



**International Hydro-diplomacy:  
Building and Strengthening Transboundary Water Cooperation**

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*Policy Recommendations*

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## About Us

### Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

Freedom, justice, and solidarity are the basic principles underlying the work of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). With 107 offices abroad and projects in over 120 countries, our European and International Cooperation contributes to the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, and an ecologically oriented social market economy. The topics of Energy Security, Climate Change, and Natural Resources Management are of central importance for KAS. With the four regional programmes on energy security and climate change in Latin America (Lima), Sub-Saharan Africa (Nairobi), Asia and the Pacific (Hong Kong) and the Middle East and North Africa (Rabat) and the Multinational Development Dialogue based in Brussels, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has been contributing since 2015 to strengthening the supra-regional dialogue on the topics of energy, climate and environmental policy in the respective regions. It is a central concern to accompany current discussions, to develop solutions and to promote concrete projects of sustainable action in politics, business and society. All KAS regional programs provide policy advice on the Water-Security-Development- Governance nexus and include local, national, and international stakeholders in solution-oriented multi-stakeholder dialogues.

Our Climate and Energy Programme in Brussels connects the voices from different regions with European Policy and Decision Makers and helps to bridge voices and to contribute to policy making which includes local practices and experiences. Access to water is developing more and more into a determining element in geopolitics since most of the borders between states develop along rivers and lakes, which separate different water basins. Often, a river considered the natural frontier of communities, takes on symbolic value and determines geopolitical perceptions and rivalries. Rapid population growth, urbanization, climate change, and inefficient water resources management have led to increased water scarcity and limited access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods in many parts of the world. Regional cooperation based on strong and democratic regional water institutions for KAS is therefore a prerequisite to build trust, align and mediate diverging interests and jointly manage water across borders and regions.

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## Executive Summary

Over the last decades, exacerbating climate change, shifting water patterns, and depleting groundwater resources, coupled with rising population growth, have all resulted in significant socio-economic and political implications around the globe. Over 2 billion people in the world currently lack access to safe drinking water and, if projections are to hold true, over half of the world's population will reside in water-stressed areas by 2025. This heightens concerns over the world's preparedness for the multi-faceted ramifications stemming from intensifying water insecurity. There is still limited policy foresight and sagacity when it comes to effectively managing and governing water resources and the challenge is even more magnified in the case of transboundary water resources.

Water resources which cross national boundaries are particularly vulnerable to water insecurity and water-induced conflicts due to competing national demands and interests of riparian countries. To this end, hydro-diplomacy and cooperation can play a critical role in building and strengthening transboundary water governance institutions, promoting inter-and intra-regional connectivity, and developing a more nuanced sense of decision-making among all stakeholders. Hydro-diplomacy, as we understand it, involves a set of skills, tools, and strategies that enable stakeholders, specifically at a political level, to negotiate and mediate water-related disputes peacefully and achieve sustainable and equitable management of water resources. Much of hydro-diplomacy's success is often contingent on efficient transboundary water governance institutions or River Basin Organizations (RBOs) that can facilitate collective action and implementation of effective water governance, promote integrated water resources management, and ensure the participation and representation of all stakeholders, including marginalized and vulnerable groups.

This paper lays out key recommendations and findings from the third iteration of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Stimson Center's high-level dialogue series on Water Security and International Hydro-diplomacy held in November 2022, in Brussels, Belgium. The discussants, through extensive analysis and evaluation, worked on a set of recommendations aimed toward policymakers and all water stakeholders on how to build shared understanding, facilitate capacity-building, strengthen transboundary water cooperation, and proactively engage in hydro-diplomacy.

