



POLICY BRIEF

Water diplomacy: Facilitating dialogues

Increased pressure on transboundary water resources resulting from growing economic and population demands, amplified by climate change processes, can have devastating effects in regions affected by armed conflicts and internal water mismanagement. This creates a dire need not only for strengthening the institutions of water governance but also for different dialogue mechanisms and other tools of water diplomacy.

What does diplomacy have to do with water? Can water diplomacy lead to peace? Is cooperation over transboundary surface and ground waters the exclusive domain of diplomats and foreign policy experts? Or mainly the purview of water professionals negotiating agreements on the management of shared water resources? Why should for example NGO representatives be involved in transboundary water dialogues and what is the most effective setting? These questions lie at the heart of debates and dialogues around why there is a need for water diplomacy.

Why water diplomacy now? | Growing water scarcity and climate change effects are having a profound global impact resulting in an urgent need for increased dialogue and cooperation over shared water resources. Over 50 per cent of the world's population relies on freshwater from rivers that are shared by two or more countries (McCracken & Wolf, 2019). Yet there is still a noted absence of any form of collaborative framework in more than 60 per cent of these basins. Increased water insecurity resulting from climate change processes, mounting environmental pressures, expanding economies, growing populations, and unsustainable consumption practices are increasing strain on the world's shared water resources.

Can water diplomacy lead to peace? | The question of whether or not dialogues on water can prevent escalation of armed conflicts, act as a dialogue entry point where violence has already erupted or contribute to lasting peace has become ever more prominent in the past decade. Some experts have raised concerns that this objective establishes unrealistic

expectations that foreign policy can resolve water conflicts or that technical water managers are being tasked with diplomacy and dialogue roles that they are not necessarily equipped for (Schmeier, 2018).

Why water diplomacy?

- Water diplomacy is an approach that enables a variety of stakeholders to assess ways to contribute to finding solutions for joint management of shared freshwater resources.
- It is a dynamic process that seeks to develop reasonable, sustainable and peaceful solutions to water management while promoting or informing cooperation and collaboration among riparian stakeholders.

Klimes et al. (2019)

There are few known examples when dialogue on shared water resources have proved a direct link to sustained efforts to address root causes of an armed intrastate or interstate conflict. But there are many examples from around the world where water and environmental dialogues directly contributed to bringing communities and decision-makers together around shared environmental objectives, strengthening the foundations of peaceful and sustainable societies.



Photo: iStock

One well-known example of a bottom-up process is the Good Water Neighbours programme spearheaded by EcoPeace Middle East in the Lower Jordan Valley. In this process, Palestinian, Jordanian and Israeli mayors and communities join forces to rehabilitate their shared water resources together with their transboundary neighbours in the context of a prevailing conflict. Diverse global faith leaders have also jointly addressed wise water management and climate change objections through their declarations and policies – fostering community-level behavioural change and influencing decision-makers through their wise water championship. Academics and water professionals likewise from Turkey, Syria and Iraq engaged in the Euphrates-Tigris Initiative for Cooperation (ETIC) process to foster a common understanding through data sharing and joint planning. As these diverse examples demonstrate, the tools of water diplomacy can contribute to creating pathways across societies for inclusive participation and strong partnerships in water decision-making – critical to achieving a water wise and a peaceful world.

Facing an imminent environmental disaster, related to shared water resources, can create momentum for a dialogue process. This can give the conflicting parties more tangible and measurable issues to discuss in contrast to underlying historical and governance grievances. At the same time, it is unrealistic to expect that any cooperative effort on how to manage shared water resources can resolve conflicts driven by deeply embedded historical grievances. For any external actors involved in supporting water dialogue processes, it is essential to have a good understanding of causes of armed conflicts or political tensions, which groups are most affected by unresolved water issues and who, in contrast, economically benefits from sustaining the conflict (war economy).

Who are water diplomacy actors? | Water diplomacy in conflict-affected regions offers dialogue entry points different to more traditional conflict management mechanisms. There is a continuous demand for knowledge about water diplomacy and, in particular, about the linkages between political and technical tracks.

