

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP: **A NEW WINNING EQUATION IN THE LAKE CHAD BASIN AND THE MANO AND MONO RIVER BASINS**

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Photo: Kenza Loussouarn

BACKGROUND

In the regions of the Lake Chad Basin, the Mono River Basin, and the Mano River Basin, water is a source of livelihood, work, and social cohesion. At every dawn, women rise with the river: some fetch water for household use, others irrigate small vegetable gardens, wash, process, or smoke fish from its waters before selling it in the markets of Kousséri (Cameroon), N'Djamena (Chad), or Kindia (Guinea). They are the silent custodians of the most precious resource — one that feeds families, meets essential needs, and sustains the economic life of communities. Yet paradoxically, despite their intimate knowledge of every river, every season, and every fluctuation in water levels, their voices remain largely absent from decision-making spaces.

Water resource management and governance frameworks across these three river basins continue to operate largely without women. Their experience deeply rooted in on-the-ground realities has not been translated into political or institutional influence. It is against this backdrop that IUCN's Building River Dialogue and Governance (BRIDGE) project adopted a different perspective :

- What if women became the driving force behind a new water diplomacy?
- What if their daily experience were transformed into strategic expertise ?

These questions gave rise to a series of initiatives aimed at strengthening women's capacities and enabling their full participation in transboundary water governance. Because involving women enriches water management through their knowledge, their culture of sharing, and their central role as caregivers — the starting point of sustainable change. These capacity-building efforts have therefore prepared women to become empowered, competitive, and autonomous actors.

The Mono Basin

It takes its name from the Mono river, which rises in Togo and flows across the country before forming the border with Benin near its mouth. The Mono River Basin includes several lakes, such as Lake Togo, a freshwater lagoon along the Togolese coast, and Lake Ahémé in Benin, which is connected to the Mono lagoon system.

Le Bassin du Mano

The Mano River rises in the mountainous regions of Guinea. It winds along the borders between Liberia and Sierra Leone before flowing into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Mano River Basin encompasses Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire.

The Lake Chad Basin

The Lake Chad Basin plays a crucial role in the food security, economy, and stability of several countries: Chad, Niger, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Algeria, Sudan, Cameroon, and Libya.

In Summary :

Historically underrepresented in water governance, women from the Lake Chad Basin, the Mono River Basin, and the Mano River Basin are now seeking to bridge this gap. The IUCN Building River Dialogue and Governance (BRIDGE Phase 5) project has supported this effort by facilitating the establishment of civil society organisation (CSO) platforms in the Lake Chad and Mono basins, and a basin committee in the Mano Basin. These dialogue platforms bring together all stakeholders, including women's organizations, and open up an unprecedented space, enabling them to play an active role and to influence transboundary water governance..

FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTRE

Water brings people together as much as it puts them to the test

Water-related challenges are rooted in a complex reality where climate change, security, and development intersect. Rivers are drying up, groundwater reserves are shrinking, and growing populations are increasingly dependent on an ever-scarcer resource. Yet at the heart of this crisis lies a persistent social imbalance: the role and place of women in water governance.

This marginalisation does not stem from a lack of interest, competence, or relevance, but rather from a set of deeply entrenched structural barriers. Social norms, first and foremost, confine women to the domestic sphere, making their presence in public decision-making spaces unusual or even contested. Local traditions and customs, often shaped by patriarchal models, perpetuate the perception that women's voices carry little weight in community affairs.

These challenges are compounded by limited access to training, networks, and transboundary dialogue platforms. Very few women are familiar with water governance mechanisms, let alone the international conventions and policies that govern the shared management of river basins.

Finally, economic constraints precarious livelihoods, family responsibilities, and limited mobility further restrict women's opportunities for active participation in decision-making processes.

Increasingly, however, this imbalance is beginning to shift. Workshops, exchanges, and capacity-building programmes are transforming women from passive beneficiaries into engaged actors aware of their potential and ready to influence decisions and assert their leadership in water management. The stage is now set for lasting transformation, with women poised to take centre stage in shaping the water narrative across the basins concerned.



