# Advancing transboundary water cooperation: Fit for principle, insufficient for purpose?

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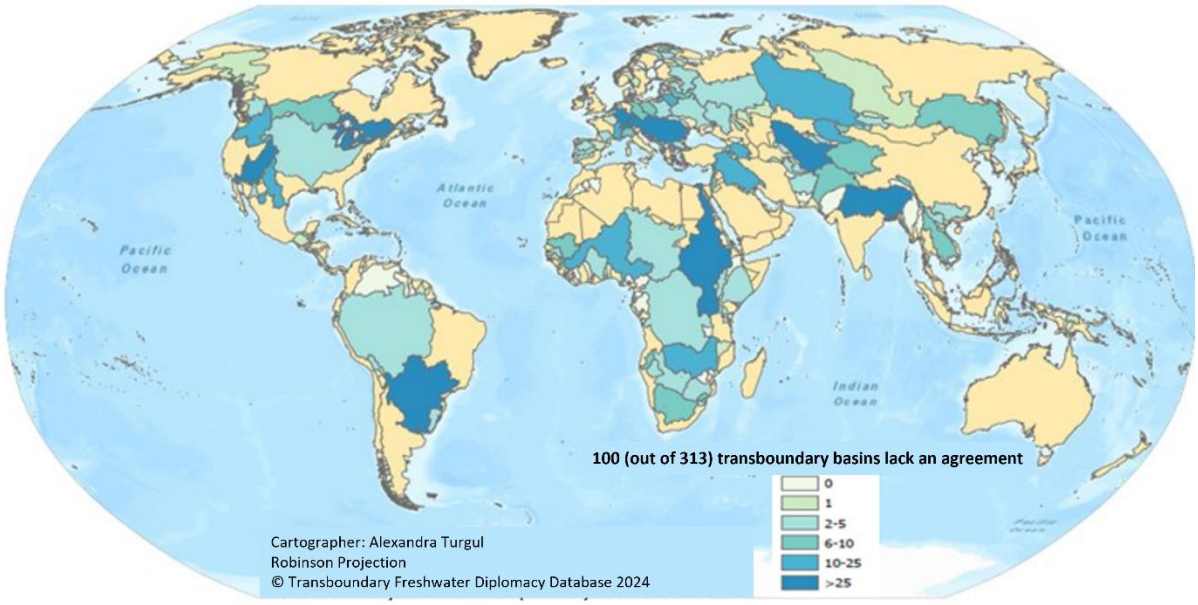
There is much to celebrate in water cooperation on the world's 313 transboundary basins and 450+ shared aquifers. More than 900 agreements have now been signed on international freshwaters. The scope of cooperation has progressively broadened to give more holistic coverage to cross-sector management of shared resources. Treaty implementation is supported by a growing number of permanent river basin organizations with both technical and financial capacities. Channels for multiple stakeholder voices are increasingly incorporated into cooperative water arrangements. Further, there is growing attention to complex global challenges including climate change, drought, floods and plastic pollution in transboundary water management. Generally, there is an increasing recognition that shared waters management encompasses various elements including glaciers, streams, forests, mangroves, as well as sectors such as food and energy that need regulation for people and nature. Drawing on the lessons and experiences from recent decades in transboundary water cooperation work, we present the progress made so far in this field and what needs to be done to achieve global commitments as the SDG 6.5.

## Progress in Water Cooperation

- 68% of transboundary basins have ≥ one international freshwater treaty (IFT).
- Focus of treaties has progressed from border and navigational issues, to infrastructure and hydropower, to issues of water quality and the environment.
- Scope of treaties has shifted from rivers, to include tributaries, basins, groundwater, and other ecosystems.



***Is the pace of progress sufficient?*** Unfortunately, the pace at which water cooperation is advancing is not sufficient to achieve targets outlined in SDG 6.5 and other international calls. Particular shortfalls include:

- Climate change and natural disasters mean less predictable water flows. The rapid pace of external change requires new agreements.
- The area of shared waters covered by an agreement has expanded only marginally in the 21st century. < 50 agreements have been signed in the last decade, several of which apply to watercourses with existing agreements.
- Agreements applying to shared aquifers remain scarce. IGRAC identifies more than 450 shared aquifers; transboundary agreements make specific reference to fewer than 20.
- Conflictive events in shared waters do not appear to be subsiding. Demand for "clean" energy is driving increased development of dams, especially in the global south. Unilateral development of infrastructure is a major conflict driver.
- Sustainable financing to transboundary cooperation remains a pervasive challenge. Financial constraints, as well other factors, may in turn constrain realization of aims and provisions of transboundary water agreements.
- The breadth of data exchange in shared waters is often limited, and frequency can be irregular.
- Institutions are fragmented and lack coordination across sectors (water, environment, climate change) and scales (regional, TB, national, local).

***Do we need a refresh?*** If the lofty objectives found in SDG 6.5 are going to be achieved, focus may need to be directed to aspirational targets as well as practical problems. Agreements may need to be made more flexible to cope with emerging challenges, for example, and more attention may need to be paid to solving water issues in a way that is politically viable. Further, a more profound set of issues may drive challenges faced in shared waters, issues such as: Finance, Visibility, and Value. Reliable financing can constrain cooperative efforts and cause substantial human resource to be directed toward resource mobilization efforts at the expense of practical implementation. RBOs are often not visible and empowered, with eloquent mandates on paper frequently translating into vague roles in practice. Finally, the value placed on basins as a unit is questionable, as virtually all non-RBO structures are aligned to other boundaries.