



# Making Waves: Youth engagement in water diplomacy

Since the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security in 2015, there has been a normative shift in the way youth are recognized as significant stakeholders in global dialogues. In recent years, governments and international organizations have increasingly recognized the importance of Resolution 2250 by creating space for youth in peace and development processes (United Nations, 2020). Despite some progress, a redoubling of efforts is needed to elevate youth voices across the water sector – including as part of water diplomacy processes.



**About SIWI**

The Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) seeks to strengthen water governance for a just, prosperous and sustainable future.

**About ICWC**

The International Centre for Water Cooperation (ICWC) hosted by SIWI is the first UNESCO Category II Centre in Sweden, and the first in the world to focus on transboundary water management in connection with peace, conflict and regional development. The ICWC supports these processes by developing world-leading knowledge and capacity through international research, training, outreach, and policy advice.

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**In many parts of the world**, young people make up the majority of the population. With unique and varied vulnerabilities and needs as well as opportunities, we understand that we will not succeed in creating a water wise world without engaging youth. In this working paper, we explore the case for elevating youth engagement in water diplomacy processes as a key aspect of fostering sustainable and long-lasting transboundary water cooperation. In addition, this working paper explores several case studies from recent and ongoing water diplomacy processes where young people have been actively involved. Whilst linkages between water diplomacy processes and the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda are limited, and barriers remain both for youth participation and youth influence, there is much that can be learned and adapted to support the enhanced engagement of youth in water diplomacy processes.

Implementing Resolution 2250 is central to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as engaging youth and creating more inclusive decision-making processes and structures are fundamental components of reaching the 2030 Agenda (United Nations Development Program, 2017). More than one third of the SDG targets mention young people, specifically highlighting terms such as participation and empowerment. There are 20 youth-specific targets spread over 6 key SDGs: Goal 13 (climate action) being one of them. SDG 6 on water and sanitation, however, lacks a youth-related target (General Assembly, 2015).

**Today's youth have shown** a strong desire and capacity to contribute to meeting the global challenges we are facing, not least climate change (United Nations, 2020). Since 2018, there has been a significant increase in youth movements actively engaging to raise awareness about climate change. These movements have acted as forceful and effective advocates for long-term sustainability by pushing policymakers on the local, national, regional and international levels to adopt urgent changes in current policies and legal frameworks (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2019). Nonetheless, in March 2020, when the UN Security Council published their first report on the implementation of Resolution 2250, it warned that youth are still being excluded from decision-making processes and signalled that further efforts are needed.

**Defining 'Youth':** Defining "youth" is a challenge as the view of who qualifies as 'young' depends to a large extent on context and culture. UNSCR 2250 defines "youth" as persons between 18 and 29 years of age (Security Council, 2015). In this working paper, youth is defined as persons between 15 and 24 years of age, a choice made due to data availability.

**Today's generation of youth** is the largest the world has ever known. Currently, there are 1.2 billion youth aged 15 to 24 years, accounting for 16 per cent of the global population. By 2030, the number of is projected to grow by 7 per cent to nearly 1.3 billion (United Nations, 2018a: p.12). Despite the actual number of youths growing, the share of youth in the total population is expected to decline after 2020 as today's youth get older and contribute to growing the relative size of other age groups.

Looking beyond the global numbers, there are large regional differences in the youth population. The general trend indicates that youth make up a larger share of the population in low-income countries, and that their share in these countries is projected to continue to grow and peak in 2030. The difference can be clearly illustrated by looking at a number of transboundary basins (*see Youth Population Density 2030, page 4*). In the Nile and Amu Darya basins, for example, the youth population is projected to make up around a fifth of the total population in 2030, while the share is lower in basins such as the Mekong and the Euphrates and Tigris region, which include high, middle, and low-income countries.

**Youth participation is one issue** in a dynamic and complex system, and inextricably linked with other issues such as socioeconomic development. Who is defined as young will depend on the makeup of the population at large, but also on other factors such as seniority in professional life, or cultural factors such as the average age to start a family. Moreover, not all young people are focused on elevating the youth agenda in their professional engagements. Comparing situations and solutions requires care, and projects and conclusions cannot necessarily be re-applied in other places without significant contextual adaptation. At the same time, the fact that youth, currently or in the near future, make up a larger-than-average share of the population in many transboundary basins illustrates the need for improved youth inclusion and participation in transboundary water management processes.