"Today, we are able to engage and more effectively explain to religious leaders, women, and young people how to protect water resources, how to use them rationally, and how to avoid waste."

Kellou Sidick, *Association for the Promotion of Women and Girls of Grand Kanem*

WOMEN AS DRIVERS OF INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GOVERNANCE OF THE WATERS OF LAKE CHAD AND THE MONO AND MANO RIVERS

What Tools Are Needed to Achieve This ?

Over the course of the workshops organised by the BRIDGE project between 2023 and 2025, a genuine transformation took place. Women from the various countries of the Lake Chad Basin and the Mano River Basin gradually moved beyond the marginal roles to which they had long been confined, emerging instead as confident and determined leaders. These workshops were held in key cities such as Kousséri and Maroua (Cameroon), N'Djamena (Chad), Kindia (Guinea-Conakry), and Monrovia (Liberia), each time bringing together participants from a wide range of community structures and local organisations.

At the outset, many participants believed that water, water policies, and water governance were the sole responsibility of technicians and decision-makers. However, through interactive sessions including presentations, role-playing exercises, discussion groups, and group work, they discovered that their daily experience as water users, previously undervalued, was in fact a strategic asset in water management. They learned to identify the barriers holding them back, to understand decision-making processes, and to express their ideas with confidence.

Free Voices, Unleashed Energy !

Within these frames of exchange, every voice began to matter. Some women spoke publicly for the first time before mixed audiences of decision-makers and technical

experts, sharing their local experiences and community initiatives. They debated, envisioned, and tested practical solutions to better integrate women's voices into management committees and to promote projects that improve access to safe drinking water.

The workshops also helped break down symbolic barriers and strengthen collective trust. Participants explored their leadership potential, learned to address complex challenges, think creatively, and make collective decisions. They developed action plans to promote their own initiatives and those of their communities, in connection with dialogue platforms such as PAGRN–Chad and PLACODEPIL, thereby reinforcing their role in water governance.

Gradually, these women ceased to be mere beneficiaries. They became empowered actors, aware of their influence and capable of shaping decisions at both local and transboundary levels.

Observing these women exchange ideas, plan collectively, and support one another reveals that something lasting is being built: a new generation of women leaders who will carry their communities' voices into all arenas where the future of water in the basin is being defined. Through their engagement, water is no longer seen solely as a resource to be managed, it becomes a lever for dialogue, development, and social transformation, heralding a lasting impact across the three basins.

"Women have developed greater self-confidence and are now affirming their right to access land; they are participating more decisively in decision-making processes within their communities."

Idriss Malloum Limane, , *President of the Chadian branch of the Platform of Natural Resource Management Actors of the Lake Chad Basin*

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN WATER DIPLOMACY

Today's Achievements and Tomorrow Prospects

Women from the Lake Chad Basin, the Mano River Basin, and the Mono River Basin have acquired practical skills in leadership, water diplomacy, and active participation in water governance. Through training sessions and peer exchanges, patterns of water use and the barriers limiting women's participation have been identified and better understood.

Practical leadership sessions, negotiation exercises, and transboundary dialogues have enabled beneficiaries to strengthen their decision-making skills, water diplomacy capacities, and understanding of water governance. They now have a solid command of the principles of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), actively participate in national and transboundary platforms, develop projects eligible for funding, and carry their communities' voices into regional governance spaces. These achievements enhance their legitimacy and pave the way for increased women's representation in the sustainable management of water resources.

A set of incentive mechanisms has been developed to encourage women's participation in water governance, opening the way to stronger female representation in decision-making spaces, including :

1. Dedicated transboundary dialogues for women, fostering their expression and engagement;
2. Creation of women-specific spaces within national and regional platforms (PLACODEPIL*, PAGRN–PTBLT**, PTGRN–SBCL***);
3. Selection of women-led initiatives eligible for IUCN support, strengthening motivation and commitment;
4. Practical exercises and simulations, enabling participants to experiment with influential roles;
5. Leadership and IWRM training, equipping more than one hundred participants with skills in communication, advocacy, and negotiation.

