



Transboundary Water Cooperation

The operational effectiveness of three
inter-state institutional mechanisms



Stabilization Mechanism Project

For peace process practitioners transboundary environmental issues such as water, climate change and desertification present a broad array of potential peace initiatives, from international declarations to guiding principles to treaties to shared management and diplomatic contact.

The Stabilization Mechanism Summative Briefs seek to capture the main points of more detailed research and analysis work done by MEDRC's Development Cooperation Department.

Transboundary Water Cooperation: The operational effectiveness of three inter-state institutional mechanisms

This is a summative brief of a peer reviewed paper: Models and Mandates in Transboundary Waters: Institutional Mechanisms in Water Diplomacy. This paper assesses the effectiveness of three inter-state institutional mechanisms in supporting transboundary water cooperation and transboundary water diplomacy toward positive peace processes.



Resilient, multifaceted approaches that go beyond technical water management to incorporate robust water diplomacy pathways for sustained transboundary cooperation are more necessary now than ever before.

How institutional mechanisms shape the legal, institutional, relational and outcome governance of transboundary water cooperation impacts the extent to which peacebuilding can be facilitated between riparian nations.

In a [recent peer-reviewed journal article](#) produced by MEDRC's DC Department, transboundary water cooperation mechanisms were assessed, through guided parameters as outlined by the Four Frames of Cooperation Framework [1, 2]. The three institutional mechanisms of the river basin organization (RBO), the transfrontier conservation area (TFCA) and the third-party inter-governmental organization (IGO) were selected as operational inter-state institutional mechanisms with the potential to support conflict prevention and environmental diplomacy. The operational effectiveness through which these institutional frameworks facilitate transboundary water cooperation and water diplomacy is summarized in the table.

The questions that guided the assessment of goal attainment in transboundary water cooperation and diplomacy were:

- Are relevant mechanisms included in the transboundary water cooperation agreement?
- Have policies and decisions been implemented? Have behaviors changed at the relevant governance scale?
- Was the process equitable? Have trust, communication and relationships developed/improved/been maintained?
- Were the outcomes identified by the actors achieved? Were relevant outcomes towards economic, environmental and social goals achieved?

Evaluation of Goal Attainment in Transboundary Water Cooperation and Diplomacy
The Senegal River Basin Development Organization (OMVS) - RBO

Legal	Relevant mechanisms are included in the agreement.
Institutional	Core policies and decisions have been implemented at the relevant governance scale. Targets set out by the policy documents have been largely advanced but not met in full, with targets being higher than realities achieved.
Relational	The process has been equitable as depicted through the periodic communication, meeting and joint project planning and implementation by all member states.
Outcome	Central outcomes achieved. Large-scale adaptations were made to meet revised needs at different points in time and with different variables considered. Institutional adaptability and resilient institutional capacity and a concern for sustainability in making trade-offs between social, environmental and economic dimensions to meet the shifting goals of all member states.

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) - RBO

Legal	Relevant mechanisms are included in the agreement.
Institutional	Policies have been advanced substantively but less so procedurally.
Relational	An inequitable and unsustainable process with little implementation success.
Outcome	With two key riparian States —China and Myanmar—not being signatories to the agreement, it has proved difficult to procedurally advance strong substantive norms.

The Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA) - TFCA

Legal	Relevant mechanisms are included in the treaty.
Institutional	Policies and decisions have been implemented but to varying degrees of success and in some cases to a greater extent by some member states than others.
Relational	A multi-level governance structure advances elements of equity.
Outcome	Greater policy harmonization has been achieved across multiple levels of governance. Policy harmonization has been able to advance the principles of sustainability substantively but less so procedurally.

The MEDRC Model – Third-party IGO

Legal	Relevant mechanisms are included in the agreement.
Institutional	Policies have been implemented and behaviours have advanced through greater political will and joint projects.
Relational	The manner in which program activities are structured and relationships are advanced reflects an equitable process.
Outcome	The outcome of having continued dialogue, inclusion and participation of all core states as part of the Middle East Peace Process has been advanced. Evaluating the extent to which sustainability has been advanced on transboundary water cooperation in areas of social, economic and environmental trade-offs is not possible.

Source: McCracken, 2022. Adapted.

How these different institutional mechanisms facilitate equitable and sustainable processes and outcomes in transboundary water cooperation relies strongly on the robustness with which all these dimensions are enforced substantially and procedurally. For transboundary water cooperation to advance equitable and sustainable principles, both resilient technical and political engagement must be maintained across the governance structures of institutional mechanisms operating in transboundary waters.

References

[1] McCracken, M. Defining Effective Transboundary Water Cooperation; Routledge: London, UK, 2022; ISBN 9780367647803.

[2] Smith, D.; Winterman, K. Models and Mandates in Transboundary Waters: Institutional Mechanisms in Water Diplomacy. *Water* 2022, 14, 2662.
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