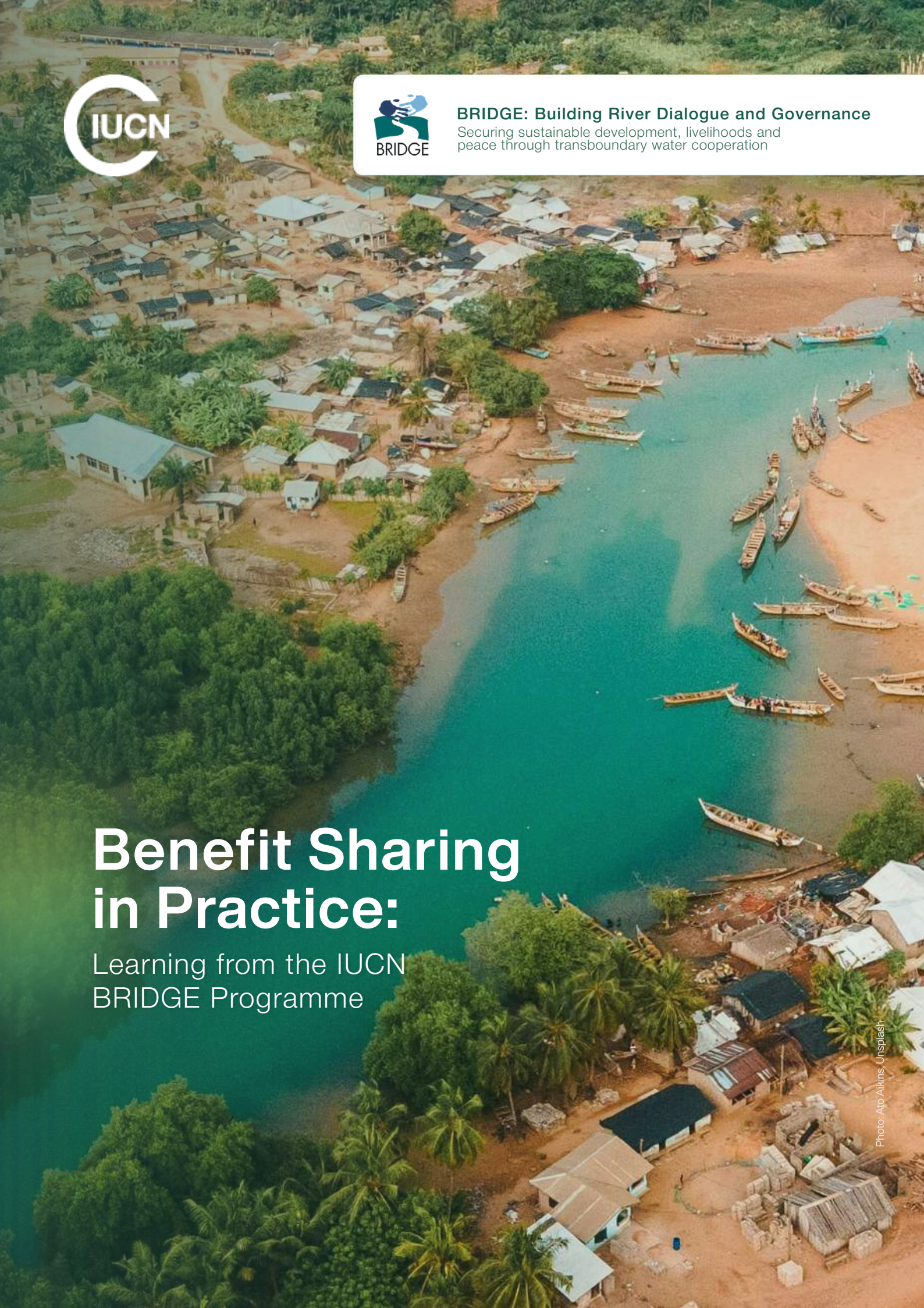


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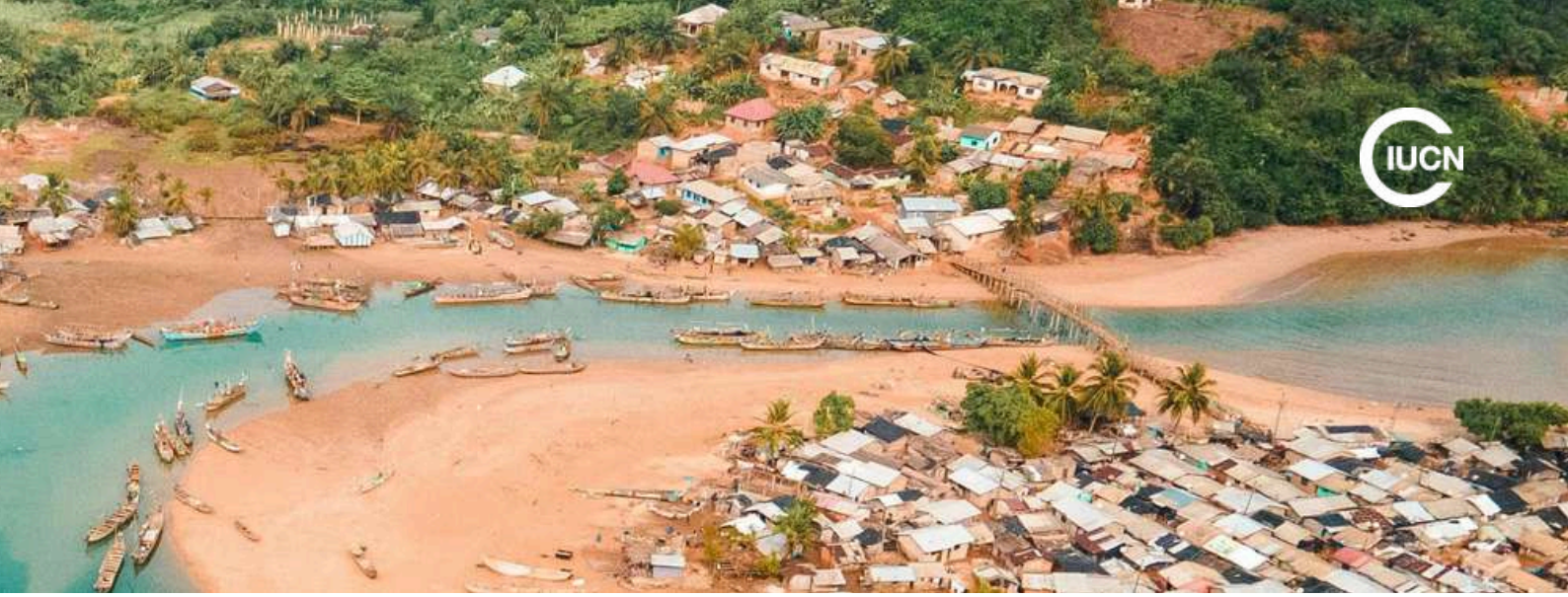
BRIDGE

BRIDGE: Building River Dialogue and Governance
Securing sustainable development, livelihoods and peace through transboundary water cooperation

Benefit Sharing in Practice:

Learning from the IUCN BRIDGE Programme

Photo: Ato Aikins, Unsplash



1. Introduction — Why Benefit Sharing Matters

Water negotiations have traditionally centred on allocation, rights and obligations. While allocation remains fundamental, it is rarely sufficient to capture the wider costs, risks and development opportunities associated with cooperation. Many of the decisions shaping shared basins today are driven by broader governance questions – infrastructure development, climate risk, energy and food security, ecosystem decline, trade, and investment patterns. As these pressures intensify, cooperation often remains reactive, triggered by crises and shaped by national interests rather than proactive negotiation. This exposes the limits of water allocation-focused approaches and strengthens the case for benefit sharing as a way to bring wider interests into a common governance frame.

