

## Water Diplomacy

### Key Message

Water diplomacy enables countries to negotiate agreements on water management. For transboundary agreements over water to work more effectively on the ground, they need the involvement of water users at multiple levels of governance.

Water diplomacy should therefore be a process which operates under the authority of sovereign States, requiring their ultimate involvement, but which also unlocks cooperation among multiple stakeholders, including municipalities and provinces and civil society. Working broadly as a multi-level governance process, water diplomacy can better integrate government priorities for natural resource security and economic growth, while providing a means to integrate biodiversity conservation into water management.



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### Recommendations

- A critical practice in water diplomacy should be the promotion of dialogues between a broad spectrum of water users in order to gain agreements.
- Cooperation in water management demands that stakeholders share a common understanding of stakeholder priorities and governance principles and options that take concrete steps towards solutions. It is essential that opportunities are created for the various actors to come together, understand each other and find common ground on water management issues.
- It is a fundamental feature of transboundary water management that decisions are made at multiple scales, ranging for example from planning a dam at the scale of a whole basin to allocating water along an irrigation channel within a community. Water management works best when decisions are taken at the appropriate level, but in doing so, collaboration across scales needs to be implemented through joint actions.
- Solving problems step-by-step is a crucial process in water diplomacy. An intergovernmental treaty does not often provide a solution for all problems, and nor is it necessary to wait for one to materialise. Stepwise process in water diplomacy can deliver practical and concrete results.
- Water diplomacy often requires a variety of support functions to be effective. This involves providing legal and technical assistance. It means connecting water users across scales. It involves raising awareness and advocacy on water issues. And it means providing data and information at the right time to ensure agreements are kept.

## Justification

With over 275 transboundary basins on the planet, cooperation over water management is essential for the preservation of freshwater biodiversity and healthy ecosystems. Approximately 40 percent of the world's population lives in river and lake basins that comprise two or more countries and, perhaps more significantly, over 90 percent lives in countries that share basins. The complexities of sharing water between and among nations require innovative approaches to water governance and water diplomacy.

The conventional approach to water diplomacy is often too narrowly focused on high-level dialogue between States, for example between Ministries of Foreign Affairs. A treaty establishes a framework under international law for how the countries that share waters in a basin will manage the resource. These agreements often, but in many cases do not, incorporate stakeholders' participation at multiple scales (legitimacy of the State's authority is not the issue).

Through BRIDGE, IUCN has built a distinctive – but complementary – practice of water diplomacy. It starts with the principle that water diplomacy takes place under the authority of sovereign States. Since water is a resource used by everyone and managed at multiple scales, many types of arrangements are needed for effective governance of transboundary waters, representing a 'multiplicity of agreements.' These include treaties but also a wide array of formal and informal accords involving local communities, municipal governments, technical agencies, economic sectors and representatives of water users; for example, farmers, fishers and power companies. Working across such a spectrum of cooperative instruments builds a practical, operational roadmap for change and improvement in water governance capacity that is closely articulated with integrated water resource management and sustainable development in a basin.



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## Evidence for action

### **Supporting the agreement of water users**

If water diplomacy requires the agreement of water users then a critical practice should be the promotion of participation of a wide range of stakeholders in dialogues. Doing so requires that dialogues are focused on the priority issues of most concern to water users and that the process leads to concrete solutions. This can be driven from both directions – bottom-up and top-down. In either case, stakeholder issues need to be incorporated into any type of arrangements being considered.

Under BRIDGE, the practice of broad-based stakeholder participation was demonstrated in the Goascorán basin by involving local economic actors and community development networks in the revitalised Binational Management Group. The original institutional arrangement included municipal actors but participation and decision-making was limited to this group only. Working with the structure, IUCN held a series of dialogues and meetings with stakeholders throughout the basin, many reaching beyond the water sector. As a result, a number of new associations of municipalities, local economic development associations, NGOs and governmental institutions joined the Binational Management Group, increasing its legitimacy and scope.

