plan developed for the basin through participatory workshops with stakeholders from Honduras and El Salvador.
- 👉 Strategic planning process of the basin articulated with other processes and actions in the territory.
- 👉 Training IWRM and governance of shared waters provided for the Binational Management Group and high-level authorities in Honduras and El Salvador.
- 👉 Legal and institutional analysis completed for transboundary river basin governance.
- 👉 Local Water Champions working closely with the BMG.
- 👉 Champions developed and drafted work plans for transboundary cooperation in respective basins.
- 👉 Virtual exchanges among Champion's Network members sharing knowledge, work and expectations.
- 👉 New members incorporated to the Champions' Network including representatives from local municipalities.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF THE GOASCORÁN

The Goascorán River basin is shared between Honduras and El Salvador. The basin covers over 2,345 square kilometres with approximately 52 percent within Honduras and 48 percent within El Salvador. The basin is home to over 30,000 inhabitants in Honduras and over nearly 145,000 in El Salvador.¹

Within the basin there are sixteen municipalities from Honduras and thirteen from El Salvador. The higher elevations in the basin have the potential for silvopastoralism, agroforestry activities and ecological tourism. The middle basin supports tourism and livestock, whereas the lower basin has tourism, fishing, irrigation, aquaculture, and trade.

Regional context and institutional arrangements

Concerns for conservation and sustainable management of natural resources of the Goascorán River Basin are not new to people living there. El Salvador implemented a few projects in the region through the Association of Watersheds of the Gulf of Fonseca (ACUGOLFO) with the Ministry of Environment. These projects were focused in areas such as solid waste management and conservation of water springs. In Honduras, previously implemented projects were designed to strengthen social capital for local development and natural resources conservation together with constructing infrastructure in the basin.

In 2006, the Goascorán Management Project (funded by the European Union) was implemented and as a result, the Binational Management Group (BMG) was created and a Binational Management Plan formulated. These became key entry points for work done over the last two years by BRIDGE and Fundación Vida (IUCN's partner working in the region).

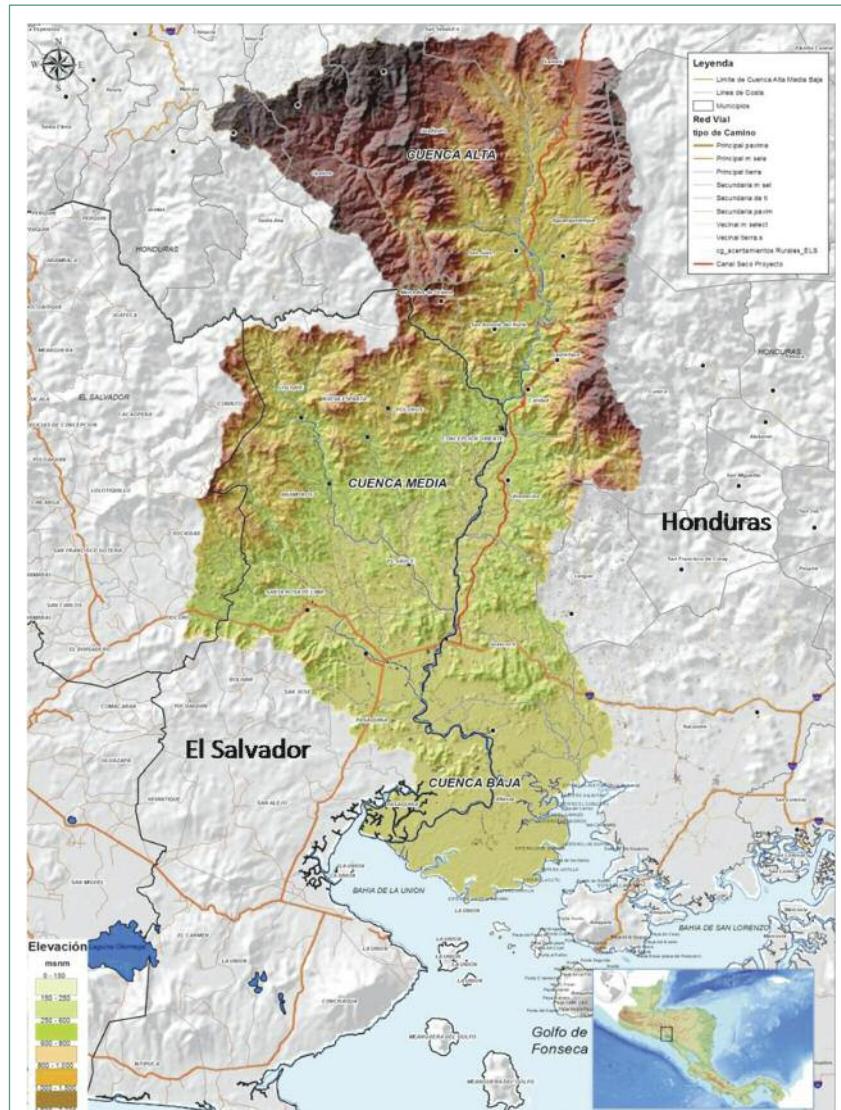


Figure 1. Map of the Goascorán basin.