## Key Policy Recommendations

- **Building and Strengthening Institutions:**

The establishment of institutions and joint bodies such as River Basin Organizations (RBOs) or transboundary water commissions can provide a platform for greater cooperation, coordinated efforts, and more nuanced decision-making. However, for these institutions to perform effectively, the following crucial elements must be considered:

- Development and implementation of a legal framework that clearly defines the roles, responsibilities, and authority of the RBOs and river commissions. This legal framework should also promote transparency, accountability, and greater stakeholder participation.
- Mobilization of financial resources by contracting member countries to help build the institutional capacity of RBOs and sustain the implementation of institutional arrangements. Strong commitments by countries can further facilitate access to international funds, in the form of financial aid and technical assistance, for more advantageous transboundary cooperation efforts.
- Regular cross-sectoral engagement as well as the participation of women, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups to ensure that all perspectives and interests are included within the decision-making process.
- Inter-regional or cross-basin collaboration and coordination for promoting greater connectivity, sharing of best practices, exchanging skills and experiences, and supporting integrated water resources management.

- **Data, Information-sharing, and Connectivity:**

- Promote information sharing which includes data, best practices, and lessons learned to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of water governance.
- Develop basin-wide information and a standardized data exchange system that can be easily accessed by all riparian countries.
- Capacitate RBOs and river commissions with effective Early Warning Systems (EWS) to mitigate the impacts of any water-related disasters such as river flooding and to develop an immediate rescue and relief plan.
- Enable resources and efforts to develop a joint portal or hub for information access, exchange, and peer-to-peer communication between different basins with similar challenges.

- **Monitoring and Evaluation:**

- Develop and implement a monitoring and evaluation system to track progress towards achieving sustainable development goals, water security, transboundary cooperation, and identify areas for improvement. This also means placing a stronger emphasis on the reporting on SDG indicator 6.5.2 under the UNECE Water Convention.

- Increasingly pay attention to developing joint monitoring and joint risk assessment systems to support disaster risk reduction on the transboundary basin level.

- **Regional Cooperation:**

Promote regional cooperation and partnerships through RBOs, river commissions, and other channels to address cross-cutting issues such as climate change and disaster risk reduction, promote knowledge-sharing, and enhance the resilience of water resources. This builds on the idea of connectivity discussed earlier.

- **International Conventions and Frameworks:**

Highlight the significance of international commitments on transboundary water cooperation and conservation, particularly the 1992 UNECE Water Convention and the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention.<sup>12</sup> Equally important to recognize are the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration for 2021–2030.

- **Political Will:**

Political support at all levels is essential to driving action and advancing effective water management and shared resource governance. Without political will, it has historically been difficult to sustain a commitment to the water sector and the situation is even more challenging on the transboundary resource front where unilateral approaches often supersede cooperative endeavors. There is an urgent need for transparent, regular, and interactive dialogues between political leaders coupled with expert-level exchanges that can translate into actionable solutions.

- **Stakeholder Engagement:**

It is imperative to understand that successful transboundary water management cannot be achieved without coordination, collaboration, and cooperation across sectors and a range of actors. The active participation of local communities, different gender groups, youth, and indigenous peoples, in addition to other key stakeholders—scientists, engineers, academics, thought leaders, CSOs, business leaders, and media—in transboundary water governance and decision-making is essential for ensuring equitable and sustainable water management. To enhance cooperation and develop a win-win mindset for a sustainable and secure water future, it is necessary to create and maintain a platform for continued political and diplomatic dialogues in tandem with other multi-stakeholder consultations.

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<sup>1</sup> *Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes*, Helsinki, 17 March 1992, *United Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 1936, No. 52106, p. 269, available from [https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=XXVII-5&chapter=27&clang=\\_en](https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXVII-5&chapter=27&clang=_en).

<sup>2</sup> *Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigable Uses of International Watercourses*, New York, 17 August 1997, *United Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 2999, No. 33207, p. 77, available from [https://treaties.un.org/pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280025697&clang=\\_en](https://treaties.un.org/pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280025697&clang=_en).

- **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):**

PPPs can provide a powerful mechanism for addressing the challenges facing transboundary rivers as they bring together the expertise and resources needed to drive action and change. By working in cooperation, governments and the private sector can create innovative solutions to addressing water challenges and promoting sustainable water management:

- Governments can enable the creation of favorable regulatory and financial frameworks which can incentivize greater private-sector partnerships. This can include tax incentives for private sector investment in water management, establishing a predictable regulatory environment for PPPs, and setting up accessible water funds.
- Governments can promote transparent and inclusive decision-making processes and ensure that the needs and perspectives of all stakeholders are considered.