These achievements lay the foundations for increased women's representation in the sustainable and participatory management of water resources.

The principles of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and the objectives of the Building River Dialogue and Governance (BRIDGE) project are now well understood by more than one hundred participants from community-based, civil society, and institutional backgrounds. These women have also acquired communication, negotiation, and advocacy tools enabling them to influence public policies, participate in transboundary dialogues, and integrate networks of IWRM stakeholders.

***PLACODEPIL :** Consultation and Dialogue Platform for Logone Stakeholders (Cameroon)
****PAGRN-PTBLT :** Platform of Actors for Natural Resource Management (Chadian Part of the Lake Chad Basin)
*****PTGRN-SBCL :** Transboundary Platform for Natural Resource Management – Chari–Logone Sub-Basin

Strengthening Transboundary Women's Platforms in the Lake Chad Basin

The joint participation of women's organisations from Cameroon and Chad in the "Dialogue on Water Diplomacy and Women's Participation in the Management of the Lake Chad Basin" (Kousséri, May 2025) marked a turning point.

Why this example is significant :

- It brought together the two national platforms—PLACODEPIL (Cameroon) and PAGRN–PTBLT (Chad)—within a shared framework for women-led transboundary cooperation;
- Women jointly developed concrete scenarios to strengthen their involvement in Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM);
- One of the key outcomes of this workshop was the identification of at least three women-led initiatives to be technically and financially supported by IUCN, demonstrating a tangible opening toward competitive grant funding, including :
  - dissemination of the Lake Chad Basin Water Charter (second phase of awareness-raising);
  - valorisation and development of spirulina;
  - flood risk reduction through the promotion of local techniques used by the Mousgoum communities;
  - an exchange visit with platforms affiliated with the Mono Basin Authority, which are highly advanced in IWRM implementation.
  - This framework also enabled participants to define the modalities of their participation in the 2025 International Forum on the Development of the Lake Chad Region, representing a first instance of institutional recognition of their regional leadership.

"Women's participation strengthens water governance and enables more balanced decision-making. We intend to put in place indicators such as gender parity audits to promote the role of women in water management."

Loumouda Suzanne,

REGEFAC – Central Africa

Two women-led initiatives will be selected to receive technical and financial support from the BRIDGE Phase 5 project, implemented by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), marking a first instance of institutional recognition of the value of projects led by women.

The first initiative focuses on strengthening women's leadership and participation in transboundary water governance, while the second is oriented toward sustainable community-based water management and environmental awareness-raising.

Local initiatives have emerged, including awareness-raising campaigns, mentoring programmes for young women, and community-based projects aimed at ensuring equitable access to water and improving urban sanitation.

Beyond the numbers, these actions reflect a profound shift in mindsets

Women are now recognised as legitimate partners in decision-making processes related to the management of water resources. Their influence has also been reflected in the allocation of a dedicated space at the 2025 International Forum on the Development of the



Lake Chad Region, a strong symbol of institutional recognition.

The story of this transformation does not end here

- Participants in the workshops have committed to establishing a regional network of women water leaders, designed to pool experiences, conduct advocacy efforts, and support future generations.
- Mentoring and experience-sharing programmes are also being prepared to encourage the involvement of young women and local women's organisations.
- For its part, the Building River Dialogue and Governance (BRIDGE) project aims to sustain these achievements through continuous training, institutional support, the provision of grants, and enhanced visibility for local initiatives.
- Beyond capacity-building, this momentum is driving a lasting cultural and political shift, marked by the recognition of women's strategic role in building water-related peace and strengthening regional cooperation.

