



# Water as a Tool for Peacebuilding

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The potential use of water as a tool for peacebuilding in a situation of conflict between two or more countries is often advanced. However, proposals for practical and replicable mechanisms in international relations to fulfil this potential are rare. Today, water plays a modest role in the maintenance of international peace and security [1]. Despite existing institutional mechanisms, a gap remains in using water as a vehicle for conducive and resilient peacebuilding. This brief makes a claim in favor of water as a vehicle for peacebuilding. It highlights key institutional elements that enable third-party organizations in environmental diplomacy to advance water diplomacy toward multilateral peacebuilding.



## Lessons from the Historic Role of Water in Conflict

The debate on the historic role of water in conflict is mired in issues of causality. As water infuses all human action and reaction at some level, any in-depth analysis of war might eventually locate water as a potential cause.

The historic record of water in conflict and cooperation suggests that though international watercourses can cause tensions between co-riparian states, acute violence is the exception rather than the rule [2].

Accepting that over the last 60 years at least forty per cent of all interstate conflicts have some link to natural resources [3], even here there is a recognition that such factors are seldom, if ever, the sole cause of violent conflict.

It is however clear that tensions around the usage and mismanagement of water may lead to political instability and disputes. Based on the historic record then, pursuing water cooperation along the traditionally narrow focus of technical joint water management may provide islands of technical cooperation in regions of instability, but not the broader platform necessary for comprehensive peacebuilding between countries.

Peacebuilding demands the development of mechanisms that can - in addition to joint water management - use water as a platform for potentially wider systemic and eventual whole-of-government cooperation and agreement.



## Current Projections Signal a Need for Urgency

Despite little evidence for historic water wars, there is a growing consensus that today we face significantly increased pressure on water resources that may increase international tensions [4] in the years ahead.

Declining freshwater availability, historic mismanagement, climate change and population growth pose significant security implications at national and international levels. The global availability of fresh water as a percentage of the total is circa 0.007% or circa 2300 m<sup>3</sup> per person, down 37% since 1970 [5]. As half the world's land surface lies within international watersheds, the implications for international relations and potential conflict are obvious.

Because of this new reality, it is now recognized that the integration of the environment and natural resources into peacebuilding is a security imperative [6].

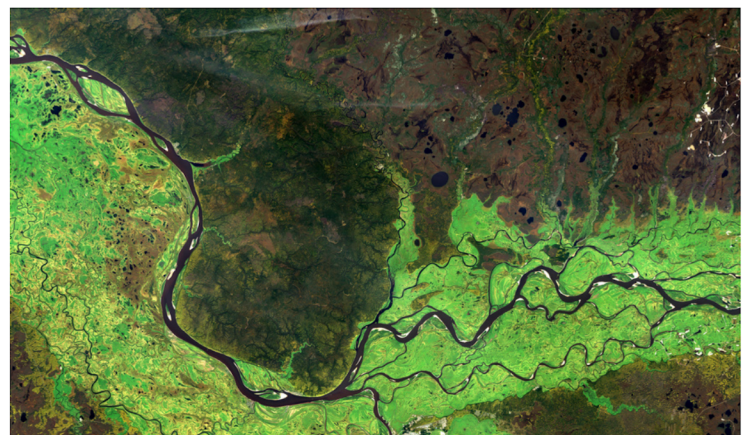
This new urgency underlines the need to move beyond thinking of water as a means of creating technical islands of cooperation separate from and impervious to the urgent political and diplomatic drive for peace. The cooperative potential of transboundary water must be harnessed in support of the political and diplomatic systems necessary for peacebuilding and, potentially, final peace settlements.

## The Potential of Water to Build Peace

310 rivers around the world cross the boundaries of two or more nations. The basin areas that contribute to these rivers comprise approximately 47% of the land surface of the earth, including 52% of the world's population, and contribute almost 60% of freshwater flow. A total of 150 nations include territories with international basins [7]. There are also approximately 300 transboundary aquifers worldwide [3].

The potential of shared water then, to provide compelling inducements to dialogue and cooperation, even while hostilities rage over other issues is well known.

Water is so precious that, even in times of great transboundary enmity, the mutually assured destruction that flows to all sides from severe water loss ensures dialogue. There are many examples of this phenomenon, including the 'picnic table' talks between Jordan and Israel or South African agreements signed amid war in the 70's and 80's.

