



Champions of Water Governance

Leadership Building for Local to Transboundary Water Cooperation

Isabelle Fauconnier, Nazareth Porras, Raphaël Glémet, Emilio Cobo, Mark Smith and Alejandro Iza



INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CONSERVATION OF NATURE – WATER PROGRAMME – BRIDGE THEMATIC CASE STUDY

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Water Cooperation

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CHAMPIONS OF WATER GOVERNANCE: LEADERSHIP BUILDING FOR LOCAL TO TRANSBOUNDARY WATER COOPERATION

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KEY MESSAGES

The Building River Dialogue and Governance Programme (BRIDGE, currently in phase 3) set out to do something quite new: to facilitate the development of international networks of Champions of water governance in its target basins. Selected individuals who were already active in water or environmental resources stewardship were invited to build skills around transboundary cooperation in a collective process at basin or regional scale, in order to help realise new visions for the governance of shared water resources. This thematic case study reviews the diverse experience of the ‘Champions’ component’ of BRIDGE in Mesoamerica, South America, in the Lower Mekong region and in the Lake Chad Basin, to examine the factors of success and draw lessons for future initiatives that may choose to rely on change makers to effect transformative change. A number of testimonials tell us that the Champions’ component in BRIDGE has been successful in helping leaders build informal pathways for dialogue, unlocking new cooperation processes and linking local to national influence streams. Key findings, detailed below, speak in favour of adopting leadership building as a deliberate strategy to catalyse change – one that must tread wisely and patiently according to the context in which it unfolds.

BRIDGE Champions have acted as flag bearers and communicators on local, national and international platforms. They are unlocking cooperation processes by:

- Working with a broader range of stakeholders than in their usual sphere of action and influence, in a participatory manner;
- Applying knowledge and technical skills that have enabled and empowered them to lead constructively in dialogue processes where differing stakeholder views are aired;
- Transmitting content knowledge and skills to their own networks, channelling a multiplier effect, including for policy influencing at higher levels;
- Obtaining expert input from like-minded Champions into their own work, as well as working together in strategic thinking.

The leadership programme has altered the way in which Champions approach water governance. It has spurred them to:

- Adopt new ways of influencing behaviour change, e.g., through dialogue instead of confrontation;
- Draw useful examples from other basins and countries that strengthen their understanding and ability to communicate about problems that are shared in their region;
- Take the BRIDGE mode of working together with different stakeholders into their own work;
- Evolve from a locally centred to a broader, multi-scalar vision of water governance;
- Use the network of Champions to keep abreast of new developments and important news relating to water and natural resources, cooperation and governance in their regions.

Champions also provided advice on how to make the leadership programme more impactful, e.g., through providing tools and methodologies that are tailored to different audiences and levels of governance; facilitating knowledge resource banks, which the Champions and other stakeholders could easily access and draw upon; and building Champions’ capacity to lead on resource mobilisation for future initiatives.

Learning from BRIDGE practice about the process and substance of supporting leadership development highlights the following:

- Ensuring that Champions share their learning with their immediate and broader networks augments the multiplier effect of leadership capacity building and also helps to institutionalise new knowledge, making it less susceptible to staff turnover;
- Formalising a Champions' network into an organisation with legal status poses risks, as it may detract from the Champions' ability to work in informal ways through their spheres of influence, and it may lead to the creating of new institutions that compete with the ones that Champions are trying to strengthen;
- Leadership building programmes are a valuable means of building more gender equality into interventions, by equipping and supporting more women to lead and influence through their substantive contributions;
- A flexible approach is required for leadership building. Tailoring and adapting a leadership programme to a specific cultural, political and geo-political context is crucial for its success;
- There is political sensitivity that comes with being a Champion for water governance in places where free speech and advocacy are not well tolerated. Leadership building that includes negotiation skills can equip Champions to work constructively in difficult political environments;
- The sustainability of individuals' leadership abilities, and of Champions' networks, ultimately depends on how the Champions behave as a group and as individuals. It is therefore important to select Champions for their individual drive and motivation to participate in change processes, rather than merely based on title and position, which are subject to the uncertainties of staff turnover.



Lake Titicaca © IUCN/Emilio Cobo

1. INTRODUCTION: THE IDEA OF CHAMPIONS

Conservation and development action often seeks to stimulate behavioural change in resource use and management, aiming in turn to achieve better outcomes for humans and for the natural environment they depend on. How to trigger that change in the midst of existing and complex social-ecological systems¹ is the challenge undertaken from local to international scales as societies strive for a more sustainable world.

The idea of Champions stems from the realisation that the ability of societies to embrace change often hinges on the actions and influence of one or a few individuals whose vision and leadership open new avenues. The actions of a single inspiring leader have led communities and sometimes entire nations to adopt new ways: Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and Rosa Parks are but a few examples. Such leaders of change, or change makers, are often termed ‘Champions²,’ in that they embody a pioneering spirit that must often go against the forces of habit, conformism, inertia or the fear of the unknown. They are at once disruptive and builders of cohesion and action around new ideas.

Such leaders seldom appear in a vacuum. They happen to be able to combine a set of skills, such as persuasive speaking and problem solving, with an ability to generate or identify promising new ideas and paradigms that may already be at the early stages of gestation in their surroundings. By catalysing new thinking, communicating

new knowledge, building trust, and projecting a new vision, these individuals gather a following. In this way, they become true leaders.

Change in processes of governance requires strong leadership in order to be successful. In particular, governance over natural resources is a complex social undertaking that involves many competing actors across different economic sectors and across different levels, from local to national to transboundary. Through the Water and Nature Initiative (WANI), which ran between 2001 and 2012, IUCN learned that the success of many interventions to improve water governance in different countries and basin settings was linked to the presence of Champions who promoted the project vision and made connections across layers of governance, from local to basin to national and international levels³. Strong leadership was thus identified as one of WANI’s key impact pathways. IUCN has applied these lessons in its global initiative on water governance, Building River Dialogue and Governance Programme (BRIDGE), focusing on transboundary water cooperation. This thematic case study reviews the diverse experience of what became the ‘Champions’ component’ in BRIDGE, to examine the factors of success and draw lessons for future initiatives that may choose to rely on change-makers – among other actors and programme elements – to effect transformative change.



BRIDGE 3S planning workshop with Champions © IUCN/Vishwa Sinha

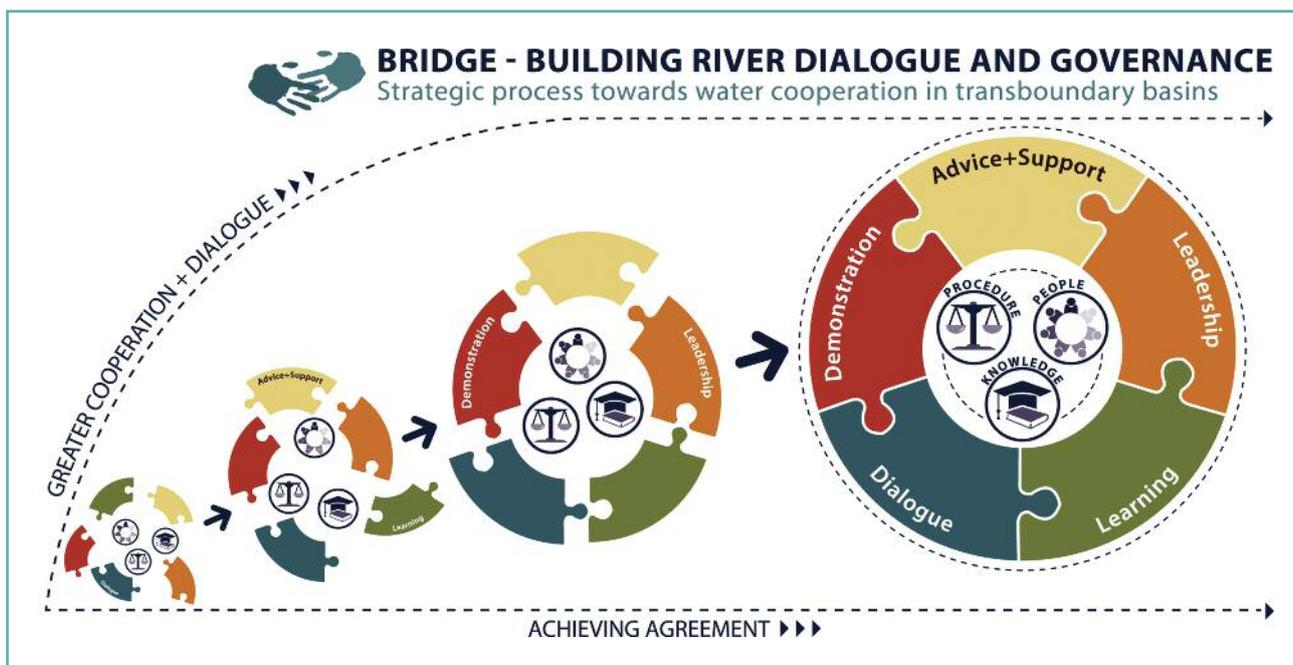
2. CHAMPIONS IN BRIDGE: FOSTERING LEADERSHIP, AND LEADERSHIP NETWORKS

Building on its experience from WANI, IUCN developed an experimental component on ‘leadership development’ for the BRIDGE programme, as one of five strategic pillars to achieve collaborative water governance in transboundary basins. These were: 1) providing advice and support to stakeholders; 2) building leadership capacities; 3) promoting learning; 4) facilitating dialogue and 5) carrying out demonstration on the ground.