64 Women Sensitised and Trained under BRIDGE Phase 5 through Capacity-Building Workshops on Women's Leadership: Outcomes and Beneficiary Profiles

N°	Event and Location	Participants (Number & Profile)	Proposed actions to enhance the integration of women's voices within management committees and to promote projects focused on access to safe drinking water
1	**Mano Basin (Guinea, May 2025) :** Capacity-Building Workshop on Leadership and Women's Participation in Transboundary Water Management in the Kolenté and Kaba River Basins	A total of 26 participants (20 women) took part in the event including representatives of : - Government administrations responsible for Energy, Hydrocarbons, Environment, and Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation; - Universities; - Associations and community groups from Kindia (Tamisso-Yigui, Dennaballo of Madina-Oula, and Bamban).	▪ Engagement of women's groups in management committee activities; ▪ Disseminate legal and regulatory texts relating to environmental and water resources, and ensure compliance. ▪ Community awareness-raising on sustainable water management and sanitation; ▪ Capacity building of stakeholders and users on riverbank restoration and degraded land rehabilitation techniques.

2	**Lake Chad Basin (Kousseri, May 2025) :** Dialogue on Water Diplomacy and Women's Participation in the Management of the Lake Chad Basin	The meeting brought together 22 participants, including 16 women, representing : - Women's organisations belonging to national platforms; - Sectoral institutions from both countries responsible for Water and Women's Affairs.	▪ Strengthening women's leadership through sustainable financing of women-led initiatives (over a 5–10 year period) to stimulate leadership and ensure on-the-job training; ▪ Enhancing women's technical capacities in project design and project management; ▪ Raising public awareness of the Lake Chad Basin Water Charter through platform-led initiatives conducted between 2020 and 2021, which resulted in encouraging results in terms of behavioral change among communities.
3	**Lake Chad Basin (N'DJAMENA, September 2024) :** Capacity-Building Workshop on Leadership and Women's Participation in Transboundary Water Management in Chad	The event brought together 33 participants, including 25 women, all of whom were members of PAGRN-BLT (the Platform of Natural Resource Management Stakeholders on the Chadian side of the Lake Chad Basin).	▪ Capacity strengthening of women's organizations to address persistent structural challenges; ▪ Capacity building of women's organizations on water governance regulations within the Chadian platform; ▪ Support and involve women engaged in natural resource management in decision-making processes; ▪ Inclusion of women leaders in Cameroon–Chad consultation processes on water management in the Lake Chad Basin (Chadian side)
4	**Bassin du Mono (d'Alédjo Partago) 2025 :** Build the capacities of the Local Water Committee (CLE prefiguration committee of Alédjo Partago) and support the establishment of a formal Local Water Committee at the source of the Mono River in Alédjo Partago.	36 participants, including 33 women, all members of the Local Water Committee (LWC) prefiguration committee established in 2022 under the PRE-ACO project. This committee specifically brought together : ▪ Local authorities; ▪ Technical services; ▪ Women's and youth associations; ▪ Community-based organizations.	Establishment and formalisation of the Local Water Committee (LWC) of Alédjo Partago, fostering ownership and shared responsibility for participatory water management within the basin.



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Drawing on more than a decade of experience in implementing the *Building River Dialogues and Governance (BRIDGE)* programme across more than twenty transboundary river basins worldwide, IUCN has developed a water diplomacy approach grounded in strengthening water governance capacities, with the aim of achieving effective water management, security, and peace. BRIDGE seeks to catalyse the sustainable management and development of water resources, ensure water supply and sanitation, preserve biodiversity, and strengthen transboundary cooperation.

Now in its fifth phase, the programme consolidates the knowledge and expertise acquired during previous phases in order to support ongoing key negotiation processes, in which IUCN plays a facilitative and mediating role to promote transboundary agreements at multiple scales and strengthen institutions. IUCN will strive to maximise the impact of BRIDGE Phase V by aligning programme outcomes with a set of strategic priorities and linking them to specific regions and river basins. This approach aims to ensure solutions tailored to the diverse needs of BRIDGE sites. These efforts are complemented by a range of global and regional interventions in response to the United Nations' call to accelerate the implementation of SDG 6.5. BRIDGE delivers solutions adapted to specific geographic priorities while responding globally to the urgent need to accelerate cooperation over transboundary waters.

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