A key idea that emerged from the November 2022 dialogue was that of Public-Private-Civic-Partnerships, which spoke to the active involvement of civic representatives and civil society organizations (CSOs). CSOs, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs), play a pivotal role by representing the interests of local communities and ensuring that their perspectives and needs are considered. The following are some ways in which CSOs can lend a valuable hand to water management and cooperation efforts:

- Sharing valuable expertise and information on local conditions as well as helping monitor and report on water management practices. This in turn ensures greater transparency and accountability.
- Provide avenues for public participation and stakeholder engagement in water management decisions. By engaging with local communities, youth, gender groups, and other stakeholders, CSOs can help to build trust and cooperation among different groups and foster a culture of dialogue and collaboration.
- Promote sustainable water management practices. This includes advocating for the adoption of best practices in water management, promoting the use of sustainable technologies and approaches, and raising awareness about the importance of water conservation and protection.
- Provide neutral mediating grounds for policy discussions and negotiations, helping to broker peace during times of conflict.

- **Mainstream the Water-Food-Energy (WFE) Nexus:**

- Integrate policy frameworks that incorporate the Water-Food-Energy Nexus to ensure that policies are coherent, coordinated, and mutually reinforcing.
- As in transboundary contexts above, governments should engage with multiple stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, academia, the energy

sector, the food sector, and local communities to ensure inclusive and participatory decision-making to advance the WFE nexus.

- Promote efficient land and water management practices which include sustainable agriculture practices, water-use efficiency, and the protection and restoration of ecosystems.
- Create finance mechanisms and incentives to mobilize investments in the Water-Food-Energy nexus.

- **Investment in Technology:**

Innovative technologies, such as efficient irrigation systems, desalination plants, and water reuse and recycling technologies, can play a crucial role in enhancing water management and mitigating water scarcity in water-stressed regions. Investments in technological advancements can be supported by donor agencies and implementation of these new technologies as best practices can be expedited by multi-lateral forums such as the UN and the EU.

- **Environmental and Ecological Management:**

Implementing an effective environmental and ecological management strategy is essential for protecting and preserving the ecological health of transboundary river basins. To that end, transboundary water cooperation is key for the viability of ecosystems and the protection of the livelihoods of populations sustained by these rivers.

- **Climate Change and Source-to-Sea Approach:**

Develop joint strategies to adapt to climate change-related impacts within transboundary river basins and actively pursue a source-to-sea approach to protect marine life.

## Conclusion

These recommendations necessitate a call to action on enhancing cooperation and strengthening transboundary water governance. Shared river basins face several challenges ranging from the securitization of natural resources impeding cooperative approaches to a lack of financing for appropriate institutional development for joint river management. The above recommendations offer some pathways to improve transboundary water cooperation and develop collaborative structures and institutions, both at national and regional levels. The recently concluded UN 2023 global water conference, the first in almost 50 years, offered the world a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address the intensifying water crisis head-on. As a result of the conference, the Water Action Agenda has received great momentum with more than 700 commitments, shared throughout both official sessions and side events, to support a sustainable and secure water future. A key outcome was Nigeria and Iraq's accession to the UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and

International Lakes—a significant development in the world of transboundary water cooperation.

Through our continued efforts, we commit to working with partners, experts, and all relevant stakeholders to advance transboundary water cooperation, facilitate the implementation of SDG 6, and champion the Water Action Agenda.



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**Address:** Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.  
Multinational Development Dialogue Brussels  
11, Avenue de l'Yser, B-1040 Brussels, Belgium

**Contact:**

**Farwa Aamer**  
Research Analyst, Stimson Center  
[faamer@stimson.org](mailto:faamer@stimson.org)

**Karin Jancykova**  
Programme Manager, KAS-MDPD  
[Karin.Jancykova@kas.de](mailto:Karin.Jancykova@kas.de)