Benefit sharing is defined as "a governance approach through which countries and stakeholders cooperatively identify, generate and align the economic, social, environmental and risk-reduction benefits linked to a shared watercourse – together with the costs, responsibilities and trade-offs involved – shifting attention from dividing water itself to expanding the benefits that flow from cooperation."

Operationalising benefit sharing remains a relatively new and evolving field, and practitioners, governments and organisations like IUCN are learning and adapting how to apply it in real political and institutional contexts. Drawing on more than a decade of practice through IUCN's BRIDGE programme – and on the conceptual framing provided in the *Sharing the benefits from river basin management. A practitioner's guide (2021)* – this learning brief presents how benefit sharing has emerged in practice, and the factors that are key in shaping its practical application.

Across basins, benefit sharing principles have been promoted, adapted or embedded in different ways, offering a credible practice base for understanding what works and why. A central lesson is that benefit sharing becomes meaningful when viewed through a **multi-level water governance lens**, since benefits and trade-offs are experienced differently across scales. Overall, practice shows that benefit sharing functions less as a fixed sequence of steps and more as a flexible governance logic that must be tailored to political and institutional realities as well as resource availability in the basin.

2. What Emerged in Practice – Learning from Implementation

Over a decade of BRIDGE practice has highlighted the importance of benefit sharing approaches in transboundary cooperation. A more intentional focus over the last four years shows that benefit sharing did not emerge as a single, formalised process, but through the ways cooperation already functioned in each transboundary basin. Three patterns help explain how shared-benefit thinking surfaced in practice and why it took different forms across regions.

1. Benefit sharing leveraging existing cooperation spaces

The strongest examples of benefit-sharing logic emerged where cooperation frameworks were already active. In the **Mono Basin (Benin and Togo)**, work to operationalise the basin charter naturally highlighted the risks, shared responsibilities, and the central role the Mono Basin Authority (MBA) should play. As countries clarified roles, strengthened joint planning and aligned upstream–downstream priorities, they were effectively applying benefit-sharing principles without naming them as such.

A similar dynamic appeared in the **Mano River Basin (Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone)**. Efforts to revitalise the basin organisation and strengthen cooperation on flood management and watershed protection created opportunities to discuss how benefits and responsibilities are distributed across borders. Here too, shared-benefit logic was already embedded in practice, and countries expressed clear interest in deepening this work. This also led to accelerating the implementation of the Mano River Basin Management Office as a specialized entity of the Mano River Union (MRU) dedicated specifically to addressing benefit-sharing issues.

An important South American example comes from **Ecuador and Peru**, where joint basin assessments, mapping, shared information systems, and strengthened local coordination mechanisms helped create a common technical foundation across their nine transboundary river basins. Although the process was framed primarily through integrated water resources management rather than explicit benefit-sharing language, it generated important cooperative benefits, including improved information exchange, stronger institutional trust and enhanced capacity for joint decision-making. These efforts supported bilateral negotiations that culminated in the 2017 establishment of the Binational Commission for the Integrated Management of Transboundary Waters, covering all nine shared basins and providing a formal mechanism for cooperative management of shared water resources.

Across these basins, benefit-sharing logic emerged not simply because agreements existed, but because cooperation was active or activated – institutions met, information was exchanged and practical solutions were worked out together. Formal frameworks helped, but it was the quality and continuity of cooperation that made shared-benefit thinking possible.