The actors involved in multi-track water diplomacy can comprise various groups of state and non-state actors. Formal actors, mainly encompassing Ministry of Foreign Affairs, water line ministry, and other ministries and government agencies according to the specific context are often the most visible. Informal or non-state actors also have an important role in water diplomacy dialogues. Representatives of civil society organizations, academia and think tanks, media, and faith-based traditions all have an important role to play to build

Transboundary rivers

- 310 rivers cross boundaries of two or more states
- 150 countries and disputed areas share these transboundary basins
- 52% of the world's population relies on these rivers as a primary source of freshwater
- 60% of international river basins lack any type of formal cooperative management framework*

McCracken & Wolf (2019) and UN-Water (2013)*

relations and contribute to shared knowledge on common water resources. External actors are also crucial and can range from multilateral and bilateral foreign policy and development partners – including UN agencies – to regional organizations, and international financial institutions. To increase chances of success, these processes should be broad and inclusive, with a clear gender focus. Having a diverse cross-section of stakeholders participating in dialogues around shared waters ensures that the impacts and benefits of shared water management are identified early, increasing the likelihood of sustainable and equitable solutions and contributing to the prevention of conflict relapse.

Water diplomacy tracks | For water diplomacy processes to be effective they need to be flexible enough to respond to changing political landscapes and climate change. Many water diplomacy processes take place in a context of so-called *informal diplomacy* with non-state actors (Track 2) or with official actors in informal roles (Track 1.5). These tracks are complementary to the formal processes (Track 1) and tend to be most impactful if they are well linked. Effective and sustainable solutions require better cooperation across and between actors and sectors; foremost the political and technical tracks of transboundary water management. One of the main challenges is to ensure that available technical knowledge informs the political tracks of water diplomacy and how to build trust effectively to ensure sustainability of water cooperation processes.

The importance of efficient water management and good water governance practices is increasingly recognized, but the wider impacts of climate change on the hydrological cycle and shared risks and opportunities in transboundary basins are not always understood. Many high-level decision-makers engaged in cross-boundary negotiations over shared waters recognize the need to create joint understanding among stakeholders sharing a freshwater resource.

Water diplomacy tracks and tools such as different dialogue mechanisms, fact-finding missions, study tours, joint scientific seminars and similar need to be more accessible to technical experts and foreign policy actors and interdisciplinary

frameworks to support discussion on how different sectors and actors can work together more effectively. An outstanding question is how the water community can better support different water diplomacy processes that contribute to stability, community resilience, conflict transformation, peacebuilding and regional cooperation.

Conclusion | There is an urgent need to further integrate science, policy, and practical perspectives in multi-track water diplomacy processes to contribute to improved transboundary water cooperation necessary in conflict-affected regions.

Water Diplomacy Tracks

Conventionally (water) diplomacy is seen as 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 its purpose.

- **Formal Diplomacy** (Track 1)
Official/Formal communication between state actors with the authority and mandate to speak and make decisions on behalf of their governments or institutions.
- **Informal Diplomacy** (Track 2 and 1.5)
Dialogue between non-officials to build relations, resolve conflict, manage a crisis or build trust, based on agreed mandate, roles and responsibilities. It can include officials in informal roles (Track 1.5), academics, NGOs, faith-based organizations, business partners, media, retired civil servants and other “insiders” (Track 2).

Adapted from Klimes & Yaari (2019)

References

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This policy brief has been authored by Dr Martina Klimes, Advisor, Water and Peace at SIWI and Elizabeth A. Yaari, Senior Manager at SIWI on behalf of the ICWC, the International Centre for Water Cooperation hosted by SIWI under the auspices of UNESCO. The brief is based on an editorial article authored by Martina Klimes, Elizabeth A. Yaari, David Michel, and Phillia Restiani in the Special Issue on Water Diplomacy of the Journal of Hydrology published in April 2019.

The UNESCO Category II 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. For more information please visit: <https://www.siwi.org/what-we-do/international-centre-water-cooperation/>

The Shared Waters Partnership (SWP) hosted by SIWI is a platform designed to improve cooperation over shared waters in regions where water is, or may become, a source of conflict or where water can serve as a catalyst for peace. The overall objective of SWP is peaceful cooperation between basin states sharing transboundary water sources. For more information please visit: <https://www.siwi.org/what-we-do/shared-waters-partnership/>

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