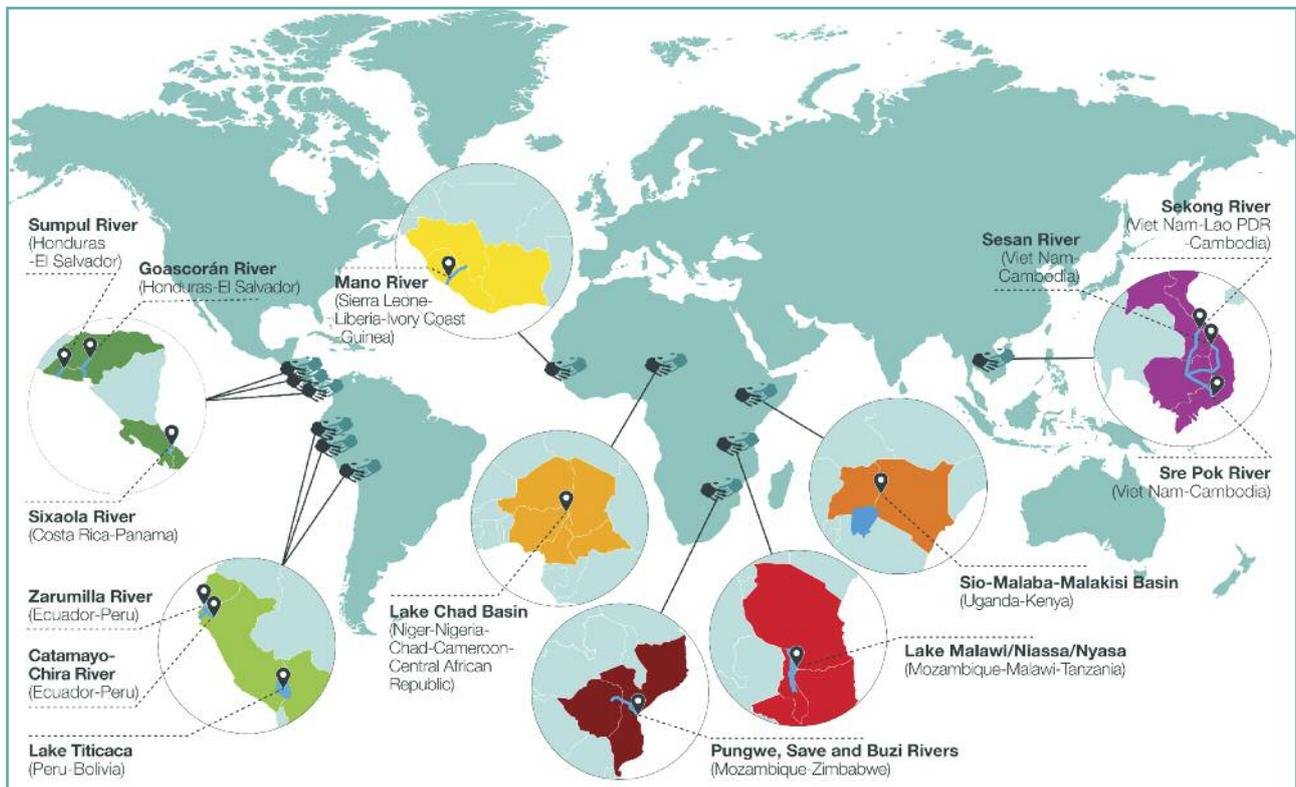
The concept of leadership *building* had been applied to other contexts, such as business, government and education. In particular, there are models of leadership development specifically targeted at triggering social change⁴. However, there are no documented efforts to foster leadership in water resources governance. BRIDGE thus set out to do something quite new: to facilitate the development of international networks of Champions of water governance in its target basins, with the idea that selected

individuals who were already active in water cooperation could build further relevant skills and knowledge in a collective process at basin or regional scale, in order to pursue and help realise new visions for the governance of shared water resources. Through the emerging Champions’ network, they could support each other, learn from each other and also leverage a multiplier effect for their ideas and actions.

Rather than designing a standard institutional strengthening programme, which certain individuals might ‘organically’ come to support and for which they might then become Champions, BRIDGE undertook to *cultivate* water governance Champions, and *networks* of Champions, from the outset as a specific strategy alongside others. Leadership building was as important as, e.g., capacity building for a wider set of stakeholders, or demonstrating changes in governance on the ground.



The BRIDGE Strategic Process © IUCN/Water



BRIDGE Map: BRIDGE began with 9 basins in three regions in 2011 and is now active in 14 basins in 6 regions: Central America, South America, the Lower Mekong region, Southern Africa, West and Central Africa and the Horn of Africa © IUCN/Water

3. THE LEADERSHIP BUILDING PROCESS IN BRIDGE: FROM CODIFIED STEPS TO CONTEXTUALISED APPLICATIONS

The leadership development process within the BRIDGE 1 Project (2011-2013) was designed to combine flexibility with a few codified steps to provide structure. It would bring together 8-15 professionals to establish networks of change-makers, drawn from local to regional levels, and from government, civil society, academia and the private sector, in each of the initial three participating regions. The Champions' selection process would be flexible and non-prescriptive: project managers would identify individuals that had 'champion' qualities or potential among the stakeholders with whom they interacted during workshops and meetings as the project got underway. Such individuals would ideally possess the following attributes:

- They would be change makers with a sphere of influence on water governance,
- Who believe in transboundary cooperation, with a
- Good understanding of local realities and challenges and who...

- Want to learn and exchange knowledge.

The leadership development process would run over an 8-month period, through a number of face-to-face events and virtual interactions. These might include:

- A 1-day introduction to the leadership development process, called a regional 'meet up'
- A 2-3-day regional network kick-off event
- A collective action project
- A 2-day regional reporting and next actions workshop.

Each one of these stages was designed flexibly and would be tailored according to regional contexts, needs and demand expressed by participants. This would allow the Champions' process to follow its own path and develop uniquely in each region.

In the initial **Regional ‘Meet-Up’**, participants in the BRIDGE Leadership Process would gather as a group for an introductory session to explore the regional context for shared water resources management, including similarities and differences across their respective basin. They would also determine the group’s ambition vis-à-vis regional and basin-level water governance and transboundary cooperation, and explore initial requirements to make this happen. Participants were asked to consider their spheres of influence, and to develop ideas on how to tap into skills and creativity to influence change.

The outputs of this Meet-Up would then be used to inform the regional group’s requirements for the design of a 3-day ‘Regional Network Kick-Off’ event.

Determined by each regional group’s ambitions, the **Regional Network Kick-Off** event would comprise a customised series of modules for learning and exchange of knowledge and ideas. These modules drew on and integrated content from a set of water governance and transboundary cooperation tools developed by IUCN’s Water and Nature Initiative (WANI) – SHARE, NEGOTIATE, RULE, VALUE, PAY, CHANGE and FLOW.

