

Water Cooperation

Information brief



"With transboundary river basins and aquifer systems representing almost half the earth's surface, water cooperation is vital for peace."

Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General at the Rio+20 Conference 2012

WHAT is water cooperation?

"Water cooperation" refers to the peaceful management and use of freshwater resources at local, national, regional and international levels among various players and sectors. The concept of water cooperation entails working together towards a common goal, in a way that is mutually beneficial.

History has often shown that the vital nature of freshwater is a powerful incentive for cooperation, compelling stakeholders to reconcile even the most divergent views. Water more often unites than divides peoples and societies.

Quick facts

Since 1948, there were only 37 incidents of acute conflict between riparian states over water involving violence. In the same period, 295 international water agreements were signed (OSU 2011).

WHY is water cooperation important?

Water is a cross-cutting issue which demands attention at all levels and across sectors. Water issues involve many stakeholders with conflicting and competing needs and cross multiple physical, political and jurisdictional boundaries (Rio+20). Cooperation is necessary to deal with issues such as water allocation decisions, upstream and downstream impacts of water pollution and water abstraction, construction of infrastructures, overexploitation, deciding on financing management of water resources and water services.

Water cooperation contributes to:

- **Poverty reduction and equity**

More inclusive governance of water and cooperation between different users can help overcome unequal distribution of water and increase access to water, which is essential for achieving basic human needs and reaching the Millennium Development Goals.

- **Economic benefits**

Cooperation in the value chain and between local stakeholders can overcome the challenges of increasing water scarcity and uncertainty that industries are facing.

- **Preserving water resources and protecting the environment**

Cooperation helps to exchange data and information and find joint management strategies.

- **Promoting peace**

Cooperation on water can help overcome cultural, political and social tensions and build trust between different groups: water communities, regions or states.

Quick facts

More than half of the world's population depends daily upon water resources shared by more than one country (INBO 2012).

40% of the world's population lives in river and lake basins that comprise two or more countries and 90% lives in countries that share basins (UN-Water 2008).



What are the CHALLENGES?

Conflicts can arise between various players at different levels on a range of issues. Challenges for water cooperation include:

- **Water demand.** Given the cross cutting nature of water resources, there are competing demands for its use between sectors, nations, communities, urban and rural environments.
- **Water quality and water quantity.** Concerns on water quality and water quantity can form a challenge for water cooperation. The upstream use and treatment of water can have consequences for downstream users.
- **Infrastructure development.** Infrastructure development such as dams may provide significant benefits for society, but can also negatively impact surrounding ecosystems and communities.
- **Climate change.** Climate change is expected to add to pressures on water resources in many areas with fluctuations in water availability and water quality.
- **Economic interests.** Economic interests over water and its use can cause conflicts that change the balance of power in a region.
- **Financing.** Investment needs for sustainable financing of transboundary water management institutions often exceed the resources available to riparian countries.

Quick facts

Transboundary freshwaters cover 45% of the world's land mass, connecting two or more countries in water resources above (surface) and below (groundwater) the earth's surface.

(Sources: UNW-DPAC 2012, UNESCO-IHP 2012)

What are the BENEFITS of water cooperation?

Examples of benefits include:

- Cooperation can **avert costs** by reducing tensions and disputes between neighbours (e.g. Euphrates, Indus and Jordan Basins).
- Cooperation at the basin level can promote **efficient techniques** for water storage and distribution, expanding irrigation acreage (e.g. Indus Water Treaty).
- Cooperation at the basin level can enhance **flood management**.
- Cooperation around international watercourses paves the way for **regional cooperation in other domains** of politics, economics, environment and culture.
- Cooperation between municipalities and private providers can stimulate **resource mobilization** (e.g. Water and Sanitation Pooled Fund in India).
- Cooperative management of water resources can improve **ecological management** and produce environmental benefits such as improved water quality.
- Cooperation over shared water resources enables authorities to jointly face common **external threats** (e.g. climate risks, malaria).

Quick facts

Disasters can be a catalyst for cooperation. The Chernobyl disaster resulted in a joint action by governments to improve the river quality.

(Sources: UNW-DPAC 2012, World Bank 2012, GEF 2011)



HOW to promote water cooperation?

- **A multilevel, inclusive approach for water cooperation**

Water resources management issues must be addressed at the local, national and at appropriate regional and international levels. All stakeholders should be engaged, paying special attention to the livelihoods of the poor and most vulnerable people.

- **Innovative approaches for water cooperation**

Mobilizing political will and commitment to address water issues worldwide remains crucial. Equally important are forward thinking and a willingness to consider innovative ways to approach local, regional and international cooperation.

WHICH TOOLS can be used to promote water cooperation?

At all levels, cooperation requires the application of a wide range of tools and mechanisms, such as:

- Legal frameworks and institutional arrangements.
- Exchange of information, joint monitoring and assessment.
- Incentives for cooperation.
- Mediation and dispute resolution mechanisms
- Cost and benefit sharing.
- Financing.

Quick facts

60% of the world's 276 international river basins lack any type of cooperative management framework. (OSU 2011)