### Youth inclusion in Water Diplomacy

Participation is a fundamental right. It is one of the guiding principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

### UNSCR 2250 (2015)

The United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security in 2015. This Resolution recognizes that young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security.

that has been reiterated in many other conventions and declarations as well as in the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, further inclusive processes have demonstrated a positive impact on the sustainability of peace agreements (Nilsson, 2012). With regard to the specific issue of the impact of youth inclusion in decision-making – more research is needed. As with efforts to elevate other voices, it is hypothesized that enhancing youth engagement will likewise have a positive impact on the durability of agreements.

**Ensuring inclusive participation** and representation of different stakeholder groups as part of water diplomacy processes has increasingly been elevated as a pillar of sustainable and long-lasting agreements (Troell and Yaari, 2019). To date, these discussions have primarily focused on efforts and needs to improve gender equality and increase recognition of the role of ensuring youth perspectives as part of water diplomacy processes (Yaari and Klimes, 2020). Understanding water diplomacy as the interaction between stakeholders engaged in both formal and informal processes creates an important window of opportunity to engage youth in water diplomacy – particularly in informal water diplomacy processes. Despite these positive steps in advancing youth engagement, in particular as part of informal water diplomacy, formal level water diplomacy processes typically remain the purview of senior representatives from the national Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Ministries of Water. Furthermore, informal water diplomacy processes – particularly those designed to engage youth – are challenged to develop strong linkages to formal processes.

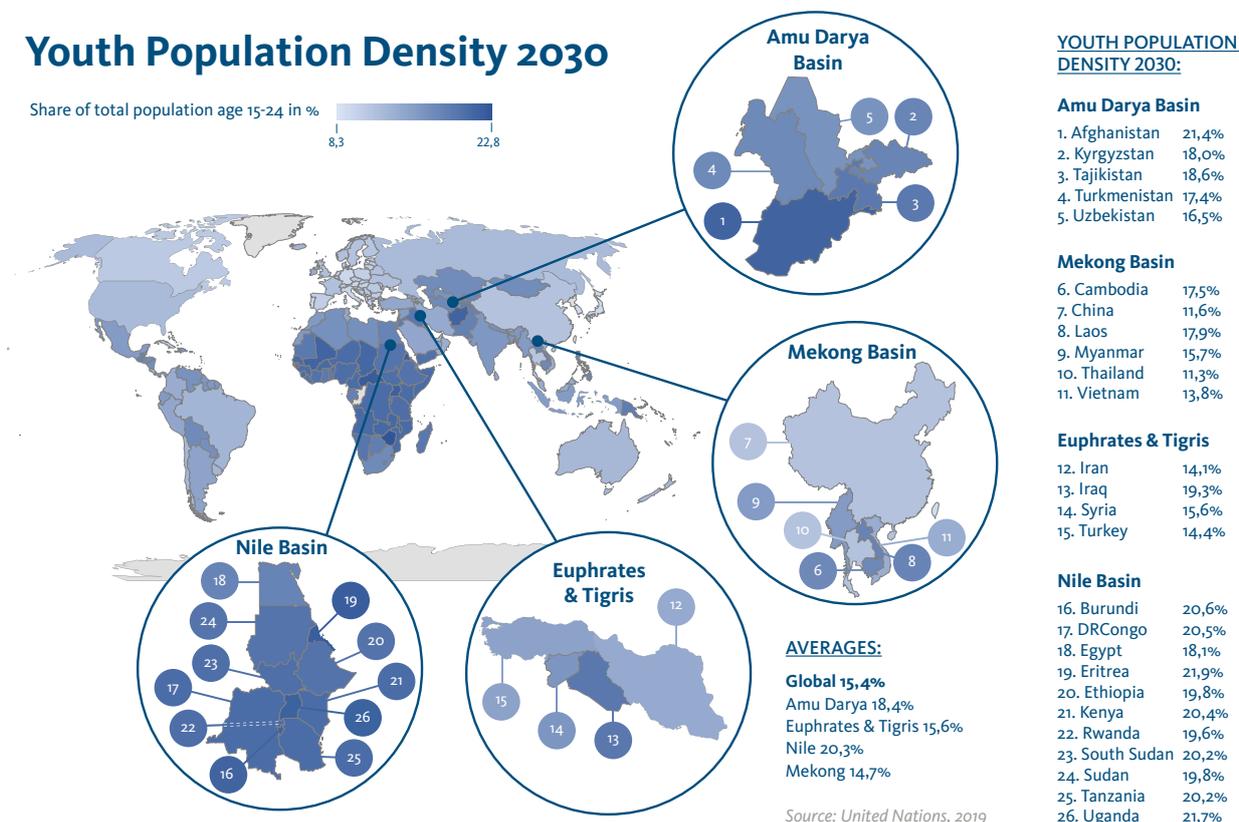
**Water diplomacy** recognizes that there are many different actors that have the ability to create solution spaces for conflicts over water and that can create windows of opportunity for cooperation over water. These actors are inclusive of **formal** government officials (state and local level) and **informal** non-state/government actors, private sector, civil society, media, and others. While conventionally, water diplomacy is seen as official high-level interaction and dialogue between nation-states, diplomacy is now defined according to various tracks which vary in terms of formality, actors involved, and purpose (Klimes and Yaari 2019).