Tools from systems thinking were integrated into the design of the ‘Regional Network Kick-Off’ events. These included the use of a set of diagramming tools, such as behaviour-over-time graphs and causal-loop-diagrams, to describe and communicate systems related to water governance and transboundary cooperation, as well as identify strategic intervention points. Use of these systems thinking tools were supported by experiential and interactive learning activities.⁵

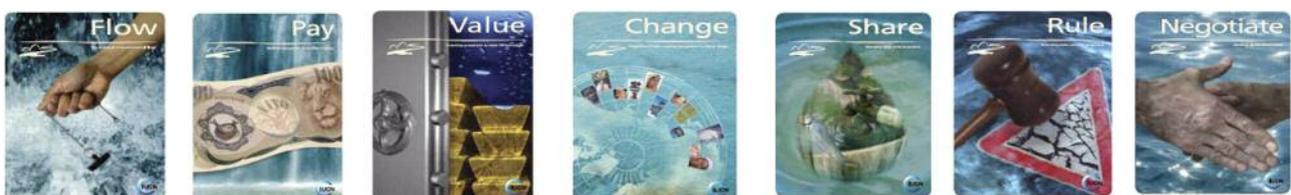
As an output of the ‘Regional Network Kick-Off’ event, participants were to design a regional **‘Collective Action Project’**. This project would bring together learning and thinking about water governance and transboundary cooperation in the region. It would be designed to help meet the ambitions of individuals and

the group as a whole for supporting change and progress in water governance and transboundary water management. The purpose was to provide participating change makers with an ‘action learning’ opportunity focused on co-creating and leading change, while pursuing personal and professional development and learning objectives. The implementation of the ‘Collective Action Projects’ was to be managed by participants, and self-organising for the duration of the project.

A final 2-day ‘Regional Reporting and Next Actions’ workshop would bring participants together again in a face-to-face setting. During this workshop, participants would report on the outcomes from the Collective Action Projects and engage in guided reflection on the process, on leadership and on influencing change. Each participant would then create his/her own individual ‘next actions’ plan and receive reflections and recommendations from the rest of the group. Throughout the ‘Regional Reporting and Next Actions Workshop’, learning was to be captured about the overall BRIDGE leadership process and to inform scaling to other regions.

As a result, the main outcomes and outputs from the leadership development process would include:

- Learning – Leaders learning new skills, sharing their experience, knowledge, ideas and inspiration;
- Networking – Leaders working together to support change in water management in transboundary river basins;
- Communicating – Leaders in each of the BRIDGE basins communicating effectively about transboundary cooperation in water to basin stakeholders;
- Advising – Networks of leaders supporting key institutions with skills, experience and ideas, to promote change, leading in turn to better water management and sustainable development.



Overview of WANI publications © IUCN/Water

Examples of collective action projects led by Champions in Mesoamerica

-  In Guatemala, Champions focused on capacity building in good water governance and integrated water resources management to local stakeholders. They approached mayors from San Marcos Department to explain the upper-lower basin dynamics and the importance of coordinating conservation actions among municipalities. They worked with several organisations to develop and impart a training course on water governance and climate change directed mainly to municipality officials. They also led the elaboration of board games for micro watershed councils to teach basic concepts and involve children in the trainings.
-  In the Sixaola Basin (Panama/Costa Rica), Champions decided that environmental education was essential to foster good water governance and transboundary cooperation. They held meetings with Panama's Ministry of Education and led an exchange of experiences among teachers from Costa Rica and Panama in which they shared best practices.



Champions in the Goascoran Basin © IUCN/Nazareth Porra

4. LEADERSHIP BUILDING IN PRACTICE

In practice, and because it was designed flexibly to allow for contextualisation, the leadership component followed varying trajectories across the different regions and basins of the BRIDGE project, largely due to differing cultural, political and water resources contexts. Four contrasted experiences are described below, which offer a valuable set of findings and lessons: the Mesoamerica experience, the Andes experience, the Lower Mekong (3S) experience and the Lake Chad experience. These offer in-depth illustrations of some of the key concepts, objectives and achievements of the leadership development strategy in BRIDGE.

The Champions in BRIDGE's Mesoamerica Basins

In Mesoamerica, BRIDGE project coordinators identified leaders at the local level, who could conduct advocacy with local governments and become a channel between civil society needs and water governance at the basin level. Nineteen women and men – in virtually equal proportion – were invited to participate in the leadership development process, from five shared basins in the region: Coatlán (México-Guatemala), Goascorán (Honduras-El Salvador), Sixaola (Costa Rica-Panamá), Chiquibul-Mopán (Guatemala-Belize) and Coco (Honduras- Nicaragua)⁶.

Because the term 'champion' did not translate easily into Spanish, Champions in Mesoamerica adopted a new term, *Abanderados y Abanderadas* i.e., standard bearers. This was one step in the process of building an identity and purpose for their new group. They articulated the meaning of the term in the following way during the first regional encounter:

- A flagbearer is a person motivated by a commitment to human wellbeing, who **applies his or her knowledge so that other people change their practices** with regard to integrated water resource management and transboundary cooperation in shared watersheds.
- A flagbearer is a person who works with **personal conviction, motivation and dedication** around a shared objective.
- The shared objective of all flagbearers is to **promote cooperation** among people of different countries to

improve the **quality and quantity of water, and quality of life** for people in shared watersheds.

The BRIDGE Mesoamerican Champions also defined their priority actions early in the leadership development process, following group work that allowed them to



Yudy Espinal, local leader in the Goascoran River Basin © IUCN/Wanda Villeda

understand differences and similarities between their respective watersheds, the role of each champion in his or her community, and challenges that they shared across basins. As a result of these exchanges, Champions identified the following priority objectives: (i) the inclusion of local government authorities in processes of transboundary cooperation in shared watersheds; (ii) the involvement of civil society in the governance of shared watersheds; (iii) environmental education for basin populations around the importance and management of shared watersheds; and (iv) the coordination of work across all levels for the governance of shared watersheds. These objectives were memorialised in the San Marcos Declaration, signed by all members of the group during their third encounter. This formalisation may have contributed to the sense of commitment and responsibility to his/her action plan that each leader came away with. There was a meshing of personal motivation with the sense of team belonging and collective action. In Mesoamerica, the first few encounters followed the leadership development process described above fairly closely: over the course of three workshops in the space of several months, participants defined their basin-focused action plans, received training on various



BRIDGE's Mesoamerican Champions © IUCN/Pedro Cordero

aspects of water governance using BRIDGE tools, and reported on their achievements and next steps. In addition, Champions participated in field trips to the Goascorán Basin and to the Coatán Basin, in which they learned about different forms of local level enterprise and institutional arrangements around water and environmental management, including microwatershed councils in the Coatán Basin and budding transboundary structures such as the Goascorán Binational Basin Management Group. Between region-wide meetings, Champions were able to remain in contact through email, with the help of a BRIDGE facilitator for virtual communications, and they also organised meetings at basin level to follow up on each other's progress, often with technical support from the local BRIDGE team.

Two additional regional meetings of the Champions took place during the second phase of the project, and these were designed by the project coordinators in

consultation with the Champions and facilitators, in a natural continuation of the dynamics, needs and interests expressed in previous meetings. Each of these allowed the Champions to continue to share experiences, visit Sixaola and Sumpul basins, take stock of achievements, receive additional capacity building on topics such as benefit sharing and disaster risk management, and outline next steps for their basin-level work as well as for the Champions' network itself.

One of the achievements of the Mesoamerica Champions collectively has been the outreach and inclusion of municipal authorities in leadership building around water governance. Several local municipal representatives from the three basins took part in the Champions' third regional meeting. This enabled them not only to engage in the learning process, but also to share their perspectives and prompt a wider discussion on the role of local municipal authorities in water resources management and in

In the words of Rocio Córdoba, former BRIDGE coordinator at IUCN's regional headquarters in San José, Costa Rica...

Rocio Cordoba admitted she wasn't sure at first how to go about implementing the Champions' experiment in Mesoamerica. Or even how to name it. All the labels sounded wrong – until a consultant suggested the term Abanderado or Abanderada. That translates to “standard bearer”. And it seems to have made all the difference. “From the start, they already felt like they were wearing uniforms,” noted Córdoba. “Then they had T-shirts made up. For the next meeting they will get the mayors to wear the T-shirts.”⁶

transboundary cooperation. Salient themes included the key role that local government plays in helping to solve local water resources issues, including by working directly with local government across the border, but also by channelling local concerns up to national and regional authorities to motivate greater cooperation at higher levels. Another key take-away message was that local government has the ability to proactively integrate watershed management into local economic and land use plans, and to support the establishment and operation of local watershed committees.