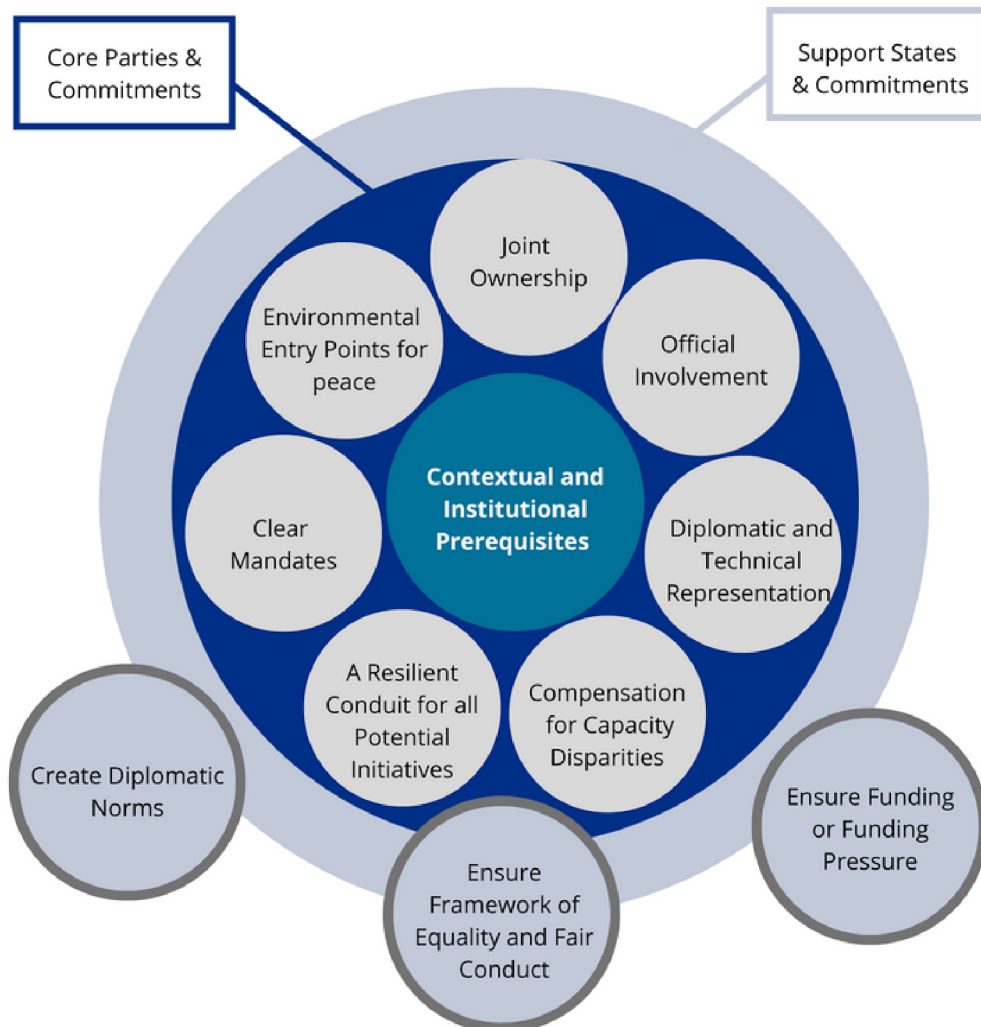


## The Need for New Mechanisms

The international community has long grappled with effective institutional arrangements for managing shared water resources [7]. The lack of agency at the international level in this field is equally well established [8].

For peace process practitioners transboundary water presents a broad array of potential international peace initiatives, from international declarations to guiding principles to treaties to shared management. Water also provides an opportunity where many innovative peacebuilding and mediation mechanisms can be implemented [2, 4].

The success of these mechanisms depends on the ongoing dialogue between the core parties; joint core party analysis, governance and decision-making; effective links between technical and diplomatic actors on all sides, and a possibility to adapt various approaches and initiatives to fit the stage of conflict. The initiatives and mediation methods acceptable in the wake of a final status agreement, for example, will be fundamentally different from the basic face-to-face dialogue or capacity building that may be possible at earlier stages.





The centrality of institutions for preventive hydro-diplomacy and effective transboundary water management can not be overemphasised [2].

There are a number of institutional elements that are important for organizations in the sector to have in order to create a spill-over from cooperation into conflict prevention. We summarize these as follows:

- Clear mandate
- High-level political will (government exists as the operating system)
- Political engagement in activities alongside technical capacity
- Inclusivity and membership of the organization
- A resilient structure for all potential initiatives including financial resilience
- Mechanisms to overcome differences in capacity between riparian countries

Moving beyond narrower definitions of water cooperation as joint management of a shared water resource, pro-active peacebuilding requires a broader approach; the core parties provide a mandate to generally support peace and find solutions to fresh water shortage. Where this is not possible the mandate should focus on any common water challenge or non-contentious technology, research area or geographic of interest to the core parties. The goal is to find an initially narrow basis for dialogue which can be expanded eventually as conditions permit.

Structuring the institutional mechanism so that government is central to its operation is key to harnessing political will.

Successful peace processes are co-equal partnerships between core party governments and supporting states where possible. Equally, a successful mechanism should involve all co-parties, and supporting states, as joint and equal partners.

Civil servants and high-level diplomats must be brought together ensuring that technical and diplomatic representation are present. Core issues in transboundary water management such as property rights, water pricing and technical approaches between countries are inherently political and therefore cannot be concluded by technical experts alone. It is clear from the discussion that the success of an organization also depends on the political will that exists toward it. Without committed political engagement at Track 1 and 1.5 level within water diplomacy, the resilience of transboundary water cooperation falters. Government participation and leadership provides the ability to include the broad spectrum of technical, academic, state agency and system-wide expertise and coordination as required. Practically, this structure facilitates the success of initiatives undertaken through the mechanism (general official buy-in, visa support, access to contested spaces, ready access to clearances and permissions, etc.)

There is no once-size-fits-all approach to peace process or conflict resolution. Any effective mechanism should provide a resilient framework for a broad array of technical and political peacebuilding initiatives, including track I through III. The nature and extent of the initiatives will depend on the state of the peace process and the hydropolitical resilience of the core party region.

At its most basic the mechanism should provide a regular framework for intergovernmental contact. At its most advanced it might be the support mechanism for final status negotiations in the area of water.

Capacity disparities are a common cause of treaties, institutions, development regularly being seen as inefficient, ineffective and sometimes a cause for tension themselves [2]. The mechanism should provide targeted capacity activities to the relevant core party members bilaterally or where possible in niche area jointly.

More specific case study research needs to be developed around these elements to evaluate them practically for their role in advancing water as a tool for peace.

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