2. Technical collaboration opened the door to shared-benefit thinking

In several basins, technical work created the conditions for shared-benefit conversations. In the **Songwe (Malawi and Tanzania)** and **Ruvuma** basins **(Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania)**, coordinated planning around multipurpose infrastructure and watershed management highlighted the interdependence of countries' interests and made shared benefits more visible. Joint studies and scenario discussions helped clarify where risks and opportunities aligned, even before formal benefit-sharing steps were considered. In the **Meghna (Bangladesh and India)**, joint assessments and data exchange played a similar role, enabling countries to identify shared risks and opportunities through technical collaboration and stakeholder exchange rather than political negotiation. This learning-driven process made shared-benefit thinking possible without framing it as a formal distributive negotiation. Even in **Buzi-Pungwe-Save (BuPuSa) (Mozambique and Zimbabwe)**, technical cooperation revealed areas of shared interest but also exposed the limits of what could be advanced without stronger institutional anchoring and clearer expectations from partners. These experiences show that technical collaboration / joint research is not benefit sharing in itself, but it can build the shared evidence, relationships and problem-solving habits that make benefit sharing discussions possible – especially in contexts where political negotiation space is limited.

3. Institutions and joint legal frameworks shaped what was feasible

Institutional arrangements – particularly at the regional level – strongly influenced how far benefit sharing principles could be applied in practice. The clearest example comes from the **Sio–Malaba–Malakisi (SMM) Basin (Kenya and Uganda)**, a sub-basin of the Nile. Here the enabling environment created by the **Nile Equatorial Lakes Subsidiary Action Programme (NELSAP)**, an investment arm of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) made a deeper, more structured process possible. Although the SMM basin does not yet have a formalised bilateral basin organisation nor signed basin agreement, NELSAP provided the regional coordination, co-financing and institutional continuity needed to support detailed analysis and joint decision making which resulted in the prioritisation of the Angololo Multipurpose Dam as an SMM investment priority. With **NELSAP and AUDA-NEPAD, BRIDGE** supported the Angolo Bilateral Agreement which creates a framework for investment in the multi-purpose project. An initial **US$137M** from the African Development Bank and NEPAD-IPPF will take the project forward. This combination of sustained regional leadership, financing and trust building created conditions that were exceptional across the BRIDGE portfolio, demonstrating what is achievable when regional institutions are mature and cooperation spaces are well established, even if basin level institutions and legal agreements are still emerging. SMM stands out as the basin where regional institutional readiness most clearly enabled benefit sharing logic to move beyond dialogue into structured analysis and concrete cooperation outcomes.

3. Insights Into the Complexities of Benefit Sharing

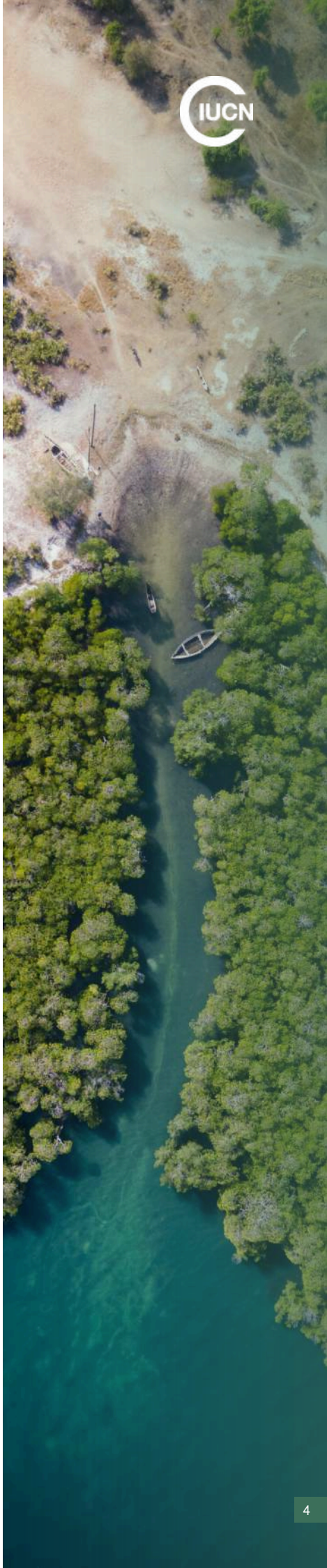
Experience across BRIDGE shows that benefit sharing holds significant promise, but its operationalisation is shaped by a set of recurring challenges that influence what is feasible in real contexts. These are not barriers to cooperation; they are insights into the quality of relationships, trust and institutional interaction that must be understood for benefit sharing to take root.