In the Goascorán Basin, Champions were active on several fronts: supporting the strengthening of the Binational Goascorán Basin Management Group and its options for becoming a formal institution, supporting the establishment or planning of basin-level economic development associations, and providing support and inputs into technical appraisals of the basin. At the same time, Champions participated in multi-level meetings convened by BRIDGE and others on both sides of the border, and seized opportunities to communicate with high level officials about the importance of engaging the two countries in transboundary water cooperation. In this way, the Champions exemplified the vision of cooperation

prompted through dialogue at multiple levels, by carrying the voices of local communities to national and transnational authorities.

The sequence of leadership support activities under BRIDGE is now completed, and the BRIDGE Mesoamerican Champions continue to carry forth strong individual action in their respective basins. They also continue to participate in BRIDGE activities, e.g. by contributing their testimonies and knowledge at training and dialogue events that target a wider set of stakeholders at multiple levels of governance. Remaining in contact as a network has proven more challenging for the Mesoamerica Champions, as this requires means to travel and meet. Efforts to support virtual communication have been moderately successful, due mostly to the fact that at very local levels in these settings, Champions and their surrounding stakeholders have not widely adopted virtual communication, often due to internet access issues. In Mesoamerica, the strengthening of individual leadership abilities through a successful networked, shared learning process is bearing its fruits. Yet the Mesoamerican example also poses the question of the longevity of Champions' *networks*, which will be further discussed below.

In the words of Mitzela Dávila, BRIDGE Champion in the Sixaola Basin (Panama-Costa Rica)...

In the Sixaola Basin, Mitzela Dávila grew from being a locally based youth environmental entrepreneur to liaising with the Sixaola Binational Commission, an important transboundary committee. This allows Dávila to foster dialogues between the official body and the communities. "Since we have someone on the Commission, we know what is going on," said 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. (...) In our meetings, we have shown that we are united as a network. We think we can work at an even higher level – at the regional level or even beyond."⁷

The Champions in the Lower Mekong 3S Basins

In the Sekong, Sesan and Sre-Pok basins ('3S' basins) shared between Vietnam, Lao PDR and Cambodia where BRIDGE has been working since 2011, the Champions' component has developed quite differently. This is due in part to cultural and political contexts where institutional hierarchy is important, change processes are usually undertaken from the top, and opportunities for the involvement of grassroots representatives are still at a nascent stage. Other important cultural/political features include different communication styles and norms and a marked emphasis on group vs. individual initiative. This led to a selection process that relied on institutions, such as the National Mekong River Committees, provincial and national government officials to appoint Champions using locally relevant criteria that valued seniority and hierarchy above, for example, a candidate's demonstrated ability to lead change processes.

With strong technical, engineering and bio-sciences technical backgrounds among both project implementers and

Champions, early leadership meetings were therefore oriented – with assistance from BRIDGE's global support facilities team – to providing capacity-building on new kinds of technical content relating to water governance, international water law and benefit-sharing, and new skills such as engaging in participatory multi-stakeholder dialogue and negotiations.

With continuous engagement at regular intervals in a number of such BRIDGE trainings and workshops, the network of Champions in the 3S basins has gradually evolved. It now comprises a group of individuals that has come to value the exchanges among Champions from different countries, enriching each other's point of view with outside perspectives while taking on the common cause of advancing transboundary cooperation in the 3S basins. New Champions have also been invited to join the network, hailing from a more diverse set of backgrounds including academia and NGOs, including more women, and representing both young and more experienced actors of water governance, research and practice in the region. The broadening and recomposition of the Champions' network took place as part of



3S Champions participating in benefit sharing Workshop © IUCN/Vishwa Sinha

pro-active adaptive management on the part of the local BRIDGE team.

Beginning in 2015, the 3S Champions have sought to play a more active role in the shaping of a shared trans-boundary cooperation vision. They have acted as a co-design and co-implementation team for BRIDGE, and as ambassadors who could bring connections from, and open new entry points into their respective spheres of influence, including to higher levels such as national assemblies, and to grassroots levels. They are proactively contributing to the production of strategy and

assessment documents, including a paper on trans-boundary cooperation in the 3S basin⁹ and inputs to the BRIDGE communications strategy. They also played a key role in assessing BRIDGE Phases 1 and 2 to shape a 3rd phase, contributing valuable insights into the goals and approaches that would most likely gain traction and lead to concrete results with regard to a co-constructed 3S cooperation strategy among the three countries. One of the successes of the Champions' programme in the 3S Basin is that the Champions have appropriated the project and are actively using it and shaping it to fit with their own objectives.

In the words of Raphaël Glémet, BRIDGE Coordinator for the 3S component...

In Asia it is very structured: government agencies have fewer expectations of individual contributions. Rather, designated Champions were understood initially to act as ambassadors for their organisation. People were nominated, and later, once trust was built with the project, it became easier to liaise informally and invite new representatives. In hindsight it was useful to 1) understand that it takes time for people to 'relax' and start contributing as individuals, giving insights and personal suggestions; and 2) understand that we needed to start with the mid- to high-level officials officially nominated but eventually mix them with more junior, self-propelled people. We followed a process but as the project advanced, the ones who remained involved were revealed to be the 'real' Champions. Now the Champions play a key role in the implementation of BRIDGE in the 3S.

They facilitate the project co-design, by providing ideas and feedback. They act as co-pilots for the project. They provide information in an informal manner – for example they are a great help in how to deal with institutional processes to organise a workshop, and how to approach high level government representatives. They provide content, through their own contribution to the project through the publication of BRIDGE documents and studies. One key example was the strategy paper published by one of our Champions: he took pride in that accomplishment, which he could also use for his own career. This would also indirectly promote the project. In this way, Champions use the project for their own agenda in water governance – which is also what we encourage.

Champions helped us to connect with stakeholders not directly involved in the project, for example through NGOs liaising with grassroots communities, or heads of departments liaising with top executives of NMCs. One of our Champions organised several workshops for the Cambodia National Mekong Committee (CNMC), including the Secretary General of CNMC. This helped us connect to higher levels, build trust and strengthen the programme's influence. Another key Champion was able to organise a meeting with the National Assembly of Cambodia through his own connections... Something we had thought extremely difficult was achieved in less than two days!

The Champions in BRIDGE's Andes Basins

In the Andean region, BRIDGE undertook the leadership building process in 2011 in three demonstration basins: the Catamayo-Chira and Zarumilla river basins, shared between Ecuador and Peru; and the Lake Titicaca Basin, shared between Bolivia and Peru. The complex socio-environmental setting in these basins has required an evolving approach for developing a leadership program. Stakeholders from diverse sectors related to water management and from different levels of governance have become be engaged in a long-term process.

The first steps of BRIDGE's leadership process in this region relied on the institutional partnerships that were established at project inception, mainly with governmental institutions and cooperation agencies. This meant that most of the Champions came from partner institutions related to water management, climate services, ministries of foreign affairs and transboundary organisations. This approach presented some advantages: for example, BRIDGE was able to engage closely with national governments to support establishment of transboundary mechanisms. However, there were also barriers associated to the political context and institutional instability in

these countries. After two years, the Champions network in these three basins had been affected by staff changes in public posts and a number of Champions had rotated out of their institutions. Much of the learning and capacities built to strengthen these institutions through the Champions' programme were lost. Another disadvantage was that the make-up of the Champions' network did not address the fact that local processes and grassroots organisations were disconnected from the decisions and planning activities that were promoted from central governments. The multi-level nature of water governance meant that after those first two years, the need to engage more sub-national governments, local organisations and the civil society became clearer.

In 2016 BRIDGE began implementing a new approach to the leadership program, which consisted in strengthening collaboration with Champions in national institutions while at the same time engaging new Champions from sub-national governments and key local organisations. Technical capacities at these different levels of governance vary, requiring tailored trainings and activities. Through 2016 and 2017 a series of dialogues and training modules were implemented with the new clusters of Champions within each basin. The process proved to be a successful



Lake Titicaca © IUCN/Emilio Cobo



BRIDGE Champions on the shore of Lake Titicaca © IUCN/Martin Calisto

way to strengthen governance systems, build capacities and improve transboundary cooperation. Most of all it has been a driver of collaboration among institutions and sectors, an essential element for integrated river basin management.