### Existing initiatives: Youth and Water Diplomacy

Despite existing barriers to youth participation in water diplomacy processes, there are a number of existing initiatives that promote youth participation both as targeted and mainstreamed stakeholders. In order to further broaden and deepen this engagement, it is vital to learn from these existing initiatives. In this working paper, we highlight a few of the existing case studies, which all contribute to enhancing youth participation in water diplomacy processes.

## Youth Population Density 2030

Share of total population age 15-24 in %   
8,3 22,8



# Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI)

**SIWI recognizes that it will not** be possible to reach the goal of a water wise world without supporting youth engagement – including as water diplomats and managers. Youth empowerment is, therefore, one of SIWI's three cross-cutting issues, recognized in its strategy and mainstreamed across SIWI programming. To enable this, SIWI works to maintain platforms, create opportunities amongst different youth groups, and ensure diverse youth perspectives in SIWI-convened events by leveraging its Gold Standard, which was introduced in 2017 as a way of increasing inclusive dialogues. SIWI also convenes special days for young professionals as part of SIWI's annual World Water Week and showcases innovation through the Stockholm Junior Water Prize.

**SIWI's flagship Shared Waters Partnership (SWP)** is a global programme designed to facilitate transboundary water cooperation in conflict-sensitive basins. The SWP approach leverages SIWI's experience in supporting peaceful transboundary water cooperation and effective water governance. SWP applies a multi-track water diplomacy approach, recognizing that there are many different actors that both catalyze conflicts over water

and can create windows of opportunity for cooperation over water – including young professionals.

**In recent years, SWP has made** significant progress supporting the engagement of young water diplomats and 'rising stars' amongst participating country delegations through both mainstreaming and targeted approaches. Across all SWP engagements, young professionals are encouraged to be part of senior representative delegations from their countries to enable interaction with neighbouring counterparts and have sustained mentoring time with their senior colleagues. This contributes significantly to the young professionals' capacity building and regional networking. In addition, since 2016, SWP has engaged in targeted youth empowerment activities including in partnership with the Central Asian Regional Environmental Centre (CAREC) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe among others by contributing to an annual water diplomacy training for selected young environmental leaders in Central Asia and Afghanistan through the Central Asia Leadership Programme (see case study for details).



SWP negotiation simulation at CALP 2019. Photo © CAREC, 2019



Central Asian Leadership Program 2019 participants. Photo © CAREC, 2019

# The Central Asian Regional Environmental Centre (CAREC)

**The Central Asian Regional Environmental Centre (CAREC)** is an independent, non-political and non-profit international organization with regional mandate to assist the Central Asian governments, and regional and international stakeholders in addressing environmental and sustainability challenges across the Central Asian region and Afghanistan. By promoting dialogue and collaboration among all environmental stakeholders, CAREC has today become a leading regional knowledge hub in the field of environment and sustainable development recognized by national, regional and international partners.

One of the flagship initiatives of CAREC is the **Central Asian Leadership Program (CALP)**. CALP is a unique programme, designed to improve the leadership capacity of young and mid-level managers of various environmental agencies, focused on the sustainable development challenges in the region. In Central Asia, the role of young leaders in transformations of the environment and sustainable development and in promoting regional dialogue is becoming more visible. The role of this new generation of managers and regional leaders who have global thinking, regional vision, and understanding of the importance of regional cooperation and are ready to embrace innovative approaches, is becoming increasingly important. Young leaders with high qualifications and professional skills are needed to respond to the global challenges and jointly solve regional problems related to water, climate change, gender, environment, and post-Covid-19 development issues.

CALP is designed to equip young leaders of the region with cutting-edge knowledge and innovative leadership

methodologies to respond to global, regional, and national environmental challenges. For over eleven years, 330 young people from Central Asia and Afghanistan – representatives of state environmental, water and energy sectors, NGOs, universities, and green business – have graduated from CALP. From year to year, CAREC receives more and more nominations from the state bodies of Central Asian countries, NGOs, and regional organizations, which confirms recognition and relevance of the programme by national partners.