In Asia, BRIDGE supported the national governments to organize the first multi-stakeholder consultation workshops on the Sekong River Basin as a process for the establishment of the Sekong River Basin Committee. Led by the national government and facilitated by BRIDGE, concerns raised by stakeholders from provincial and local districts in the basin provided essential feedback for officials responsible for crafting newly formed river basin organisations.

## Further reading

- *Governance of shared waters: legal and institutional issues, EPLP 58 rev. (2011)*
- *International water governance: conservation of freshwater ecosystems. Vol.1 : International agreements, compilation and analysis, EPLP 55 (2004)*

In the Zarumilla basin, IUCN was requested to support and facilitate the process of gaining agreement among the national water authorities from Ecuador (SENAGUA) and Peru (ANA) and the IWRM Binational Commission, on the Terms of Reference of the IWRM for the Zarumilla.

### ***Creating spaces for bringing people together***

Good water governance and cooperation is about coming together to find solutions to water management issues. Creating effective and sustainable solutions is therefore, to a large extent, based on the ability of stakeholders to understand their options, each others' needs and the issues they face in the basin. Therefore, space is required for people to meet and find common solutions to problems. Significantly, this does not have to be in formal round-table dialogue sessions but can also take place through for example training workshops, technical meetings on information management and maps or seminar-style events.

Under BRIDGE, technical meetings on standardisation of river basin maps from Lake Titicaca became the basis for opening a much wider dialogue on water information systems. The process created space for the participation of sub-national (regions and departments) and municipal governments in broader discussions on transboundary water management issues.

In the Catamayo-Chira basin, training courses and workshops with the participation of multilevel stakeholders demonstrated the need for establishing a Binational River Basin Commission, with the participation of national institutions (Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Water Authorities) as well as the sub-national (Regions and Provinces) and local level institutions (municipalities). Creating space also provided opportunity for learning through the reflection of real needs of stakeholders from similar experiences on the Zarumilla and Lake Titicaca basins, a learning process which can effect change in transboundary settings.

### ***Joint action across scales***

Since water management must occur at multiple scales, so must decisions and actions be implemented across local, provincial, national and regional levels. This can be a challenging task. Decisions at different scales often require the appropriate

authority through often complex governmental processes and institutions. Additionally, water users often feel disempowered to act due to a lack of understanding of how to negotiate with organisations and manoeuvre through political circles, skills required if they are to exercise their influence. Joint action loosens these constraints. Whether or not multiple levels are joined through formal or informal structures, decision-making requires cooperative action linking various layers of governance. This applies equally to transboundary basins and sub-national basins. The practice of water diplomacy therefore benefits from joint action that links scales and promotes coordination across multiple levels of governance.

In the Catamayo-Chira Basin, municipal and provincial-level actors were involved in raising interest at the national level in a joint Presidential Decree by Peru and Ecuador on a future river basin commission. Their interests were mobilised through a number of channels – two of which were technical coordination over a water information system and a number of leadership workshops. Additionally, cooperation in the neighbouring Zarumilla basin and development of the Zarumilla Commission are serving as a model for cooperation between Peru and Ecuador. In fact, they have strengthened confidence sufficiently that the governments have agreed to the establishment of three further transboundary basin commissions.

At the regional level in the Andes, a work plan has been created to implement common activities of both the Andean IWRM strategy and BRIDGE, prioritizing training courses in water diplomacy and the development of an Andean Water Information System as part of the region-wide Environmental Information System under development.

In the Sekong, IUCN engaged with key stakeholders from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam on the principles of effective river basin institutions. Since Laos has issued a Decree on the establishment of river basin committees, including the Sekong, it has been crucial to coordinate with national-level processes while engaging provincial and local stakeholders in dialogue on the principles of good water governance.

### ***Taking incremental steps***

Problems in transboundary basins do not get resolved overnight. It often takes modest and deliberate steps to build confidence before progress is made by the parties involved. Taking small steps *in the right direction* is an integral part of creating an enabling environment for cooperation. Like in a puzzle, at some point, when the pieces are in the right arrangement, the picture comes into view and takes shape.