Source: Fundación Vida; IUCN

¹ Taken from the Management Plan for the Goascorán Binational River Basin, 2007.

CHALLENGES TO COOPERATION

The Goascorán basin presents a level of complexity in joint management. There are a multiplicity of stakeholders with various interests in the basin, such as: municipalities, NGOs, governmental institutions, local economic and development associations, etc., making the facilitation of involvement challenging. Even with greater stakeholder participation there are difficulties with coordination of activities in a sustainable fashion.

Additionally, there is no specific treaty for joint management of the basin, therefore legal and institutional structures for transboundary coordination of management functions do not exist. This is complicated by the fact that legislation in El Salvador and Honduras differ in the way they address the territory.

At its beginning, the Goascorán Binational Management Group structure wasn't clear and didn't include key stakeholders. Integration of the group only involved actors representing local governments, three associations of municipalities, two in Honduras and one in El Salvador, and they created a vision based on unilateral action. These associations made up the original general assembly and their delegates became the committee group coordinators, on an equal basis. Distanced from the broad and systemic shared objectives of territorial development, their dislocation from the various public programs and private projects made it difficult to meet development goals, as well as achieve solid and sustainable impacts. So the challenge became how to revitalise and strengthen the BMG?



Chismuyo, Honduras in the Goascoran Basin.

BRIDGE Actions, Mechanisms and Tools

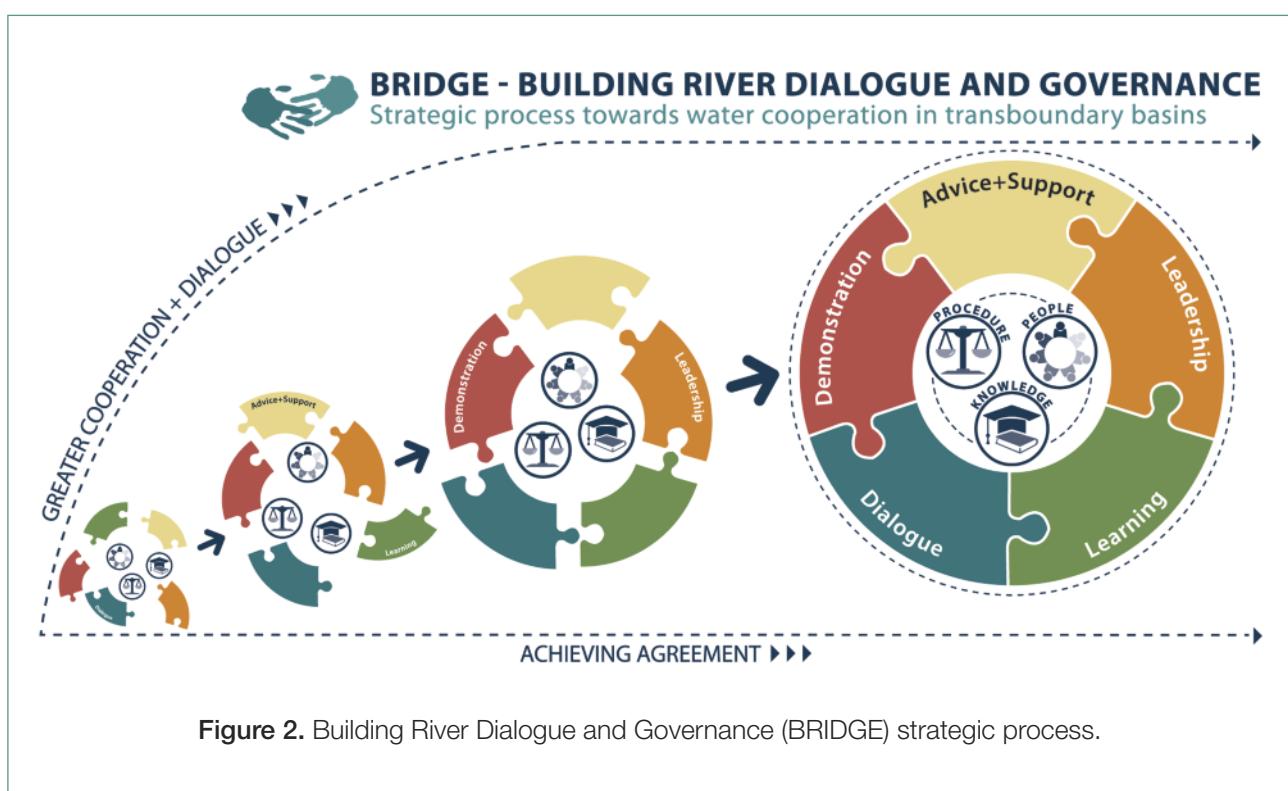
Implementing water diplomacy is not a simple process and BRIDGE incorporates a number of mechanisms and tools in the Goascorán. First, it uses **demonstration** of how to make cooperation operational as the basis for confidence and trust building through shared learning and joint action on concrete steps in building national and transboundary water governance capacity. Second, through **learning**, BRIDGE uses training and capacity building for multiple stakeholders, including municipal and civil society actors as well as high-level national officials, in water governance, international water law and benefit sharing to improve understanding. Third, it **facilitates dialogue for consensus building** using demonstration actions and learning events to catalyse new dialogues on technical, development and political matters. Fourth, BRIDGE implements **leadership** programmes supporting the empowering of champions for transboundary water cooperation and better water governance who can effectively advocate for mobilisation of water diplomacy. Finally, through **advice and support** functions, BRIDGE provides advice on demand and technical assistance to governments and stakeholders on water governance, including on effective institutional and legal frameworks, and communications to promote applications of lessons learned, advice and demonstration results in transboundary hot spots