**In 2017, the first Organizing Committee** of the CALP Alumni Network was established, comprising six graduates of CALP. The Organizing Committee and members of the Alumni Network meet not only on the CALP platform, but also successfully conduct various youth side or pre-conference events during the regional forums. In April 2019, as part of the Central Asian Climate Change Conference in Tashkent, the Youth Pre-Conference Event “One Planet, One Future: Motivating young people to take action on climate change” took place. The event made a valuable contribution to strengthening regional cooperation and preparing future leaders who will be playing a major role in ensuring sustainable development of the region. Today, CALP graduates make significant contributions to the promotion of regional cooperation and sustainability in various sectors throughout the region as many graduates have been appointed to key positions in the various sectors.

*Case study submitted by Anna Inozemtseva, Leading Specialist of Water Initiatives Support Program on behalf of CAREC, October 2020.*

# EcoPeace Middle East

**EcoPeace Middle East** was founded in 1994 when a group of Jordanian, Israeli and Palestinian environmentalists joined forces and established a regional organization with the aim of promoting cooperative efforts to protect their countries' shared environmental heritage. Since its foundation, youth engagement and capacity building have been a central pillar of EcoPeace's bottom-up activities, demonstrated most directly through its flagship programme "[Good Water Neighbors \(GWN\)](#)".

**The GWN programme is designed** to create citizen champions – including youth and young professionals – by engaging community stakeholders in resolving shared regional environmental challenges. While today's youth and young professionals are not yet the decision makers, they are the demographic that will suffer the consequences of inaction or reap the benefits from understanding the regional water issues, how it affects them, and the positive role they can play. As such EcoPeace works to empower and support a cadre of young professionals working together across borders to enhance water security in the region.

**To reach this goal**, as part of the GWN educational programmes, EcoPeace piloted a "Water Diplomacy Track" in 2019 that aims at broadening and deepening an understanding of the need for successful water diplomacy and cooperative solutions to deal with climate threats among Palestinian, Jordanian and Israeli young professionals in the region. This year-long programme on water diplomacy offers more than thirty selected applicants from the three countries opportunities to



**EcoPeace first national water diplomacy training, September 2019 Jordan.** Photo © EcoPeace

participate in a series of national and regional trainings focusing on communication and developing negotiation and conflict resolution skills through simulations. By strengthening the capacities of young professionals, as individuals and as part of institutions, this programme exposes its participants to the key aspects of water diplomacy including legal aspects, nexus aspects, and benefit and cost sharing as well as modules on the shared water reality, project planning and cross-border cooperation. Additionally, the programme provides opportunities to foster cross-border relationships and help identify points of interest to build regional projects.

*Case study submitted by Nawwar Sabe Eleish, Jordanian Educational Programs Officer on behalf of EcoPeace Middle East, October 2020.*

**The Jordan River, once a mighty waterway, is today threatened by excessive water diversion, pollution, and climate change.** Photo © Shutterstock.



# Enhancing youth participation through bottom-up processes

**With a growing consideration** for the importance of including youth perspectives in water diplomacy processes, what steps can be taken to enhance youth participation? Following Basco-Carrera et al., enhancing participation can be thought of as a ladder. The bottom level signifies an absence of stakeholder engagement where stakeholders have no or very little knowledge of what is happening. The first three steps signify low, but increasing, levels of stakeholder participation. These low-level participation steps are defined by one-way flows of information. In the three following high participation steps, the flow of information is two-way: through discussion, co-design, and co-decision making (Basco-Carrera et al., 2017). By focusing attention on the nature of youth participation in a certain process, the ladder can be useful in planning for and monitoring activities and identify areas where targeted and/or mainstreamed engagement strategies could increase youth participation.

**Youth engagement is important** at all participation levels, from being aware to co-decision making, especially in settings where youth make up a significant share of the population (OECD, 2017). By including youth in all phases of a process, there is an opportunity for them to move up the ladder of participation and be engaged on the higher echelons of the participation ladder rather than only being targeted in a one-way upward flow of

information, if involved at all. Ultimately, the aim is to achieve empowerment – where youth are provided with opportunities to develop skills, become problem solvers and decision-makers, and where they can independently share knowledge and add their own perspective to the discussions (Youth Development Report, 2020)

**What is required to move up the ladder?** One part is changes in policies. Whilst there has been an increase in the number of countries with national youth policies, few countries have taken the step to add mandatory youth representatives in decision-making processes (United Nations, 2020). Currently, even the policies meant to enable youth participation are created without consistent and formal consultation of the target group itself (United Nations, 2018a). As a first step, policies should be adopted to institutionalize youth participation in e.g. policy development and project planning, monitoring, and evaluation. By way of example, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and UNDP are engaging young people in defining youth policies with a strong focus on sustaining peace in Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire and Togo (United Nations, 2020). Another example is the creation of national coalitions on youth inclusive processes in countries such as Cameroon, Finland, Jordan, Tunisia and Yemen in order to facilitate the engagement of a diverse group of stakeholders (United Nations, 2020).