IUCN supported the adoption of statutes for the Sixaola Binational Basin Commission (shared by Costa Rica and Panamá) and bylaws for the Permanent Binational Commission of the Border Development Agreement. This effectively provided support to the institutional setting for these two bodies to work in a complementary and harmonious fashion, to



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addressing significant challenges in the Sixaola. Transboundary cooperation in this basin endeavours to build a *bridge* between national level authorities and local representatives creating common understanding and promoting joint actions between the Permanent Binational Commission and the Sixaola basin Commission. To facilitate cooperation, a number of incremental steps were needed before significant results were realised, including delivering water governance training, disseminating communication tools, facilitating dialogues, and conducting meetings with officials and stakeholders.

Likewise in the Sesan and Sre Pok basins (part of the 3S river basin, tributary of the Mekong River), IUCN enabled access through a 3S website that provided much needed information about the basin. Located in remote areas of Cambodia and rugged highlands of Vietnam, stakeholders were often out of reach of the capitals and information. Engagement with the national, provincial, and local stakeholders on capacity building has therefore been a gradual and stepwise but steady process.



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## Examples from the field

In the 3S basin in the Lower Mekong, IUCN supports a process of establishing a roadmap for transboundary cooperation building the necessary capacities in key national and provincial stakeholders. In the Sekong river basin, national and provincial authorities initiated the process of establishing a River Basin Committee with BRIDGE support, on technical issues and technical advice and capacity building working towards future cooperation with Cambodia.

In the Coatán Basin shared between Mexico and Guatemala, IUCN is supporting a bottom-up approach to water diplomacy. The project focuses on building cooperation at the local level demonstrated by establishment of the Buena Vista microwatershed committee and exchange of experiences between microwatershed councils in San Marcos, Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico. Local water 'champions' have mobilised to sharpen their skills in water cooperation and diplomacy. A wide range of stakeholders, including municipal leaders, are part of these networks which catalyse change by creating action plans on each side of the border and sharing information and knowledge on water solutions.

BRIDGE supported the role of the Titicaca Basin Authority, or ALT, by promoting the creation of two technical commissions. The first was formed by two meteorological and hydrological services, SENAMHI Bolivia and SENAMHI Peru in Puno. The second linked the water supply and water sanitation enterprises from cities in the basin. Meetings and workshops held by both commissions provided a platform for shared experiences and, for the first time, produced a joint work plan. They recognised the need to work together and to coordinate work with the Titicaca Basin Authority recognising that they all reside within the same, shared transboundary basin.



## Learn more

### WANI Toolkits

SHARE – Managing waters across boundaries  
NEGOTIATE – Reaching Agreements over Water

### Websites

[www.iucn.org/bridge](http://www.iucn.org/bridge)  
[www.waterlawandgovernance.org](http://www.waterlawandgovernance.org)

### Contact us

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### About IUCN

IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature, helps the world find pragmatic solutions to our most pressing environment and development challenges. IUCN's work focuses on valuing and conserving nature, ensuring effective and equitable governance of its use, and deploying nature-based solutions to global challenges in climate, food and development. IUCN supports scientific research, manages field projects all over the world, and brings governments, NGOs, the UN and companies together to develop policy, laws and best practice.

IUCN is the world's oldest and largest global environmental organization, with more than 1,200 government and NGO Members and almost 11,000 volunteer experts in some 160 countries. IUCN's work is supported by over 1,000 staff in 45 offices and hundreds of partners in public, NGO and private sectors around the world.

### About BRIDGE - Building River Dialogue and Governance

BRIDGE (Building River Dialogue and Governance) supports the capacities of countries sharing a river basin to implement effective water management arrangements through a shared vision, benefit-sharing principles and transparent, coherent and cost-effective institutional frameworks. Its goal is to enhance cooperation among riparian countries through applying water diplomacy at multiple levels.



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