regionally and globally. Examples of how these were implemented in the Goascorán are given next.

Institutional legitimacy and stakeholder participation

A key mechanism for greater cooperation in the Goascorán has been the intervention with the BMG working through IUCN's partner, Fundación Vida. Through this, BRIDGE facilitated consultations among stakeholders during a series of workshops which led to the identification of a new and widened stakeholder base. The focus of the intervention was to include stakeholders not previously represented in the process, such as local development agencies and national level ministries of planning, interior, and agriculture from both countries.

To create a supporting environment for interventions, Fundación Vida reached out to the original stakeholders in the Goascorán Management Group in an effort to "socialise" BRIDGE and organise sub-regional meetings with local institutions. During these meetings people made clear that they needed to work from a territorial perspective, meaning that the activities of the basin organisation should not only work on protection of natural resources, but should include creating new



BOX 1. Getting Things Rolling by Not Reinventing the Wheel

Rather than following the all-too-common recipe of scraping everything and starting from scratch, BRIDGE built on previous initiatives to advance the project's aims. “*We went to places where we had some experience or partners,*” said Rocio Córdoba, Coordinator of the Livelihoods and Climate Change Unit at IUCN’s regional office in San José, Costa Rica. In the Goascorán River Basin along the border separating Honduras from El Salvador, a binational management group had been created in 2006 by a European Union project.

A year later a development plan was elaborated. “*When BRIDGE came in, it had two main jobs,*” said Luis Maier, Coordinator of the BRIDGE Goascorán Project for the Fundación Vida, an IUCN partner organisation based in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. “*To evaluate the management group and to analyse the strengths of the different actors.*” The next and “most important” step, as Maier put it, was “*the reengineering of the management group*”. There was no need to start from scratch. What’s more, the effort to reinvigorate the management group tapped into the Agencies for Local Economic Development (ADELs), groups formed in the early 1990s as public-private initiatives with support of the United Nations.



Group Work during the BMG General Assembly in August 2012.

opportunities for improving life in the basin extending to sectors beyond water.

Seizing upon this motivation, BRIDGE and its partners leveraged the existing management plan to expand the representation of the BMG through the assembly process. Through a series of meetings, assemblies, and negotiations, the BMG adopted a new structure and a revised strategic water development plan articulated with regional and development plans. The group also formed a transboundary committee to promote new institutional arrangement for transboundary management in the basin. The process was not linear and BRIDGE supported it through facilitation of dialogue, knowledge, and training and support functions.