In Lake Titicaca, the leadership program during the first two years focused on building technical capacities and strengthening water diplomacy. Champions came mainly from the Binational Authority for Lake Titicaca (ALT), the hydro-meteorological services of Bolivia and Peru, Ministries of environment and foreign affairs and the Bolivian NGO *Agua Sustentable*. Work with this group of stakeholders achieved important steps in improving the exchange of technical information between countries and enhancing technical capacities for integrated water resource management. Since 2016 BRIDGE has increasingly engaged with mayors from local municipalities and local NGOs. The initiative supported a series of dialogues to tackle the problem of wastewater management. In the last year, BRIDGE also launched a special leadership process focused on empowering indigenous women on water management. Working with this group of motivated women has demonstrated that local empowerment in water management will be essential for achieving results at the transboundary level. BRIDGE coordinators are now using this example to motivate other institutions such as the ALT and national governments to rely on local leaders for implementing transboundary agreements, but also to include them in the decision-making process that usually sets local leaders aside.

In the shared basins of Catamayo-Chira and Zarumilla, a similar approach was implemented. During the first years the Champions Network adopted a technical emphasis, and leaders from Ecuadorian and Peruvian

institutions achieved important milestones like the establishment of the Zarumilla River Binational Commission, agreements on thematic basin maps and protocols for sharing hydro-meteorological information. The Champions played an essential role in keeping processes moving forward in spite of many institutional changes. Today they are taking part in the culminating step: the creation of a single binational commission for the integrated management of all nine shared basins between Ecuador and Peru.

In 2016-2017 BRIDGE designed and implemented a six-month training process with the aim of building capacities at the subnational level, increasing multi-level cooperation and strengthening ecosystem-based approaches. As part of this process, the Champions developed a set of collaborative projects, including transboundary projects. The training succeeded in building stronger working relations among basin-level stakeholders, a network of not only professionals but friends. Importantly, it also resulted in better coordination between basin-level stakeholders and central government institutions, as some Champions were delegates from the Ministries of water and Ministries of environment of Ecuador and Peru.

In all of the BRIDGE Andes basins, building leadership has proven to be a fruitful investment to improve water governance processes. The multi-level approach supported coordination and cooperation among institutions and sectors. Adding a gender approach into the design of leadership activities has delivered encouraging results. The leadership program in this region has



BRIDGE Champion presenting at a capacity-building workshop © IUCN/Martin Calisto



Group work on benefit sharing in Bolivia © IUCN/Martin Calisto

learned from challenges, including frequent civil servant staff turnover, lack of long term financing and institutional weaknesses. Participatory processes are time and resource-intensive, and must be built sustainably through appropriate facilitation, pedagogic methods and motivation strategies. For leaders to disseminate what they have learned and to motivate new groups to join the task of improving natural resource management, they will need not only technical capacities, but also the ability to drive change on the ground through increasing financial autonomy.

The Champions in the Lake Chad Basin

BRIDGE's work with Champions began more recently in West and Central Africa, with the formation in 2015 of the self-named 'Oryx Network of Ambassadors for the Protection of Lake Chad Resources and Heritage.' Learning from BRIDGE's experience in other regions, project

coordinators in the Lake Chad region invited representatives from civil society and government at multiple levels to join the network. Today's group includes members of parliament in Niger and Chad as well as local community leaders and CSO leaders. Members of the Oryx network have taken part in BRIDGE capacity-building workshops on hydrodiplomacy, benefit-sharing and water governance in order to sharpen their skills and widen the scope of their advocacy and action in their respective spheres of influence. In their early actions, members operating at the parliamentary level have learned from and supported actions by members working at basin and sub-basin levels, while also taking the stage in global policy fora to draw attention to the urgency of the situation in and around Lake Chad.

The Lake Chad water Ambassadors have defined their goals in specific terms: to support transboundary cooperation for participatory and equitable management

of water resources in the Lake Chad Basin, through 1) promotion of IWRM, of stakeholder consultation and of equitable benefit sharing; 2) communication of information about latent and open conflicts; and 3) sharing of best practices on conflict resolution. Indeed one of the major roles they see for themselves is the prevention of conflict from water resources use. Another key role they have taken on is to support the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) in mobilising partners and resources at all scales. Their vision for the Lake Chad Basin is that: “By 2030, the people of the basin enjoy equitable and sufficient access to water resources to satisfy their needs and rights, while conserving the freshwater resources, ecosystems and biodiversity of the Lake Chad Basin.”

One of the specificities of the Oryx network is that it has secured formal support and recognition from the LCBC as a legitimate body and partner to advocate for the preservation and restoration of the Lake Chad Basin’s water resources. The Oryx Ambassadors have thus undertaken a number of actions to raise awareness and inspire action among communities, national assemblies and global actors around the severe conditions that prevail in the basin. Oryx Ambassadors have spoken in global fora such as the Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016 and the United Nations Conference on Nigeria and Lake



Adamou Aïchatou Jariri, BRIDGE Champion from Niger © IUCN/West Africa Office

Chad in Oslo in 2017. They have worked with local development committees to initiate reforestation activities, and with traditional and local authorities to demand Environmental Impact Assessments where new water diverting is being planned, such as in the Lake Fitri area. They are also collaborating with farmers, fishing communities and pastoralists to raise awareness about unsustainable practices, such as damaging fishing canals.

Going forward, the Lake Chad water ambassadors plan to advocate for ratification of the Lake Chad Water Charter by the Central African Republic and to work towards the implementation of the Charter in the other four countries that have ratified it (Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria). They also hope to gain access, as observers, to the LCBC’s statutory processes, such as the council of Ministers and expert working group meetings. As in the other regions, the network and the individuals that comprise it will need to develop the ability to secure resources for their activities in partnership with other stakeholders in the basin.



Honorable Issa Mardo Djibir, BRIDGE Champion from Niger © IUCN/West Africa Office

5. THE LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME, EXPERIENCED BY BRIDGE CHAMPIONS

A number of BRIDGE Champions from different regions⁹ contributed their testimonials through a series of semi-structured interviews, which aimed to shed light on three key questions:

1. What did the Champions find most valuable about the Champions' programme; and how did it help to strengthen their leadership abilities?
2. Did the BRIDGE Champions' programme change the way in which they work on water governance and transboundary cooperation, and if so, how?
3. What did they feel could be improved, and how?

The testimonials tell us that the Champions' component in BRIDGE has been successful in helping stakeholders use informal pathways for dialogue, and in linking local to national processes and influence streams. BRIDGE Champions have acted as flag bearers and communicators on local, national and international platforms. They are unlocking cooperation processes by:

- Working with a broader range of stakeholders than in their usual sphere of action and influence, in a participatory manner;
- Acquiring knowledge and technical skills, which enabled and empowered them to participate constructively in dialogue processes where different stakeholder views are aired;
- Transmitting content knowledge and skills to their own networks, channelling a multiplier effect, which also enhances their ability to transmit knowledge for policy influencing at higher levels;
- Obtaining expert input from like-minded Champions into their own work, as well as working together in strategic thinking.

The leadership programme has altered the way in which they approach water governance to effect change. It has spurred them to:

- Adopt new ways of influencing behaviour change, e.g. through dialogue rather than confrontation;
- Learn from other basins and countries about interesting cases that strengthen their understanding and ability to communicate about problems that are shared in their region;
- Take the BRIDGE mode of working together with different stakeholders into their own work;
- Evolve from a locally centred to a broader vision;
- Use the network of Champions to communicate and inform each other about new developments and important news relating to water and natural resources, cooperation and governance in their regions.

What the Champions found most valuable about the Champions' programme and how it helped to strengthen their leadership abilities

Interviewees stressed the value of working with a broader range of stakeholders than in their usual sphere of action and influence, in a participatory manner. In many settings, actors have limited access to counterparts working at different levels, across different economic or thematic sectors, or outside of their public, private or civil society realm of action. Through the BRIDGE leadership programme, Champions from different spheres and multiple levels of governance have interacted directly to work and exchange learning around water management, natural resources conservation and sustainable development, bringing a diversity of perspectives that they are encouraged to voice. For example, Champions usually working at national level have gained a much deeper understanding of the local challenges faced by water users from all sectors. Conversely, stakeholders anchored in local level civil society have gained access to decision-makers working at provincial or national levels. Local actors can seize the

opportunity to educate national figures about basin-level issues while also enhancing their own understanding of national level economic and strategic priorities that have a bearing on their basin.

