BRIDGE: Building River Dialogue and Governance

Securing sustainable development, livelihoods and peace through transboundary water cooperation

Water Diplomacy

BRIDGE Thematic Briefing Series

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Photo: © Pianporn Deetes
Salween River

Water Diplomacy

Water diplomacy is a practical process that uses water management as an entry point to facilitate dialogue, negotiation and cooperation between State and non-State actors in shared river, lake and aquifer systems. Its purpose is not only to reduce tensions over water, but to help establish the governance arrangements, institutions, procedures, knowledge base and shared incentives needed to manage transboundary waters effectively over time.

For IUCN, water diplomacy is not limited to high-level interstate negotiation. While formal agreements remain important, effective transboundary cooperation also depends on the engagement of river basin organisations, local authorities, communities, indigenous peoples, technical agencies, civil society, economic sectors, financiers, infrastructure actors and water users. This multilevel approach helps turn political commitments into practical cooperation on the ground and strengthens the ability of cooperation arrangements to remain functional when pressure rises.

Rationale

While transboundary water agreements are negotiated under the authority of sovereign States, their effectiveness depends on whether they can be implemented across the basin in practice. In many shared basins, the challenge is not only reaching agreement, but aligning national mandates, basin institutions, sector interests, local realities, data, finance, accountability and response capacity under conditions of increasing climatic, political and economic stress.

This is where water diplomacy matters. It creates the conditions for informed, inclusive and incremental cooperation across levels. It helps stakeholders articulate shared problems, identify practical solutions, negotiate trade-offs, and establish the institutional and legal arrangements needed to support sustainable development, ecosystem integrity, regional stability and peace.

Today, the task is not only to support cooperation, but to help make cooperation workable, legitimate and durable. This requires stronger institutions, clearer procedures, more credible implementation pathways and the capacity to manage disagreement constructively when trust is fragile and pressure is high.





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Key messages

Water diplomacy is most effective when it moves beyond narrow state-to-state negotiation and engages the wider set of actors who shape water outcomes across a basin.

Effective transboundary cooperation depends on informed dialogue, trusted relationships, credible institutions, and the capacity to adapt agreements and practices as conditions change.

Water governance works best when decisions are taken at the appropriate level and linked across scales, from local water users and municipalities to basin institutions and national governments.

Transboundary water agreements are only the starting point. Lasting cooperation requires implementation mechanisms, data and information exchange, institutional capacity, financing, and periodic review.

Benefit sharing is one of the main practical ways to move beyond zero-sum debates over water allocation and identify broader economic, environmental and social gains from cooperation, while creating incentives for cooperation to remain effective over time.

Inclusive participation strengthens legitimacy and results. Women, indigenous peoples, youth, local communities and basin-level stakeholders need meaningful roles in water decision-making, not only consultation.

Water diplomacy is inherently incremental. Progress often comes through practical steps that build trust, improve understanding and create the conditions for larger agreements and reforms.

> *Effective transboundary water cooperation depends on inclusive, informed and incremental dialogue, backed by credible institutions and practical implementation.*



Photo: IUCN Asia
Barak River, the main source of water for the Meghna River basin, shared by India and Bangladesh

Transboundary water challenges

Most of the world's freshwater resources are shared across political boundaries. They are found in 310 transboundary river and lake basins, approximately 600 shared aquifers, and more than 300 wetlands crossing international borders. Nearly 40% of the world's population lives within shared basins, and more than 90% lives in countries that share water with one or more neighbours.

Managing these waters is complex not only because hydrology is shared, but because authority, incentives, information, investment and accountability are often fragmented across ministries, sectors, institutions and jurisdictions. High-level diplomatic processes alone do not always capture these realities. They may overlook local priorities, implementation constraints, or the perspectives of communities and economic sectors most affected by water decisions.

Water diplomacy provides a framework for addressing this complexity. It helps create transparent, participatory and technically informed processes through which State and non-State actors can jointly understand risks, identify opportunities, and build practical cooperation arrangements for the use and protection of shared waters.

IUCN approach to water diplomacy

For more than two decades, IUCN has helped shape the practice of water diplomacy in Africa, Latin America and Asia through its work on transboundary water governance, particularly under the BRIDGE programme, Building River Dialogue and Governance.

IUCN's approach is grounded in the understanding that effective transboundary water cooperation requires more than agreements between States. It depends on a broader architecture of governance across levels, combining formal treaties, basin agreements and institutions with technical cooperation, local participation, practical dialogue platforms, leadership development and support for implementation. IUCN's added value lies in its ability to act as a neutral convenor and long-term broker of cooperation, working across governance levels to connect political dialogue, technical processes, local realities and institutional reform.

Through BRIDGE, IUCN works through five mutually reinforcing functions: demonstration, learning, dialogue, leadership development and technical support. This allows IUCN to help basin stakeholders identify entry points for cooperation, strengthen legal and institutional arrangements, support benefit sharing processes, improve inclusion, and guide implementation over time.

As pressures on shared waters intensify, this approach is increasingly focused on future-proofing cooperation. In practice, this means helping institutions clarify mandates, strengthen authority, improve financing pathways, and embed practical cooperation procedures such as notification, consultation, joint monitoring, data exchange and agreed response mechanisms. The aim is to help countries and basin actors move from dialogue to effective governance, and from governance to implementation through stronger institutions, benefit sharing, financing pathways and practical results on the ground.

Evidence for action

Opening spaces to bring people together

Water diplomacy begins by creating space for dialogue. In many transboundary basins, progress depends on giving stakeholders opportunities to meet, exchange perspectives, build trust and explore practical solutions before formal negotiations can advance.