Knowledge and information

As part of the process of identifying a sharper direction for the Binational Management Group, proceeded by mapping stakeholder and power relations, BRIDGE facilitated a transboundary strategic diagnostic assessment and plan that was developed over a series of workshops jointly by national institutions in the Goascorán watershed and national monitoring committees. This process led to a Strategic Territorial Development Plan, where stakeholders from all levels and all development sectors were then able to discuss their vision on the binational management of the basin. Utilising water governance tools to enhance cooperation has not only provided strategic guidance on transboundary water management to the BMG but also enabled greater empowerment of stakeholders in the Goascorán basin.

Capacity building and leadership

Supporting the BMG, training workshops were conducted involving the national government (Honduras and El Salvador), NGOs, and stakeholders in international water law and transboundary governance principles. Key elements of creating a framework for cooperation were to analyse the existing institutional structure, support the restructuring process of the BMG including the conduct code, and to provide training in international law and transboundary water governance at the national level. Several requests came from the national level in El Salvador, for training on transboundary water governance including skills on negotiation and decision-making. According to Deisy López, from the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources in El Salvador:

“Training has led to the inclusion of, in the El Salvador water bill, a chapter on international rivers basins and shared water-sheds and contributed to facilitate negotiations between El Salvador and its riparian countries.”

Champion’s Network

The establishment of a transboundary Water Champion’s Network has begun to develop leadership expertise across transboundary basins in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua, Belize and Mexico. Experience working in Mesoamerica has illustrated the need for multi-layered approaches to transboundary management and good governance. The existence of a transboundary network of water champions, or “abanderados”, translated literally to “flag bearer,” provides another pathway for influence for local water users and stakeholders.

The Network serves as a mechanism for transmitting information and knowledge through virtual and physical networks of people who can advocate for good water governance and transboundary water and management. As a result of several face-to-face meetings and exchanges, and training on IWRM and water governance, the network has begun to establish work plans in each basin. Goascorán champions are committed to strengthening the Goascorán Binational Management Group by doing local policy advocacy and actively participating in the BMG meetings and activities.

Advice and support facilities

Support Facilities have been very active completing and delivering water governance capacity training package and train the trainer workshops. They have provided crucial tools for use in the participative trainings and workshops with national authorities, basin structures and champions for capacity building on integrated water resources management and shared waters governance. Knowledge products such as the water governance WANI toolkits RULE and NEGOTIATE were translated into Spanish and the book Governance of *Shared Waters – Legal and Institutional Issues*, have been very well received by water users in the basin. Also, the Water Law and Governance Support Platform provided crucial and timely technical assistance to stakeholders from provincial and national levels.

BOX 2. Standard Bearers Lead BRIDGE's Charge in Mesoamerica

The Champions Network was created to promote exchange and empowerment of local stakeholders in transboundary water cooperation. Shortly after their first regional meeting in May 2012, the 14 other members of the Champions Network from four transboundary regions and eight countries of Mesoamerica decided to recruit reticent local officials into discussions over shared binational watershed management, the network has now 19 members from five transboundary basins.

Of their own accord, the group adopted the slogan “vamospalante” (“Let’s get moving”). “They agreed that they had to get the mayors to come to their next regional meeting,” recalls Rocio Córdoba, Coordinator of the Livelihoods and Climate Change Unit of IUCN’s regional headquarters in San José, Costa Rica. OK, mostly vice-mayors showed up, but even that was remarkable given the previous lack of interest by local officials – and the fact that most of them had to travel hundreds of kilometres from their home countries to neighbouring Guatemala, where the meeting was held.

In the neighbouring Sixaola River basin, a representative of the champions group takes a seat on an important transboundary committee, creating a link between this official body and the communities affected by its decisions. “Since we have someone on the commission, we know what is going on,” says Dávila, “we can go to a community and tell them what the commission is doing. And we can take information from them back to the commission.”

Initial successes have fuelled more enthusiasm and even greater ambitions. “In our meetings, we have shown that we are united as a network,” said Dávila. “We think we can work at an even higher level – at the regional level or even beyond.” “Water diplomacy has to happen under the authority of national governments, but water accords need the agreement of local users,” says Mark Smith, Director of the Global Water Programme at IUCN. But experience shows no matter how much political will exists in the respective capitals, little will happen if local governments and communities are not engaged.

At first even the name was controversial, but now called “Abanderados” and “Abanderadas”, (meaning “flag bearers”, in the masculine and feminine form), is being strengthened and is working. Nobody predicted this early flurry of activity. “Then they had T-shirts made up. For the next meeting they are going to get the mayors to wear the T-shirts and become “Abanderados.” As Córdoba put it, “They are catalysts.”



Champions Network meeting in San Marcos, Guatemala.