Leaders are found at different levels: at the institutional level under the mayors, who inject energy, catalyse action, influence upper levels; at the project level; at the community level, which is very important to reach and support 'positive leadership'; and among our youth: they are motivated, they are dynamic and want to create change.

Oswaldo Campoverde Celi (Peru)

Champions benefited from acquiring knowledge and technical skills, which enabled and empowered them to participate constructively in dialogue processes where different stakeholder views are aired. Through capacity building on national and transboundary water governance, IWRM, international water law and benefit sharing, Champions learned about key concepts and practiced new skills. Through interactive exercises that promote scenario development, role-play and conflict resolution mechanisms, they also engaged in informal dialogue, which later translated to greater ability to engage in more formal dialogue processes within their basins and at national and transboundary levels. Champions highlighted their newfound ability to negotiate, to present interests in a reasonable, evidence-based manner that is conducive to being heard, as opposed to using conflictive stances that can lead to stalemates.

We received capacity building on transboundary water governance, negotiations skills and how to encourage our stakeholders in-country to engage in dialogue. We have used these BRIDGE tools and skills to negotiate with the National Assembly, Mekong River Commission's Cambodia National Committee, and with the Ministry of Mines and Energy. We have been able to discuss EIAs and the sustainability of proposed hydropower projects. As a result, our National Assembly agreed to question the Ministry of Mines and Energy on the development of the Donsahong dam. They have decided to conduct field visits. We also convened the national assembly to discuss the UNWCC. We have also raised important issues with other dams (Xayaburi, Lower Sesan II), and as a result the Ministry was even called to answer questions by our National Assembly. We have also written letters to MRC National committee on Don Sahong sustainability issues.

Tek Vannara (Cambodia)

I found the Benefit Sharing workshop to be quite valuable: it brought a new approach that we had not used before in Vietnam and I learned a lot. I think that it could be translated and used with different levels of stakeholders. Learning about the value of water, the importance of data about its value and scientific approaches to this was also useful.

Nguy Thi Kahn (Vietnam)

I really appreciated the technical knowledge I gained by participating in the water resources inventory that was conducted in our basin, and I also developed a much better understanding of national level work, and of climate change effects.

Jeronimo Navarro (Guatemala)

I was glad to learn about our rights at international level. I understand now that I am not alone at local, regional and international levels to fight on these issues.

Jesy Barralaga (Honduras)

Champions valued their ability to transmit content knowledge and skills to their networks, channelling a multiplier effect. Champions are able to appropriate and disseminate the concepts and skills that they find particularly relevant and useful in their own settings. Indeed, this is an essential component of their intended leadership role under BRIDGE, in order to bring on and adapt new frames of thinking about water governance and cooperation into their respective spheres of influence. Because Champions are government officials, academics, and NGO members, this knowledge gets disseminated to many types of stakeholders.



BRIDGE 3S planning workshop with Champions
@ IUCN/Vishwa Sinha

We transfer knowledge to our networks. In Cambodia, we have 94 national and international organisations as members. At least 57 organisations have benefited from BRIDGE knowledge dissemination. We have also relayed training to the River Coordination Network (one of eight NGO networks in Cambodia), which works on water and hydropower issues.

Tek Vannara (Cambodia)

As a teacher, I now share learning and tools with my students, I support actions on e.g. forestry and community forest management, and I also do community awareness-raising. We have also worked on developing training certificates (diplomados) at local level, training grassroots organisations, and provided support to micro-watershed councils.

Jeronimo Navarro (Guatemala)

By extension, the Champions' multi-plier effect also enhances their ability to transmit knowledge for policy influencing at higher levels. Because BRIDGE Champions typically interact with policy makers and planners at different levels and in different sectors, they are able to reach key spheres of influence that can implement long term changes to institutional frameworks and arrangements for water governance. Champions have first appropriated, chosen and adapted the relevant pieces of knowledge and skills for their context, and they are building on prior relationships of trust and locally anchored legitimacy. As a result, policy makers and planners are open to listening and learning from these Champions.

I gained the ability to influence behaviour change in technical and political decision-making. I have mainstreamed knowledge to different line ministries and different stakeholders, both in the MRC context and in the International context.

Wat Botkosol (Cambodia)

I have been able to share this with people in my sphere of influence, including through my work with decision-makers. These tools are helpful as Peru turns to the implementation of the law passed in 2008/2009, including about IWRM in transboundary basins (Peru has 34 transboundary basins). In addition, our learning about negotiation and conflict minimisation has been key and can really influence our decision-making processes.

Hanny Guzman (Peru)

I have influenced my municipality's practice in basin planning. Other municipalities have followed our example. We are not receiving much support at national level, but at the level of the department of San Marcos, work on water has certainly made progress.

Jeronimo Navarro (Guatemala)

We are supporting leaders' initiatives by training political leaders and decision-makers on environmental and water resources topics. We help to coordinate activities and events involving the mayors, so the mayors are informed and also drawn in to participate. We also work with environmental managers in the municipalities, to help identify methods to propel projects forward.

Oswaldo Campoverde Celi (Peru)

Champions valued the opportunity to benefit from the expert input and feedback of like-minded Champions into their own work, as well as working together in strategic thinking. The value of facilitating *networks* of Champions, where both individual and collective action could flourish in an upward positive spiral, was thus illustrated. Especially in the Lower Mekong context, their ability to connect into power spheres individually was enhanced through collective strategising on how best to leverage those entry points.

Working together, engaging in dialogue and strategic thinking with the other Champions was really valuable. Through phase 1 and 2, we produced valuable documents that will help shape cooperation between the three countries going forward. Also it was very useful to work in teams from three countries to review my paper, which will be applied in three countries.

Watt Botkosol (Cambodia)

One of the most valuable outcomes was that the three countries' participants agreed to work together to promote the use of water from the 3S sustainably, in the context of the 3S Basin Development Plan (BDP). We made exciting plans around training courses, dialogues, and even small grants for provincial level action on institutional strengthening.

Tek Vannara (Cambodia)

What changed in their practice

Champions adopted new ways of influencing behaviour change on water governance and sustainable water management, e.g., through dialogue instead of confrontation. As seen above, new technical knowledge combined with negotiations and dialogue skills empowered Champions, but also allowed them to take a different strategic tack in resolving challenges, both at local and national levels.

Before, we used confrontation of stakeholders with government; we had an ‘anti-dam position.’ Now, changing behaviour means using negotiation on how to use water more sustainably. Community stakeholders and the NGOs that defend them recognise that they still face risks, but they also have electricity (so they recognise some of the value of dams). Now national authorities recognise NGOs and the NGO forum, and that we are equipped to negotiate. Even Chinese companies engage in dialogue and negotiation with us, e.g. Sino Hydro and Donsahong Hydropower dam. The NGO forum and Sino Hydro now meet directly in Sino Hydro’s Cambodia office, which was unimaginable before. Now that there is dialogue, there is space to negotiate and to bring the community to the table. Before, we were confrontational and there was no dialogue.

Tek Vannara (Cambodia)



Jesy Barralaga, BRIDGE Champion in the Goascoran Basin, Honduras © IUCN/Wanda Villeda

BRIDGE support has helped to open my perspective and also work in a way that is more oriented toward negotiations and compromise. A colleague of mine, who was more vocal and oppositional, was just assassinated. Despite the personal risks involved, I am committed to fight against the risk to water resources from corporate concessions and hidden deals that are not known by the population. I have learned to work on building consensus, strengthening tolerance, using persuasiveness and ‘selling the idea’ so that our interlocutors see it’s in their own interest. I have learned about hydrodiplomacy and how to negotiate...and I have taken and applied these skills at local level. It is about having the knowledge and using diplomacy to take best advantage of conditions in place.

Jesy Barralaga (Honduras)

Champions underlined the value of learning from other basins and countries, about interesting cases and examples that strengthen one’s understanding

and ability to communicate about problems that are shared in the region. Several Champions explained how having such cases and illustrations at their fingertips aids them in their own communication efforts. Learning through workshops and exchange visits about how colleagues work in other settings and tackle issues in different manners allowed Champions to gain perspective and enrich their repertoire of possible actions. It also allowed participants to place basin-level or national-level concerns in a larger regional context, to see a ‘full picture’ where the priorities and concerns of neighbouring communities or countries could be better understood by all.

