Transboundary Water Governance



Recommendations

Headline Recommendation

Implement integrated approaches to water management at the local, national, and transboundary levels, strengthen water governance, and ensure gender and social inclusion.

Detailed Recommendations (Transboundary Water Governance)

- Share water in river basins and aquifers, pursue legal frameworks for international cooperation, and establish joint institutions for transboundary water governance.
- Adopt common standards for water data collection, sharing, and analysis on transboundary waters.

Challenges

A challenge to be turned into a factor for stability across the globe. Worldwide more than 286 river basins (TWAP 2016) and around 600 aquifers (IGRAC and UNESCO IHP, 2015) cross sovereign borders. 154 States have territory in these basins, including 30 countries that lie entirely within them. Without transboundary water cooperation inclusive sustainable development is severely curtailed, and risks to peace and security increased.

40% of the world population lives within shared river basins and almost 90% of the world population lives in countries sharing transboundary waters. The 14 transboundary river basins with the highest levels of economic dependence on water resources collectively comprise almost 1.4 billion people (TWAP - UNEP-DHI and UNEP, 2016).

Rationale of collective action. As international waters can be catalytic agents, transboundary water cooperation has often resulted in improved wider economic integration between riparian states. Transboundary water cooperation can, directly or indirectly, act as a catalyst to improve international trade, economic development, navigation, energy generation, wildlife conservation, and broader regional integration. Transboundary water cooperation arrangements also facilitate investments by providing a stable and reliable legal and institutional environment for investors (UNECE, 2015).

Agreements and institutional arrangements, such as river basin organizations, can offer an important means by which to manage transboundary waters in an equitable and sustainable way, and in turn, support prosperity, and maintain peace and security. More than 450 transboundary water treaties have been signed since 1820, with the record showing that these instruments offer an important means to avoid, and where necessary resolve, disputes between states (UNEP, OSU and FAO, 2002).

The 1997 Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of Transboundary Watercourses and the 1992 Helsinki Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) as well as the UNILC's Draft Articles on the Law of Transboundary Aquifers recognise the importance of states establishing agreements and joint institutional arrangements on their shared waters, and provide guidance for doing so.

Shortfalls of action. However, around 60% of transboundary river basins worldwide still lack any cooperative arrangement (UNEP, OSU and FAO, 2002). In addition, existing transboundary water treaties and institutions are often weak in terms of their mandate, design, resources, and enforcement mechanisms. Only around one-third of multilateral basins have treaties signed by at least three states, only 11 basins have treaties that include all riparians, and only about a quarter of all treaties cover the entire basin to which they apply.

The situation is even worse for transboundary aquifers where very few agreements exist: only six aquifer agreements have been adopted at the international level and two agreements regarding the sharing of transboundary ground waters between sub-national / local authorities.

Climate change as an accelerator. Flood and drought-related problems of water and ecosystems quality will increase. Disasters and climate impacts do not stop at borders. Already today, about two billion people are living in water stressed areas. By 2030, mostly due to climate change, it is projected that 54 million people will be exposed to river floods. Many transboundary basins are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts across the Middle East, Africa, Central Europe and Central Asia, Southern Europe, Asia, and Latin America. In the absence of cooperative arrangements, climate change impacts may increase tensions, fragility, and conflicts over dwindling water resources between countries and sectors, and affect growth and economic development, with substantial GDP losses. Areas of high groundwater development stress in transboundary aquifers are likely to more than double between now and 2050 (TWAP- UNESCO-IHP and UNEP, 2016). New hotspots will be particularly driven by population pressure.

Principles for approaching the problems

Transboundary water cooperation has local, regional and global meaning.

Transboundary water cooperation offers opportunities to realize and capitalise on the wider benefits e.g. strengthen resilience to climate change and prevent and resolve conflicts over water resources.

Recognition of the importance of transboundary cooperation is a **prerequisite for realizing the water related SDG targets** and the broader Sustainable Development Goals. Therefore, its significance goes beyond water sharing itself.

A common basis for decision-making requires harmonized (if not standardized), monitoring mechanisms, compatible assessment methods and data management, as well as uniform reporting procedures.

Exchange of information – including on water allocation, floods, and pollution caused by accidents - on infrastructure projects that could affect downstream countries, on extreme events (such as floods and droughts), as well as on operations such as hydropower, navigation and irrigation, and the chemical and quantitative status of groundwater resources (TWAP- UNESCO-IHP and UNEP, 2016) – is vital to build trust and a shared vision among riparian countries.

Elaboration of common projects at the transboundary level, involving more riparian countries, has the potential to reduce risks of investments and be beneficial for fundraising for infrastructure development at local and regional levels.

Tracking progress, fostering assistance, and increasing accountability help support shared benefits and political will for cooperation.

Contributions of the Panel

To refine its thinking the Panel has engaged in consultations with relevant think tanks, research institutions, river basin organizations, UN agencies, the World Water Council, the OECD, the Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace, and civil organizations, and used the platforms of the Budapest Water Summit 2016, the Stockholm International Water Week 2017.

Findings and conclusions

- The Panel encourages all countries sharing river basins and aquifers to pursue legal frameworks of international cooperation on transboundary water governance be it the two global UN Conventions and/or other relevant Basin agreements.
- The Panel encourages the starting phase of development aid (where appropriate) to be regarded as a stimulus for capacity building on financially sustainable transboundary water cooperation, aiming at local ownership of participating states of the river basin.
- The Panel promotes financing approaches and tools that reward cooperation over unilateral actions in shared river basins.
- The Panel recommends the development of donor coordination mechanisms in transboundary basins.
- The Panel endorses the OECD principles of water governance.
- The Panel calls for development of basin agreements and the establishment of joint institutions, such as of transboundary river basin organisations where these are missing.
- The Panel calls for "sub-basin" agreements where these could add to meeting the overall objectives of the Basin institution.
- The Panel encourages states sharing transboundary waters to adopt common standards for relevant water and water use data and analyses, and share the resultant data and research.
- The Panel encourages the involvement of the representatives of all relevant stakeholders into transboundary cooperation processes.
- The Panel encourages countries to develop basin-wide vulnerability assessments and adaptation strategies to address disasters and climate change.