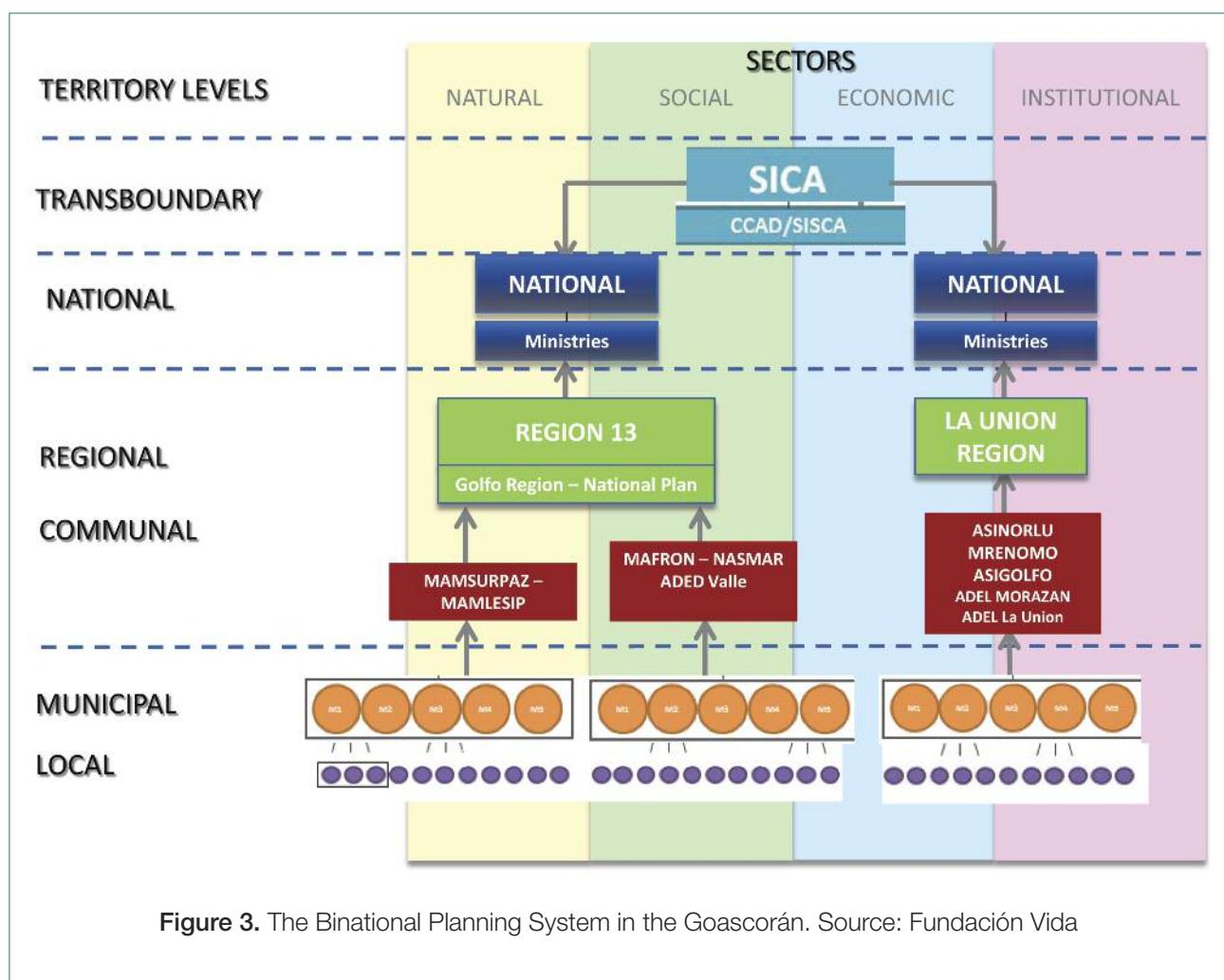
SOLUTIONS AND INTERVENTION RESULTS

The presence of BRIDGE has brought a revitalisation of the BMG from a previously narrow stakeholder base to a significantly broader group of representatives including local, regional, private, and public sector groups in the management process. By early 2012, the BMG incorporated seven local communities incorporating associations of municipalities and local economic development institutions, three non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in the area, and eight national ministries including the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Planning and Territorial Development, Natural Resources and Environment, Governorship, and Ministry of Agriculture.