## Ladder of Participation



Source: Basco-Carrera et al, 2017, Figure 3

**While policies can help** ensure that youth are informed and consulted in water diplomacy processes, more is needed to move further up the participation ladder. Active, gainful collaboration and empowerment rests not just on having a seat at the table; participation has to be used effectively to have an impact on the outcomes of the processes. To this end, investments in capacity building may be necessary to give a wider group of youth the tools required to have a real and constructive impact on processes in which they are invited to participate (United Nations, 2018b). Capacity building efforts should not only be through traditional one-directional learning but include knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer experience sharing between different youth networks and organizations.

**An example of creating space** for capacity building and networking is the 2017 Central Asia Youth Water Forum in Kyrgyzstan, which was established for young professionals to support and strengthen youth participation in the regional water sector. The creation of this network is a result of a two-year coordination process led by engaged youth from the region and supported by the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) programme at the German-Kazakh University (Bachikh, 2020). Also related to capacity building is the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development in Mali, which has implemented a Peacebuilding Fund project to strengthen the capacity of youth to contribute meaningfully to the implementation of the peace agreement and increase the access and participation of young women and men to the agreement's various implementing bodies (United Nations, 2020).

**Inadequate resourcing**, particularly when it comes to capacity building and networking opportunities as well

as programmatic interventions for youths related to decision-making processes (United Nations, 2020), remains a central challenge to increasing youth participation and implementing Resolution 2250. It also becomes an important factor for addressing the challenges of youth participation. It has been estimated that 50 per cent of youth peacebuilding organizations operate on less than \$5,000 a year (United Nations, 2020). Having a seat at the table is of little use if no one is able to take it due to the lack of funds. Providing adequate funding for youth networks and organizations to participate throughout processes – from planning and execution to monitoring and evaluation – is key to increasing youth inclusion as a first step to youth empowerment. This is a role that can be filled by governments, financial institutions, and multi-lateral organizations (United Nations, 2018b). For example, the Peacebuilding Fund has taken proactive measures to support young people's critical contributions to peacebuilding at the local and national levels through the annual Youth Promotion Initiative. Between 2016 and 2019, the Fund invested a total of \$57.2 million through the Initiative, increasing funding from \$2.7 million in 2016 to \$20.4 million in 2019. To date, the Initiative remains the largest funding measure in support of the implementation of Resolution 2250 (2015) (United Nations, 2020).

**Although a lot more needs** to be done for youth to be included in high-level decision-making processes, Resolution 2250 (2015) encouraged some governments and organizations to implement new structures moving youth up on the participation ladder in the process. The examples above and in the implementation report on youth peace and security are, therefore, all significant cases to draw upon, adapt and replicate for future water diplomacy processes (United Nations, 2020).

SIWI convenes special days for young professionals as part of SIWI's annual World Water Week. Photo © Thomas Henriksen



# Conclusions

**It is the youths of today** who will be – and are – living with the challenges of increased water scarcity, more extreme weather, and a warming climate. In the near future, today's youth will also be the leading decision-makers in our response to and handling of these challenges.

**Broadening the group of current decision-makers** to include youth perspectives is important – not just for representation and the right to participation, but also to ensure continuity in policy and long-term success. Participation is a principle that needs continued encouragement and expansion if we are to achieve a water wise world. Youth participation can be strengthened by including young people in consultation, discussion, and co-design – leading to co-decision making and true empowerment.

**To truly understand how to engage youth**, we need to improve and advance a number of parallel tracks such as

education and capacity building so that young people can gain the knowledge required to be part of key processes. At the same time, we need to encourage high-level processes to make space for youth engagement and the elevation of the youth agenda.

**While the case studies** presented in this working paper demonstrate successful examples of youth engagement in informal water diplomacy processes, more research is needed regarding lessons learned in effectively engaging youth. Furthermore, efforts and support are needed to link informal water diplomacy processes, where youth are already participating, with formal engagements.

**Last but not least**, further data must be collected to make youth contributions visible across the water sector, including in water diplomacy processes – as the adage goes, 'what is not measured is not managed'.

It is mainly the youths of today who will be living with challenges such as increased water scarcity. Photo © Leon Enrique, Flickr



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