When there is an issue (e.g. fisheries, water quality), provincial governors call a meeting together with their counterparts, i.e. meetings among the three countries to discuss the issues. This has already happened twice. Quarterly meetings now include water issues, e.g. Donsahong dam is on the agenda regularly.

Tek Vannara (Cambodia)

The main difference in my practice is that I am now incorporating learning from other regions into my activities. This is especially valuable because the theme of transboundary water governance is fairly new in Peru.

Hanny Guzman (Peru)

What I find most useful are the exchanges with Champions from other basins and the experience of attending the World Water Forum to learn about realities in other countries. This has helped carry back the message that in the Goascorán Basin, they have extremely valuable resources and we are not sufficiently valuing and caring for them. I raised awareness with authorities on both sides (Honduras and El Salvador) and also raised the point that there are both surface and subterranean shared waters. We have produced the bi-national Champions’ plan, which we hope to strengthen and are looking for funds to support its implementation.

Jesy Barralaga (Honduras)

Champions reported taking the BRIDGE mode of working together with different stakeholders into their own work. In the Lower Mekong in particular, the multi-stakeholder approach and interactive learning style found great resonance with participants, for whom this was quite innovative. Champions could in turn use similar approaches in their own activities, from teaching and training to convening and policy influencing. They saw the value of bringing stakeholders from different governance levels, from different sectors of society to share contrasting perspectives and build shared understanding on issues they previously understood from opposing perspectives.

Champions often evolved from a locally centred to a broader vision. In Mesoamerica, where BRIDGE Champions were drawn mostly from the local level, participants gained exposure to other levels of action and policy around water management and development. This enriched their understanding of the links between issues faced locally and national level decision-making. It also proved helpful in making the case to higher level authorities about the relevance and need for trans-boundary cooperation at national level, following the examples of initiatives being taken at local levels to tackle and resolve very real problems on the ground.

Gradually we have evolved from a very localist vision (reflecting very diverse communities and cultures in Guatemala) to one that makes links to (higher-level) departmental level actions.

Don Jeronimo (Guatemala)

Champions can use the network to communicate and inform each other. Particularly in the Lower Mekong case, the Champions network has allowed for the formation of a 'community of practice' that is also a group of engaged thought and action leaders, who can share news, exchange viewpoints and continue think strategically together.

There is a communications process ongoing between the 3S Champions. For example, we recently exchanged about about the hydropower impacts on the Mekong Delta. This communications group (by email) seems key to keep people updated and engaged and inspired, and also help people to think through issues together.

Nguy Thi Kahn (Vietnam)

There is more communication (including through Whatsapp and Facebook) and effort to share experiences among Champions.

Jeronimo Navarro (Guatemala)

What the Champions suggest to improve

The Champions interviewed had a number of suggestions to strengthen the leadership programme, and in particular for concrete actions that the programme could support going forward.

In the 3S basins network of Champions, where Champions have so far been involved mostly in capacity building and strategic thinking, it was suggested that Champions could now focus their work on specific objectives, such as:

- Supporting establishment of basin organisations at national and local levels and promoting coordinated action among these across borders; and working on how to set up a transboundary organisation in the future;
- Devising how to implement benefit-sharing principles learned through BRIDGE at the level of the 3S;
- Establishing and maintaining a link with regional organisations such ASEAN, including through a reporting mechanism to relay progress made at basin, national and regional levels;
- Facilitating exchange visits between national committees in the 3S, to learn about their respective transboundary problems, so they can develop a mutual understanding and discuss potential solutions together;
- Champions could push for and facilitate annual meetings of provincial governors at the borders of the three countries about sustainable land and water use. In doing so, they could support the integration of water and land issues, using their capacity to organise and produce results with a diversity of stakeholders.

Champions more generally provided advice on how to make the leadership programme more impactful:

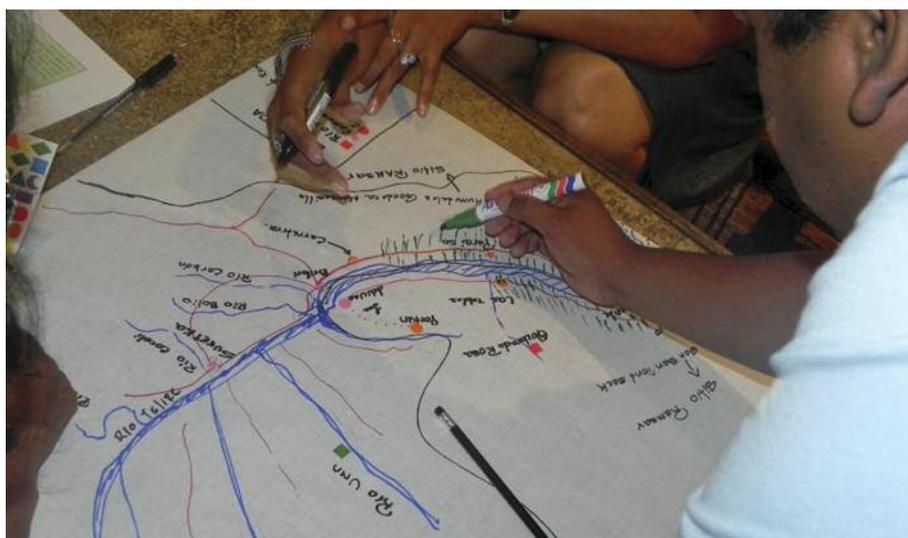
The leadership programme could provide tools and methodologies that are tailored to different audiences and levels of governance. For example, it would be valuable to develop a set of tools and materials in simpler language for local communities. Champions could use these materials to disseminate learning and key messages about water governance to these communities.

Building on the training and certification programmes that it has supported for Champions, the **leadership programme could facilitate a document resource bank**, which the Champions and other stakeholders could easily access and draw upon. Some Champions felt that there should be more follow-up between Champions' activities, and an effort to strengthen communications among Champions, to **create a platform to act. This might for example happen in sub-groups, through a mapping of the comparative advantages or shared interests of Champions.**

My suggestion is to involve more stakeholders as Champions. For example, we could incorporate the mayors into our network as full-fledged Champions, to help them understand that they can do things and change their mode of action; we could also involve producers' associations, which play a key role in using the resource; and we could also involve youth. As part of our Champions' plan, an important aspect we are tackling now is how can we work to grow this network, from 4 people (at basin level) to many more, and also getting council members involved.

Jesy Barralaga (Honduras)

The Mesoamerican Champions have been eager to move to a form of institutionalisation of their network in order to gain legal status for requesting and managing funds jointly, which would allow them implement joint projects. A recurrent request in several regions was for the leadership programme and BRIDGE more generally to move beyond capacity building and to provide technical and especially financial support so that Champions could implement specific activities relating to cooperative water management and governance. These points are explored further in the following section.



BRIDGE Champions drawing the Sixaola River Basin © IUCN Mesoamerica

6. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE: WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

In addition to the above lessons, the implementation of the leadership programme has yielded reflection and learning about the process and substance of supporting leadership development as it relates to water governance.

The value of a flexible approach to leadership building. As seen above, tailoring and adapting a leadership programme to a specific cultural, political and geopolitical context is crucial. This allows Champions to shape their own aspirations as individuals and as a group, and to take ownership of their activities under the programme. It also allows project implementers to seize upon new opportunities, effect course corrections and take the programme into constructive directions that were not necessarily foreseen at the outset. The ways in which the leadership programme unfolded in Mesoamerica and in the Lower Mekong regions were starkly contrasted, with a quicker dive into action planning in the Central America context and a longer maturation period in the 3S basins. In the 3S, a longer process to arrive at the right mix of Champions has yielded a useful balance between talkers and listeners. Strong, slightly more ego-driven personalities energise the group, but are balanced by listeners who often strategise more and report well to their respective institutions. Taking the time to arrive at the right hierarchical mix of individuals was key, to benefit from senior level participants' experience and influence, but also from lower level staff who can 'do the work'. In both regions, despite contrasting experiences in content, Champions interviewed ultimately reported a high level of satisfaction with what they gained from the programme and what they will accomplish going forward.

The sustainability of individuals' leadership abilities, and of Champions networks, ultimately depend on how the Champions behave as a group and as individuals. Three main questions arose regarding the sustainability of the work performed under the leadership programme: 1) how to deal with staff turn-over among counterpart institutions that leads to agencies replacing previously appointed Champions; 2) how to keep networks of Champions active after the funding support from BRIDGE has ended? and 3) as a corollary, is it beneficial for networks of Champions to become formalised

institutions that can later raise funds and implement activities with formal mandates to do so?