Evidence of the success of these strategies has begun to materialise in the basin. Since 2012, the BMG has now moved from a deliberative body to planning body incorporating the new stakeholders. They have developed a Strategic Territorial Development Plan for the basin in coordination with national and

regional development plans that lays out agreed, concrete steps for building cooperation in the basin. Some of these steps include the formation of an association for local economic development between Honduras and El Salvador, a legal and institutional analysis of the basin by the management group, and a basin study incorporating GIS, socio-economic, and biophysical studies including proposed infrastructure.

Greater cooperation in the BMG has also led to increased joint action in the Goascorán. The process of reforming the BMG has begun to address issues of environmental protection and water resource development through waste management and sustainable agricultural practises, increasing engagement with the involvement of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, and Ministry of Agriculture and associations of municipalities from both countries at the local level.



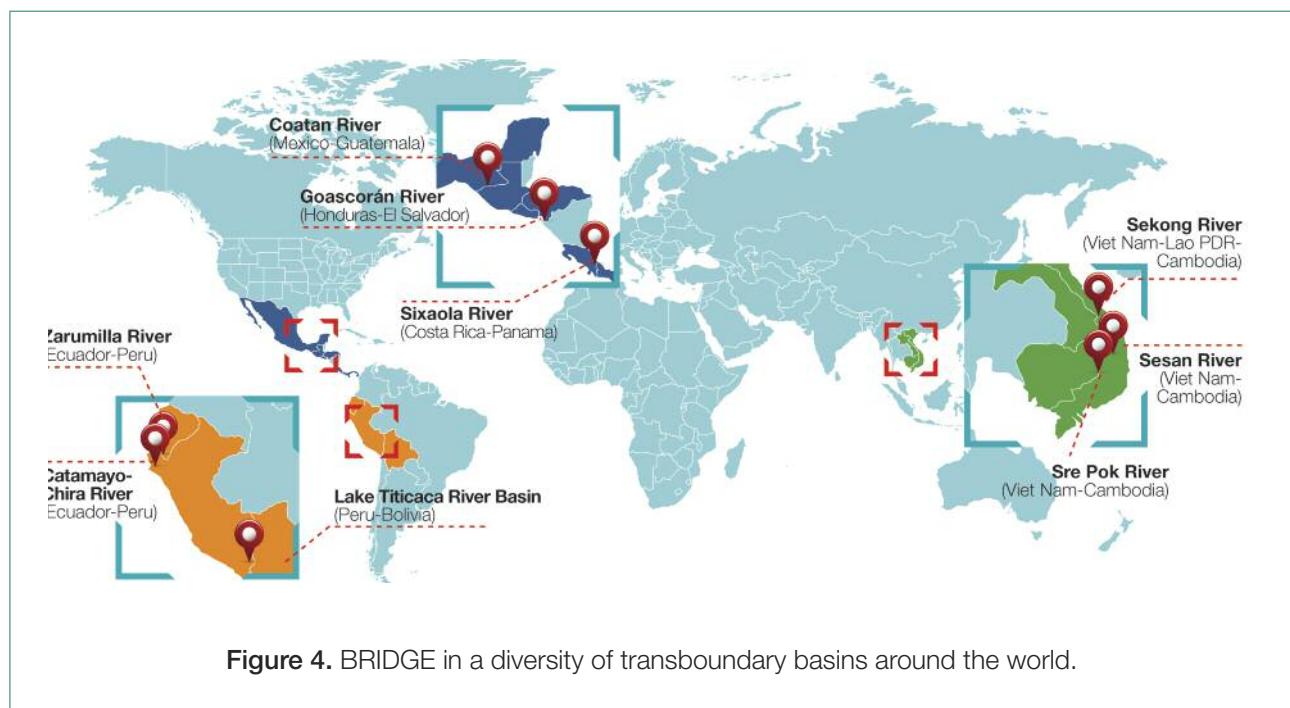
The BMG has also established a ‘transboundary monitoring committee’ for the Goascorán with the responsibility to identify and promote implementation of new institutional arrangements and monitor advances on the territorial strategic planning for the development of the basin. This includes financing, sustainability and formulation of a transboundary code of conduct. These results have been positive and have demonstrated significant steps forward in trans-boundary cooperation.

Progress in the Goascorán basin has also been successful from a social perspective due to the large number of new actors and involvement by stakeholders at the local level including the private sector. A challenge to this movement has been how to make this new arrangement economically efficient. The BMG has tasked the new transboundary committee to look at financial and sustainability aspects of the process. Additionally, the newly formed BMG revised regional, national, and local legislation, regulations, and agreements relating to transboundary management to craft a more relevant institutional arrangement for the group.