A. Political-economy dynamics shape how countries interpret and engage with benefit sharing

Across regions, countries approached benefit sharing through the lens of their own governance histories and cooperation priorities. In **BuPuSa**, partners sometimes interpreted benefit sharing as a promise of predefined or guaranteed gains. This expectation emerged during the follow-up to the comprehensive benefit-sharing study, when the distributional implications of different scenarios became more explicit. Once countries realised that benefit sharing did not equate to fixed entitlements, and that some options involved trade-offs – the political space for advancing the discussion narrowed considerably. The experience illustrates how sensitive distributional questions can be, and how easily misunderstandings about "who gets what" can constrain cooperation. It also highlights the importance of careful framing and early alignment on expectations before entering deeper analytical or negotiation processes.

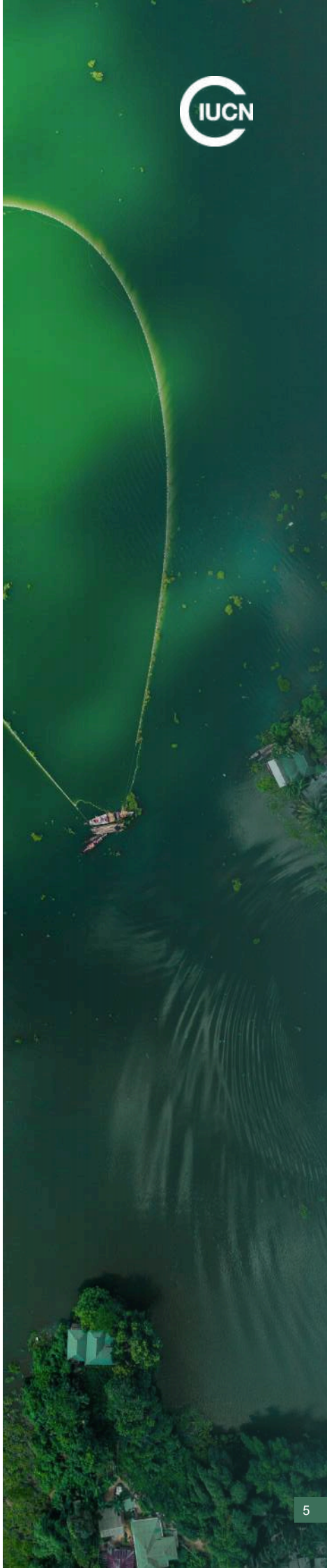
B. Operational gaps limit the ability to move from dialogue to structured analysis

Even where interest was strong, many basins lacked the diagnostics, analytical tools and facilitation support required to translate broad discussions into concrete options. In **Songwe** and **Ruvuma**, coordinated planning around multipurpose infrastructure revealed shared interests but also exposed the need for stronger economic and hydrological analysis to support trade-off discussions. Even in the **SMM,** which can be regarded so far as the most complete application of the benefit-sharing methodology – the depth of facilitation and co-financing mobilised was substantial. These experiences raise important questions about who bears the costs of generating shared benefits and how responsibilities for those costs are distributed. In practice, benefit sharing often implies some degree of cost sharing – financial, institutional or political – which aligns closely with nexus governance principles.



C. Scalability depends on institutional maturity and the ability to tailor approaches

Comprehensive benefit-sharing processes require strong institutions, sustained financing and a high degree of trust. The **SMM** experience demonstrated what is possible under such conditions, but it also showed why this depth is difficult to replicate elsewhere. In the **Mono** and **Mano basins**, the enabling conditions were strong – active cooperation frameworks, clear demand and charters that already embedded shared-benefit logic. What limited progress was not political resistance but the absence of tailored tools, diagnostics and accompaniment to support piloting. In **BuPuSa**, divergent expectations around what benefit sharing implied highlighted the need for lighter, context-specific applications rather than full methodological roll-outs. These experiences point toward the value of learning partnerships, in which knowledge is co-developed with basin actors and grounded in their political and institutional realities. They also show that how benefit sharing is introduced – the framing, language and expectations set – can strongly influence countries' willingness to engage, making careful messaging an essential part of any benefit-sharing dialogue.