Using existing water management capacities and institutions as a starting point, IUCN has supported dialogue platforms at local, national and transboundary levels to help stakeholders identify shared challenges and entry points for cooperation. These platforms may be formal or informal, but they are designed to support informed exchange, strengthen relationships and prepare the ground for more durable governance arrangements.

Building cooperation through benefit sharing and nature-based solutions in the Meghna basin

More than 50 million people, including forest-dependent communities, fishers and farmers, depend on the ecosystem services of the Meghna basin. In this context, IUCN has supported benefit sharing dialogue, joint research and multistakeholder exchange to identify practical opportunities for cooperation between Bangladesh and India.

This work has helped strengthen the evidence base for basin planning, support local and sub-basin dialogue, and identify opportunities where nature-based solutions can improve ecosystem health, reduce risk and enhance shared benefits. Local government engagement has been important in translating dialogue into action, including support for measures that contribute to the recovery of species such as Hilsa.

BRIDGE in the GBM river basins >

Strengthening women's leadership in the Lake Titicaca basin

Lake Titicaca is one of the world's most important high-altitude freshwater systems and a vital source of water, livelihoods and cultural identity for communities in Peru and Bolivia. Climate variability, receding glaciers and growing pressure on water quality and quantity have increased the need for stronger transboundary cooperation.

In response, IUCN has supported a leadership process aimed at strengthening the role of indigenous women in water governance. This has helped increase participation in monitoring water quantity and quality, improve engagement in water governance processes, and strengthen the legitimacy and inclusiveness of transboundary cooperation in the basin.

BRIDGE in Lake Titicaca >



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

Building consensus and reaching agreements

Consensus building is a core part of water diplomacy. Effective cooperation depends on whether basin stakeholders can develop a shared understanding of the problems they face, the trade-offs involved, and the practical options available to them.

This can support a common vision for the use, management and protection of shared waters, whether the goal is broad, such as peace, resilience and sustainable development, or more specific, such as flood management, irrigation, environmental flows or water quality protection. IUCN has supported both bottom-up and top-down processes to help stakeholders define priorities, shape agreements and design the institutional arrangements needed to implement them.

Supporting a binational framework for cooperation between Ecuador and Peru

Ecuador and Peru have a long and complex history, including periods of conflict. Within this context, the two countries agreed to establish a binational commission to govern the nine transboundary basins they share across their full political boundary.

IUCN has supported this process over time, helping guide the development and implementation of the agreement and the supporting legal and institutional arrangements needed to make the commission operational. This work illustrates how water diplomacy can help move from political agreement to practical mechanisms for cooperation, water management and ecosystem protection.

BRIDGE in Ecuador and Peru >

Strengthening governance and implementation in the Buzi, Pungwe and Save basins

The Buzi, Pungwe and Save basins, shared by Mozambique and Zimbabwe, support the livelihoods of more than a million people. The basins face pressures from climate change, floods, droughts and water pollution, including from unsustainable mining practices.

Over several phases of BRIDGE, IUCN has supported the two countries in strengthening their transboundary water governance capacities, including through the development of water agreements, institutional arrangements for a basin organisation, and practical cooperation tools such as data exchange and implementation support. This long-term engagement has also helped create the conditions for wider investment and follow-on support in the basin.

BRIDGE in the BuPuSa >

Incremental steps to water cooperation

Transboundary water cooperation is rarely linear. Progress often depends on a sequence of practical steps that gradually build trust, improve understanding and create the political and institutional space for more formal cooperation.

IUCN's experience shows that modest but deliberate advances, such as joint assessments, dialogue platforms, training, shared planning processes or pilot agreements, can play an important role in building the foundations for wider reform. Water diplomacy therefore needs patience, flexibility and a long-term presence, alongside the ability to respond when political opportunities emerge.



Photo: © IUCN
Final BRIDGE dialogue workshop under the Ruvuma Transboundary Committee, April 2026, in Lilongwe, Malawi

Using benefit sharing to shape investment in the Sio-Malaba-Malakisi basin

The Sio-Malaba-Malakisi basin, a sub-basin of Lake Victoria shared between Kenya and Uganda, faces water quantity and quality challenges linked to poor land and water management, weak coordination and growing pressure on resources.

IUCN has supported binational, multistakeholder benefit sharing dialogues in the basin to identify practical opportunities for cooperation and develop a basin investment framework with prioritised projects. This process has helped show how water diplomacy can move beyond dialogue alone to support benefit sharing, investment planning and more durable institutional arrangements.

BRIDGE in the SMM >

From dialogue to implementation

IUCN's experience shows that effective water diplomacy does not end when an agreement is signed. Durable cooperation depends on whether basin actors have the institutions, legal tools, technical knowledge, leadership, financing and implementation mechanisms needed to carry commitments forward.

In practice, this often means sequencing support over time: opening dialogue, building trust and evidence, shaping agreements and institutions, identifying shared benefits, embedding practical procedures, and supporting implementation and long-term sustainability. BRIDGE does not replace basin institutions or finance infrastructure directly. Its role is to strengthen the governance, diplomacy and institutional systems that make cooperation, risk management and investment possible.

As transboundary water pressures evolve, IUCN is also applying this approach in newer governance frontiers, including emerging basins, shared aquifers, drought coordination and more structured engagement with non-state actors whose decisions increasingly shape basin outcomes. Through BRIDGE, IUCN supports this full pathway: opening dialogue, building trust, strengthening capacities, designing and improving agreements, supporting benefit sharing, promoting inclusion, and helping basin institutions remain functional, legitimate and adaptive over time.



Photo: ©IUCN
John Owino, IUCN Water Programme Officer for East and Southern Africa, presents the SMM work at the Uganda Water and Environment Week in 2019

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