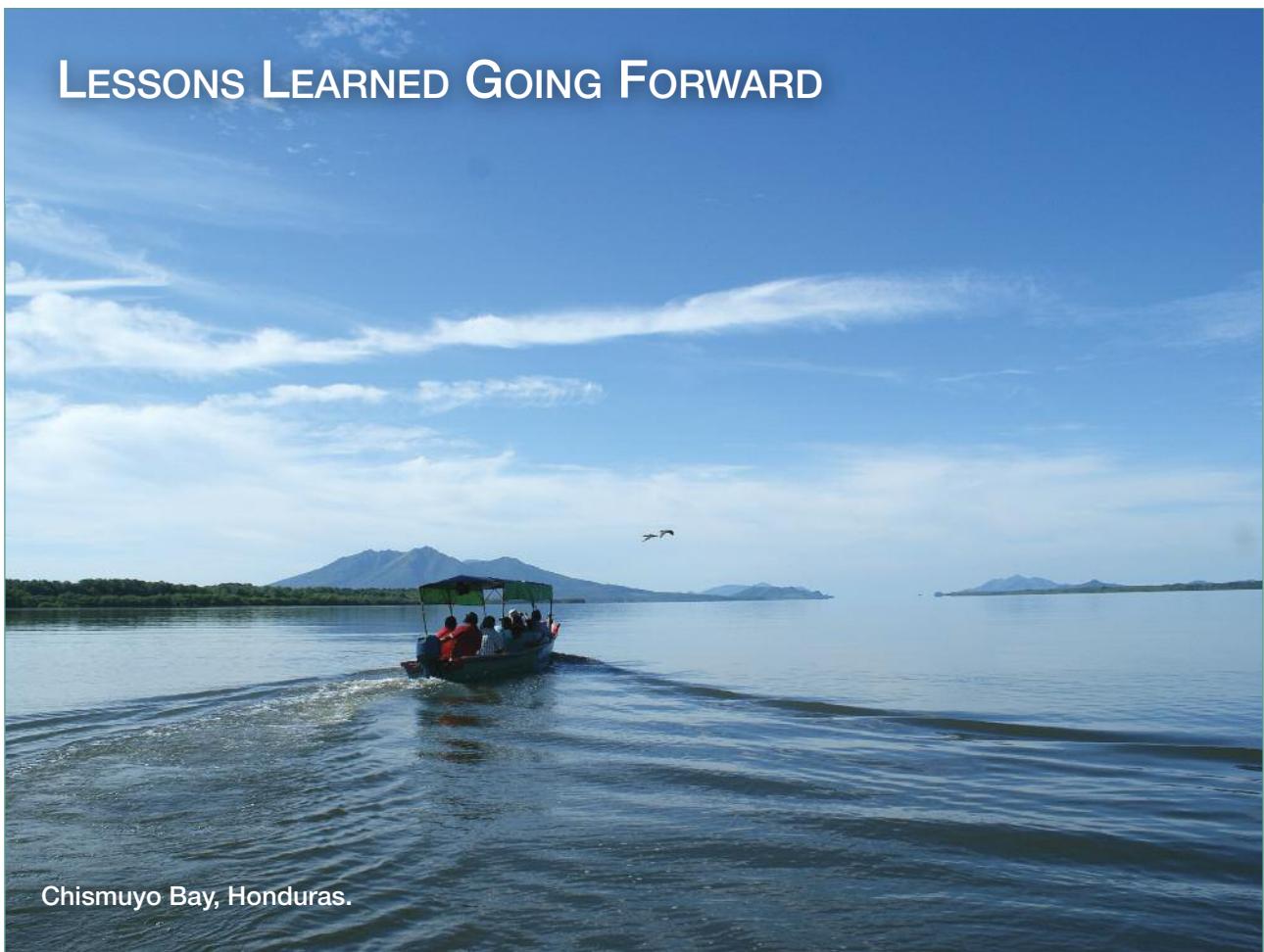
The revitalised BMG process has become a technical model for cooperation admired by other basins in the

region. The group is moving towards participatory dialogue with technical committees on development projects and ongoing consultation with the Binational General Assembly for approval of technical resolutions. BMG now has the task, together with new involvement from private actors, to articulate its actions with national and regional strategies and access funding and support for environmental and development projects.

A key to the success of re-emergence of the Binational Management Group was changing the modality to a larger stakeholder base. Supporting this change, a Water Champions Network is taking root at the regional level with participants from both countries Honduras and El Salvador, among others in the region, with the goal to promote leadership and sustainability in trans-boundary water governance. The presence of the network combined with a durable and effective Binational Management Group and the emerging follow up committee have demonstrated that the processes implemented by BRIDGE in the Goascorán are not only effective, but potentially replicable and adaptable to other basins. In fact, these strategies are being demonstrated in several other basins in Mesoamerica, the Andes Region, and Southeast Asia (see Figure 4).