4. Multi-Level Water Governance as the Enabling Logic

Experience across BRIDGE shows a consistent pattern: benefit sharing advances more easily when Multi-level Water Governance (MLWG) structures are present, functional or can be leveraged. Benefits, risks and trade-offs are experienced differently at local, basin, national and regional levels – and no single platform can hold the full conversation. In practice, benefit sharing is not a single negotiation, but a set of interactions across levels that shape how shared benefits are understood, negotiated and realised. Multi-level governance provides the institutional framing in which shared-benefit thinking can take root.

The diversity of entry points observed across BRIDGE – from local watershed initiatives to basin charters and regional coordination bodies – reflects this reality. These structures enable alignment across governance levels, ensure that community and water-user perspectives are included, and provide continuity when national-level dialogue becomes insufficient or politically constrained. Where regional organisations were active, they often played a critical role in sustaining cooperation and giving legitimacy to shared-benefit approaches.

This multi-level lens also explains why benefit sharing looks different across basins. At the local level, shared benefits relate to livelihoods, ecosystem services and community governance; at the basin level, they relate to risk reduction, joint planning and shared infrastructure; and at the regional level, they relate to stability, investment pipelines and political legitimacy including cooperation and interdependence. Each level has different incentives, risks and capacities – and benefit sharing emerges where these align. Given that distributional questions sit at the heart of benefit sharing – who gains, who bears costs, who may lose influence – no single level can resolve them.

Multi-level water governance provides a realistic approach to navigate these dynamics in ways that minimise unintended consequences and avoid exclusion of vulnerable groups. Furthermore, a multi-level approach allows benefit sharing to advance incrementally, creating politically acceptable entry points such as joint studies or technical collaboration, and supporting trust building across scales. It also enables distributional discussions to move beyond national ministries, bringing in local actors, basin organisations and regional bodies that can hold different parts of the conversation. Large infrastructure and investment decisions also create their own governance arena, where finance ministries, utilities, development banks and project developers may shape costs and benefits before basin-level actors have fully negotiated them.

The learning is clear: Multi-Level Water Governance is not an add-on to benefit sharing – it provides the enabling environment that makes it possible. Without it, benefit sharing risks becoming either too narrow (confined to national-level negotiation) or too abstract (disconnected from basin realities). With it, benefit sharing becomes something practical and responsive; a way to negotiate shared benefits and work through trade-offs that aligns with the true complexity of transboundary river systems.

5. Where We Go Next – Strengthening Benefit Sharing Practice

Learning across BRIDGE points toward a more grounded and context-sensitive approach to benefit sharing. Much of the benefit-sharing literature remains conceptual, while practical application across politically diverse basins is still limited, uneven and highly context-specific. The most effective progress in BRIDGE occurred where benefit-sharing logic grew out of basin realities rather than being applied as a fixed sequence of steps. These insights confirm that benefit sharing touches the core of governance: how benefits and costs are distributed, who participates in decisions and how institutions manage trade-offs – and that operationalising it requires working with, rather than around, this complexity.

A central lesson is the value of co-developing knowledge with partners and grounding benefit-sharing approaches in multi-level governance. Benefit sharing gains traction when basin organisations, national authorities and local actors explore concepts together and shape them around their priorities, incentives and political realities. Building on more than a decade of experience through BRIDGE – and on the conceptual foundation provided by the *Sharing the benefits from river basin management. A practitioner's guide (2021)* – IUCN will continue to refine and operationalise benefit sharing as a flexible governance logic, strengthening the tools, diagnostics and accompaniment that support countries to identify and pursue shared benefits in ways that reinforce cooperation and resilience across transboundary basins.





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