Staff turnover in governmental agencies at all levels can be expected during any project, so when Champions are nominated by agencies and later leave, what happens? In the experience of the BRIDGE programme, it was difficult to track whether former participants in the leadership programme continued to apply their skills and to use their knowledge and network. However, we have anecdotal evidence that beneficiaries who were selected not just for their title and position but for their **individual drive and motivation to participate in change processes** were likely to continue building on those skills and knowledge, perhaps from their new professional position or from a more personal vantage point. This speaks to the importance of that initial selection process as well as to its flexibility to allow new Champions to enter and replace former ones later on. In addition, project coordinators stressed the **importance for Champions to share their learning with their immediate and broader networks** within a short time after receiving capacity building, to augment the 'multiplier effect' mentioned above and facilitate broader and more sustainable benefits to institutions rather than only to individuals.

The **network aspect of the leadership programme** was quite innovative and also led to unexpected results. While the Mesoamerica Champions displayed strong collective drive during the BRIDGE supported workshops and meets, it was more difficult to keep the regional network engaged outside of those events due to distance and communications constraints. Leaders from the same basin did remain engaged together on shared actions. By contrast, the 3S regional Champions' network is reportedly remaining in contact without direct BRIDGE facilitation. This is not entirely surprising, recalling that on average the Mesoamerica Champions are locally based community leaders perhaps with more modest means, while 3S Champions are drawn from a mid- to higher level strata of professionals in government, non-governmental and academic streams, who have easier access to the internet and are more comfortable with regular email communication. As shown earlier, however, in both regions Champions were active in different ways and quite satisfied with their engagement. This suggests that although the network aspect

of the leadership program is quite valuable when it is feasible and organically self-sustaining, equally important is the individual empowerment (combined with the above-mentioned multiplier effect) that Champions derive from the Leadership programme to carry forth their own actions.

A related issue is that the logistical and financial costs of organising meetings as a network require funds, which are currently dependent upon BRIDGE funding. To remedy this, the Mesoamerica group of Champions proposed to **establish its network as an international NGO with legal status**, in order to be able to raise funds and undertake joint activities more sustainably. This posed a difficulty for BRIDGE, which has envisioned the power and value of such networks to be largely contained in their informal nature, for two reasons: 1) because of the value of governance Champions to informally share, communicate, establish connections and influence more formal processes; and 2) because of the undesirability of creating new parallel institutions that might eventually compete with the formal ones that Champions might help to strengthen. For these reasons, BRIDGE ultimately declined to directly support the formalisation and legal establishment of the network. However, it is fully recognised that the network may pursue these objectives independently, which could lead to very positive and sustainable results as well.

For different reasons, the issue of network formalisation has also surfaced in the more recent efforts to create a network of BRIDGE Champions in Central Africa, in the Lake Chad Basin. In that context, project coordinators and Champions themselves have insisted on the importance of having their status as a network formally recognised by institutions such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission, not for financial reasons but in order to validate their operational legitimacy in the sub-basins where they intend to carry out activities. In addition, because project beneficiaries, including leadership programme participants, are closely monitored and/or selected by counterpart agencies, a formalised network



PACO Champion Adamou Aïchatou Jariri

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with a publicly validated action plan appears to be better understood and accepted than an informal network, which might be construed as having unclear objectives and deliverables.

It is important to note that some of the most active BRIDGE Champions are women, and that although it was not specifically designed to do so in its early phases, the BRIDGE leadership programme has contributed to **building support for increased gender equality** in water governance. By ensuring that an equal proportion of Champions were women in Mesoamerica, BRIDGE coordinators there explicitly recognised the role of women as agents of change in transboundary cooperation at different levels of governance. In that region, women Champions have been working with the Goacorán Management Group and alongside BRIDGE to support local, national and international events voicing water governance concerns and transmitting their experiences and knowledge to communities and other leaders from Honduras and El Salvador. A local leader from Panama in the Sixaola River Basin has led water

The network is not necessarily here to last. What needs to last is the understanding of the work approach as well as the capacity to act as ambassadors for new initiatives in transboundary water governance.

Raphaël Glémet

IUCN Senior Programme officer, Water and Wetlands, Asia – Natural Resources Group

governance processes and trained other leaders to take charge and continue supporting these processes. BRIDGE's women Champions have also seized the opportunities provided through BRIDGE-convened meetings to promote the water governance and cooperation agenda at the ministerial level: they have called Ministers' attention to local challenges – for example lack of access to information on infrastructure planning – and the importance of the linkage between the local and the transboundary levels of decision-making. In the Mekong region, following a revision of the 3S Champions' network's composition in 2014/2015, the proportion of women working alongside BRIDGE has now increased from less than ten per cent to approximately 25 per cent. This has also brought in new perspectives and enhanced the discussions on the relevance of gender issues in improving water management at the basin level within the Champions' network.

A final point of reflection and learning concerns the political sensitivity that comes with being a Champion for water governance in places where free speech and advocacy are not well tolerated by the government or by dominant power holders such as corporations, agribusiness, private interests etc. Some of our testimonials above reflected the potential danger of activism in several regions, especially as it relates to environmental protection and sustainable development, and to the impacts of dams. As a programme, BRIDGE has worked hard to transmit tools and capacity for dialogue. As we have seen, some of these tools have enabled Champions to work in less conflictive and more constructive ways, which the programme considers a major achievement. However, an important lesson for BRIDGE practitioners and beyond is to never forget the tightrope on which Champions are walking, and to tailor our capacity building with this tightrope very much in mind.



Zarumilla Champions training programme © IUCN Emilio Cobo

IN CLOSING

The BRIDGE Leadership programme continues to grow, evolve and bring new lessons, including from South America where it has gained new momentum and from West and Central Africa where new Champions are actively defining their roadmap. The programme's experience thus far has brought rich learning about the nature and relevance of informal networks, about the articulation of individual and collective action, and about the value of equipping women and men as leaders with skills that range from technical knowledge to dialogue facilitation to negotiations as an alternative to conflict. It has also raised useful flags about the meaning of leadership and network sustainability, and about the sensitivity that leadership building must show across different socio-cultural and political contexts. These findings speak very much in favour of adopting leadership building as a deliberate strategy to catalyse change – one that must tread

wisely and patiently according to the context in which it unfolds.



BRIDGE Champions in the Mekong

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END NOTES

¹Ostrom E. (2009). A general framework for analyzing sustainability of social-ecological systems. *Science* 325: 419-422.

²Translation of this term to other languages requires care, as will be discussed below.

³Smith, M., and Cartin M. (2011). *Water Vision to Action: Catalysing Change through the IUCN Water and Nature Initiative*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. viii plus 55pp.

⁴Astin, Helen S. and Alexander W. Astin. (1996). *A Social Change Model of Leadership Development Guidebook Version III*. The National Clearinghouse of Leadership Programs.

⁵These materials were developed by Gillian Martin Mehers and Elizabeth Crudington, Bright Green Learning.

⁶Although the Chiquibul-Mopán (Guatemala-Belize) and Coco (Honduras-Nicaragua) basins are not among the basins where BRIDGE carries out demonstration work, individuals from these basins were included on request from organisations active in those basins, including Friends For Conservation of Development (FCD) and COSUDE.

⁷Excerpted and adapted from Bill Hinchberger. (2013). *Standard Bearers Lead BRIDGE's charge in Mesomerica*.

⁸Botkosal, W. (2015). *Strategic Priorities for Transboundary Water Cooperation in the Sekong, Sesan and Sre Pok (3S) Basins*.

⁹Champions were interviewed from the Andes, Mesoamerica and 3S (Lower Mekong) Basins.

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Video IUCN BRIDGE Project – How to build water cooperation across borders: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7igcOKFwd9w>

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

3S Basins	Sekong, Sesan, Sre Pok River Basins
ALT	Authority for Lake Titicaca
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRIDGE	Building River Dialogues and Governance
CNMC	Cambodia National Mekong Committee
CSO	Civil Societies Organisation
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
FCD	Friends for Conservation of Development
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
IWRM	Integrated Water Resources Management
LCBC	Lake Chad Basin Commission
MRC	Mekong River Commission
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NMC	National Mekong Committee
UNWCC	UN Watercourses Convention
WANI	Water and Nature Initiative



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