



HIGH LEVEL ROUNDTABLES

Transboundary Waters

Convening Governments

- (1) Ministry of Water, Tajikistan
- (2) State Department, United States of America
- (3) Ministry of Water, Zimbabwe

TIME FOR SOLUTIONS

With special appreciation to Anders Jägerskog and his colleagues at the United Nations Development Programme and the Stockholm International Water Institute for their support in assembling this background information.

1. Introduction

States that share transboundary waters face increasing water demand, hydrological variability, unilateral basin development and, in some cases, increased tensions as well. Compounding these challenges, there are often few institutions which promote joint management of shared water resources and dispute resolution. Where institutions do exist, they are often ad-hoc, disparate, and poorly financed. The challenges include a lack of common global platforms to advance joint management of transboundary waters and a lack of coordinated approaches among development partners further complicate matters.

Inaction on transboundary waters can carry a high price. Tensions can hurt regional integration, trade, and stability, thereby limiting the potential for sustainable development. However, when the management of shared water is handled with the right tools and done through cooperation, tolerance, and mutual respect, it can pave the way toward sustainable and peaceful development from every angle: political, social, economic, cultural, and ecological.

This Roundtable is an opportunity to identify specific steps that can be taken to strengthen cooperation on transboundary water resources (both surface and ground) and to promote best practices in transboundary water management. It should identify current and future challenges for transboundary water management, existing mechanisms to respond, and potential actions and outcomes that can foster cooperation in the face of tension.

2. Background

Water is among the most “shared” resources on earth. Forty-six percent of the earth’s land surface area is encompassed by shared river and lake basins; more than 260 watersheds cross the political boundaries of two or more countries, and approximately 40 percent of the world’s population lives in river and lake basins that cross national borders. Worldwide, about 2 billion people depend on groundwater, which includes approximately 300 transboundary aquifer systems. As the 2006 UNDP Human Development Report noted, managing that hydrological interdependence is “one of the great human development challenges facing the international community”.

For any country, national water governance is about striking a balance between the demands of water from various sectors such as agriculture, energy, industry, household consumption, and the environment. But as hydrological interdependence grows, users of various sectors in different countries are increasingly linked together within a shared system. This can result in concerns relating to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national security. While a transboundary water resource links riparian states together in a complex system of interdependence covering the spheres of economics, environmental policies, politics, security, and development, the dynamics of any such relationship become especially fragile in the face of growing water scarcity.

So do shared waters increase the possibility of conflict? History has often shown that the vital nature of water is a powerful incentive for cooperation, compelling stakeholders to reconcile

even the most divergent views. Water more often unites than divides peoples and societies. Researchers have found that since 1948, there have been only 37 incidents of acute multi-country conflict over water, while during the same period, approximately 295 international water agreements were negotiated and signed. While large-scale open conflict over water remains rare, increasing population, economic, and climate change pressures, which alter flow characteristics in basins, lakes, and aquifers, will likely intensify tensions over shared water resources around the globe. As these pressures increase and strain water security, multi-country cooperation on a wide range of issues will be essential. Dialogue, governance reform, stakeholder participation, transparency, regional economic integration, coordinated investment, and an integrated management of land and water resources can all play vital roles.

The benefits can take different forms: environmental benefits (e.g. improved water quality, conserved biodiversity); economic benefits (e.g. increased food and energy production); reduced geo-political tensions and enhanced flood management; and wider cooperation and economic integration. Any one of these four benefit types can promote cooperation. The broader the basket of benefits, the greater the scope for structuring mutually beneficial cooperation. Cooperation can also make a significant contribution to poverty reduction, so much so that many of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are dependent on the availability of adequate water resources in one manner or another.

But what are the costs of not cooperating? Unpredictability, for one. Without developing technical cooperation, such as sharing data on stream flow, precipitation and water quality measurements, or setting up a joint research institution for scientific study of the basin, each country has to tackle crises, such as floods and droughts, without the crucial information available in the whole basin. Functional cooperation, on the other hand, can prevent or at least reduce economic costs, environmental damages, and human suffering. That is why it is crucial to improve water management and scientific understanding of the water cycle through cooperation in joint observation and research, as well as the promotion of knowledge-sharing, provision of capacity-building, and transfer of technology, particularly to developing countries. Moreover, a lack of cooperation could lead to unforeseen consequences. It could fuel tensions to a point where the environment, economy, and people's livelihoods suffer considerably. As with rivers themselves, the spread of tensions does not always take national borders into consideration.

While national institutions and legislative bodies provide mechanisms for addressing conflicting demands within a country, there are often no equivalent institutional mechanisms to respond to transboundary problems. Moreover, promoting transboundary water cooperation is often under-financed and the mechanisms addressing it are scarce. Many national governments, bilateral donors, United Nations agencies, and development banks are hesitant to finance processes without clear outcomes and time-lines. Generating cooperation in transboundary basins largely consists of promoting a process of building collaborative structures and institutions, commonly at both national and regional levels. Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach involving users, planners, and policy makers at all levels. For countries to engage in building such cooperative structures in a shared river basin demands courage and a vision that often must transcend the lifetime of a single project. These processes are bound to be challenging. Financing such processes is often what is needed to secure, deepen and improve water-related collaboration in those transboundary basins where the parties lack other forms of cooperation.

Another key aspect to address is the *quality* of the cooperation. Often the fact that cooperation is happening at some level is taken as a positive sign and further analysis is seldom made. However, a deconstruction of the cooperative activities will often reveal another picture. On whose terms

is the cooperation happening? Is there a power asymmetry between the riparians? Is there scope for activities that would be geared towards “levelling the playing field” in this respect? Research seems to suggest that if parties can engage on more equal terms the prospects for equitable and lasting cooperative processes increase.

The United Nations General Assembly through resolution 65/154 declared 2013 year as the International Year of Water Cooperation and encouraged all Member States, the United Nations system and all other actors to take advantage of the Year to promote actions at all levels, including appropriate international cooperation aimed at the achievement of the internationally agreed water-related goals. Taking advantage of the International Year of Water Cooperation in 2013 will contribute to enhancing cooperation across and beyond water and fostering peace and stability.

3. Key questions to be discussed at the Roundtable

A number of questions may be derived from the above introduction that should be addressed at the Roundtable:

1. Challenges for transboundary water management
 - a. What are the key challenges, potential shortcomings, and limitations in the management of shared waters?
2. Existing mechanisms to respond
 - a. What global architecture or regional frameworks exist to respond to these challenges? What is the current status of these efforts and how prepared are they for the potentially disruptive impacts of climate variability, future demands, globalization, and development?
 - b. What are some of the lessons learned from these experiences? What can be considered best practices? Where are the gaps now and where may they arise in the future? Are current support programmes for transboundary water management adequately designed to respond to the challenges that riparians face?
3. Actions - what can be done?
 - a. What can we do – locally, regionally, and globally – to advance and improve cooperation on shared waters?

4. Session objectives and outcomes

The Roundtable can identify specific steps to strengthen cooperation on transboundary water resources (both surface and ground) and to promote best practices which contribute to regional peace and stability. The outcomes of the Roundtable should be documented and discussed by the sector with the view to achieve more effective, coordinated, and comprehensive support for transboundary water cooperation, including both process support as well as development support.



MARSEILLE - FRANCE

TIME FOR *SOLUTIONS*



worldwaterforum6.org



solutionsforwater.org