LESSONS LEARNED GOING FORWARD



Chismuyo Bay, Honduras.

Going forward, the future of the Binational Management Group will need to address critical management and development issues by seeking careful and deliberate input from its members, to balance its original aims with the new vision as a more inclusive and technically capable transboundary water governance institution.

Experience in the Goascorán basin has emphasised the need for an inclusive, stepwise multi-level approach to water diplomacy and transboundary basin management. Given that a binational group already existed, BRIDGE sought to enhance its effectiveness and legitimacy by increasing its stakeholder base through facilitating agreement at multiple levels, filling the spaces left between water users and groups at different levels of governance.

In doing so, BRIDGE discovered that successful interventions in transboundary water management take three critical pathways: **relational**, **procedural** and **substantive** dimensions. In the *relational* dimension, economically active sectors must be included into the binational institution since they are major players in the territory and they can “do things” to facilitate capacity improvements of other sectors. Participation needs to

come from local to provincial to regional levels in order to build a solid process for transboundary water governance that is recognised and sustainable over time. Importantly also, to support multi-level transboundary governance, local processes need understanding, empowerment, involvement and actual agreements from the communities in the watershed.

In the *procedural* dimension, progress in the Goascorán revolves around the re-formation of the Binational Management Group and its functions. The existence of an institutional framework at binational level is not enough to create an enabling environment for transboundary cooperation. Social participation and ownership of the process by civil society and municipalities are vital. A two way strategy, top-down bottom-up, is necessary to make progress. This requires a combination of legal and institutional support through training, analyses, and technical support.

Through the *substantive* dimension, the programme focuses on information and knowledge that directly supported both the relational and procedural activities. Mapping and analysis of stakeholders are critical to define the strategy for achieving outcomes within the BMG, providing an adequate baseline of information

on roles and “power relations” that are needed to influence strategy. It is also important to fully map out the BMG’s strengths and weaknesses through a legitimate analysis which led to the conclusion that it was too narrowly defined. Once the analyses were completed, the strategic plans were implemented providing the first step for defining priorities and to coordinate action at the micro-watershed level. Out of this process came the learning that building transboundary governance processes in areas of extreme poverty must include financial resources as well as human resources that can bring options for the improvement of people’s livelihoods. A key point here is that knowledge and information is a critical enabler to move relationships and processes forward.

Successful inventions in transboundary management require innovations in knowledge, processes, and relations, simultaneously. Experience from Goascorán demonstrates that there are multiple ways to unlock and build real interaction through multi-stakeholder participation and technical exchanges. These can have the effect of opening unexpected new spaces for building progress. Deepening technical engagement is therefore so far a fruitful means of animating institutions.

Another lesson from BRIDGE in the Goascorán is that interventions from multiple scales can crystallise into an integrated approach to transboundary cooperation given a sufficient enabling environment and proper facilitation and support functions. The Binational Management Group has now strengthened its legitimacy and effectiveness and is going forward into a joint

planning process. The Champion’s Network has been an important tool for enhancing engagement with local municipalities. The combined and coordinated action from local, municipal, provincial, national and regional actors toward transboundary cooperation closes the gaps where conflicts may arise.

A learning from the Goascorán is that changes in assumptions should not be a barrier to building cooperation. Implementing water diplomacy needs to incorporate adaptive, inclusive, communicative and negotiated strategies that take advantage of the new spaces that emerge for creating and for building progress, for example hidden issues or historical lack of trust between nations. In contrast, conventional approaches to water diplomacy that go through formal channels might not have the flexibility to adapt to nuances that can result in confidence building and joint actions on the ground.

Finally, an overarching lesson is that intransigent situations are often dynamic underneath, and the simple act of opening new dialogues and asking new questions can lead to unexpected shifts in the interest in or exchanges taking place around transboundary issues or institutions. These can have unforeseen consequences that open doors for greater cooperation. However, impacts cannot be realised quickly. Going forward into 2014, BRIDGE will continue to implement multi-level and multi-sectoral water diplomacy through incremental steps, remaining agile and adaptive, ensuring the resulting increased cooperation is practical and reproducible.



Protected areas in the Goascorán Basin attracts ecotourism and environmental scientists.
Chismuyo Bay, Honduras.

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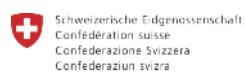
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