

Water – a shared resource requiring inclusive water diplomacy

Changing climate and extreme weather events have fundamental impacts on all aspects of our lives and our planet, including the management of the world's shared water resources. In order to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow we must broaden our conception of who the relevant decision-makers are and promote inclusive decision-making. Lessons learnt from inclusive water diplomacy can help show us the way.

By Elizabeth A. Yaari and Martina Klimes

Ever growing uncertainties with regard to future water availability and demand stemming from the impacts of climate change have human security implications. Expected changes will foundationally direct how individuals are going to be affected by the changing availability of water and, from the national and regional security perspective, how these changes will affect geopolitics and inter-state relations between countries sharing a freshwater resource. A study released in June 2019 and carried out jointly by environmental and conflict researchers indicates that armed violence across the globe is expected to rise by 26 per cent in a scenario involving a four-degree Celsius rise in global temperatures. Understanding, learning from, and enhancing water diplomacy processes (see Box) is essential for countries and communities to prepare and respond to the expected challenges to come.

Build a bigger (negotiation) table

As a dynamic, multi-track process, water diplomacy enables a broad sector of stakeholders sharing water resources to discuss and identify solutions for sustainable management of shared resources, as well as to mitigate shared risks. In contrast to traditional diplomatic efforts focused on relations between states (typically through ministries of foreign affairs), water diplomacy is able to actively engage a range of diverse stakeholders and decision-makers including diplomats but also technical experts, experts on socio-economic indicators, as well as civil society and representatives of affected communities, among others.

Indeed, inclusive participation is an instrumental characteristic of effective water diplomacy. By engaging not only formal state actors with the authority and mandate to make decisions on behalf of their governments or institutions, referred to as Track 1 processes, but also complementing official processes with informal relationship building and trust-building activities, i.e. Track 1.5 and Track 2 processes, water diplomacy is able to prompt positional and behavioural changes including by introducing



Participants at the annual Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile workshop organised by SIWI, 2019.

Photo: Elizabeth Yaari

new ideas and perspectives that inform official negotiations. These multi-track water diplomacy processes are also able to better capture user priorities, enhance and maintain buy-in and support for policies, provide early warning for risk identification and improve water access for marginalised groups. By maintaining multiple complementary channels of communication and points of contact, risks to process politicalisation are mitigated as informal actors can maintain a dialogue should formal relations deteriorate. And, as trust is a key component in water diplomacy, non-state actors often play an important role in contributing to improved dialogue among riparian countries by clarifying misunderstandings and acknowledging ambiguities and uncertainties in terms of information, action, and perception – pertaining to water management decisions. For example, in the case of Iraq, the Farmers' Union has a

consultative process role with the government (Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation) which directly informs the government's policy on agriculture water availability. In the lower Jordan Basin, mayors have maintained communication and cooperation cross-border in the absence of a formal governance structure for the shared management of the river.

Water diplomacy's multi-track approach is also multi-disciplinary, which is critical to facing growing uncertainties with evidence-based responses. One of the main challenges remains how to transfer and communicate knowledge from technical tracks to official level political dialogues. Long a challenge in climate change processes, lessons learnt from ongoing trans-boundary water negotiations indicate that technical knowledge is more likely to be captured when there is strong internal coordina-

Young leaders from Central Asia engaged in SIWI's transboundary water negotiation role play at the annual Central Asian Leadership Programme organised by CAREC, 2019.

Photo: CAREC

tion at multiple levels, i.e. horizontally across relevant line ministries and vertically from state to community-based actors. For example, in several contemporary water negotiation processes such as in the Nile basin and the Euphrates and Tigris region, and along the Hari River, negotiation teams are strategically composed of both ministry of foreign affairs representatives and representatives of water-line ministries. This approach greatly improves horizontal internal coordination and knowledge sharing between technical experts and political decision-makers.

Elevate women and youth in leadership and decision-making

Water diplomacy processes are additionally enhanced by ensuring that negotiation teams are reflective of the diverse societies they represent. Here, much effort is still needed as evidence reveals a persistent gender gap in the water sector, particularly at the transboundary level, which continues to be overshadowed by men. This happens despite evidence that balanced gender representation in peace processes results in agreements that are more durable and less likely to relapse. Unique initiatives such as the Women in Water Diplomacy Network in the Nile Basin aim to mitigate this deficit by elevating women water decision-makers and disseminating a shared perspective such as their 2020 Joint Statement in support of enhanced inclusive transboundary water cooperation through their Network.

Moreover, emphasis is also needed to leverage the leadership and engagement of young people in water diplomacy processes. As seen with regards to climate action, it is often the young voices that drive fundamental behaviour changes. This is particularly relevant to transboundary water management in conflict sensitive basins as riparian countries experience heightened youth population growth. Recurrent activities such as the annual Central Asian Leadership Programme on Environment for Sustainable Development, organised by the Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC), aim to strengthen young voices and develop the next generation of water and environment leaders, including water diplomats. Ample evidence exists to



show how young farmers who lost both their livelihoods and future employment prospects as a result of protracted water scarcity have been targeted by recruiters from terror and criminal networks, especially in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. Effective internal water management as well as sustainable transboundary water cooperation in regions where the agricultural sector is heavily dependent on shared water resources have thus become paramount for sustaining regional security in fragile regions prone to armed violence.

Why water diplomacy?

Water diplomacy is an integrative approach to address complex water problems. It

- enables a variety of stakeholders to assess ways to contribute to finding solutions for joint management of shared freshwater resources;
- is a dynamic process that seeks to develop reasonable, sustainable and peaceful solutions to water management while promoting or informing cooperation and collaboration among riparian stakeholders.

To achieve sustainable and effective transboundary water management requires an 'all hands on deck' approach. We simply cannot afford the costs of maintaining the status quo.

Success requires a pro-active effort to create inclusive and strong engagement, both top-down and bottom-up, and involving the whole of society in our shared water agenda. By leveraging more actors and communities into inclusive water diplomacy processes, we are able to foster a cadre of water champions, mitigate human security implications and improve inter-state relations between countries sharing a freshwater resource.

Elizabeth A. Yaari is a Senior Programme Manager at Stockholm Interventional Water Institute (SIWI) and the International Centre for Water Cooperation (ICWC), where she is responsible for managing regional water diplomacy processes in conflict and post-conflict environments. Elizabeth also leads SIWI's work on water and faith issues, and as SIWI's former Gender Focal Point, oversees SIWI's gender work in the context of transboundary water cooperation.

Martina Klimes is an Advisor for Water and Peace at SIWI and ICWC where she is responsible for the Water and Peace portfolio in addition to advising on SIWI's activities in transboundary basins affected by water scarcity, political tensions, and armed violence. Martina is also an Associated Research Fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) in Stockholm, Sweden. Contact: Elizabeth A. Yaari

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