



BRIDGE: Building River Dialogue and Governance

*Securing sustainable development, livelihoods and peace
through transboundary water cooperation*

Multi-level Water Governance

BRIDGE Thematic Briefing Series



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Borjas-Ecuador

Connecting decisions across scales through Multi-level Water Governance

While transboundary water cooperation ultimately rests with the authority of sovereign States, durable agreements need to reflect the realities of local water use and management. This requires a combination of mutually reinforcing arrangements: formal treaties, protocols, and basin institutions complemented by informal and locally grounded processes such as trust-building, dialogue, and capacity-enhancement that enable cooperation to take root. Yet cooperation often falters not because agreements are missing, but because basin commitments, national mandates, sector incentives, local capacities, and financing are misaligned.

It is this challenge that **Multi-level Water Governance** (MLWG) is designed to address. MLWG enables shared waters to be managed coherently across local, national, and transboundary levels. It aligns institutions, actors, sectors, and decision-making processes across scales, ensuring that national authority and local realities reinforce rather than contradict one another. By connecting formal institutions and platforms with informal processes that build trust and capacity, MLWG reduces fragmentation and creates the pathways through which agreements become implementable. In the context of rising water stress, climate impacts, and growing water demand, MLWG provides the architecture that allows cooperation to be credible, inclusive, and resilient. These dynamics make Multi-level Water Governance essential for turning negotiated commitments into coherent, implementable action.

Key messages



Effective cooperation depends on alignment across governance levels: Transboundary water governance only works when local, national, and basin level institutions reinforce one another. A combination of arrangements – treaties, basin plans, local platforms, community agreements, and informal dialogue spaces – provide the architecture through which cooperation becomes real.



Leadership and champions drive change: By creating space for women, youth, and Indigenous leaders, MLWG brings grounded experience into basin level governance. Informal networks of champions help unlock cooperation, build trust, and sustain progress through political change.



Multi-level engagement strengthens legitimacy, trust, and implementation: When local users, municipalities, civil society, Indigenous Peoples, women's groups, and national agencies co-shape decisions through inclusive processes, cooperation becomes credible, implementable, and politically sustainable.



Incremental, flexible, long-term engagement builds durable cooperation and strengthens resilience: small, incremental steps, dialogue spaces, and sustained presence allow cooperation to adapt to shifting political, social, and environmental conditions, reduce risk, and grow organically across levels.



Knowledge flows upward and downward: Shared data, joint assessments, and local-national-regional knowledge loops create a common evidence base that strengthen negotiation capacities, reduce power and capacity asymmetries and supports coherent decision-making.

Why Shared Waters Need Stronger Cooperation

Good water governance is the foundation for managing scarcity, reducing conflict risks, and protecting the ecosystems that sustain human wellbeing and climate resilience. As climate change accelerates and water demand rises, more than 2 billion people already live in countries facing high water stress, and half of the world's population experiences severe water scarcity for part of the year. By 2030, global freshwater demand is projected to exceed supply by 40%, while water related-conflict events have more than doubled over the past decade[1]. In this context, cooperation increasingly depends on governance systems that bring local realities into national policy and basin-level decision-making. With 153 countries sharing water resources across 310 transboundary basins, the stability and resilience of entire regions now hinge on how effectively these systems align decisions across levels to ensure coherent management, equitable benefits, and long-term resilience.

Where cooperation is weak, the consequences are immediate and visible: over-allocation, pollution, declining ecosystem health, and rising tensions between water users and across borders. These failures rarely stem from a lack of agreement. Instead, they arise when basin-level commitments do not translate into national mandates, sectoral incentives, financing, or local implementation capacity. In practice, this shows up as overlapping mandates and institutional competition; local consultation without influence on national or basin decisions; basin agreements without domestic legal, budgetary, or investment pathways; data systems that do not travel across agencies or borders; de-centralised responsibilities without the finance or capacity to carry them out; and participation that is symbolic rather than meaningful. These governance gaps undermine the credibility and effectiveness of cooperation, leaving countries unable to manage shared risks or turn commitments into action. Addressing these gaps requires governance approaches that connect decisions across levels, ensure information and resources flow where they are needed, and create the conditions for cooperation to take root and endure.



Photo: © IUCN
Community listening session at Woo Lone village, Salween

How Multi-level Water Governance Converts Negotiated Intent into Action

Multi-level Water Governance functions as an implementation architecture – the mechanism through which cooperation moves from dialogue and agreement into action that is politically workable, socially legitimate, and institutionally sustained – turning negotiated aspiration into a system of action across levels. It clarifies who does what, at which level, and with which mandate – reducing ambiguity and enabling institutions to act in a coordinated way. By aligning policies, plans, and regulatory frameworks across levels, MLWG ensures that basin agreements are translated into national legislation, sectoral strategies, and local implementation pathways. Equally, it enables local knowledge, priorities, and platforms to inform national positions and basin dialogue. When these upward and downward flows reinforce one another, cooperation reflects both sovereign decision-making and the priorities of local water users. This understanding of MLWG is grounded in more than a decade of BRIDGE Programme experience supporting water diplomacy in politically sensitive basins.



Photos: © IUCN
BRIDGE workshop in Bolivia in November 2024

BRIDGE defines **Multi-level Water Governance (MLWG)** as *“the coordinated multi-stakeholder, cross-sectoral processes at local, sub-basin, national and transboundary levels that align mandates, information, finance and inclusive decision-making to manage shared water systems coherently. It connects basin realities to policy and diplomacy, supporting or creating mutually reinforcing formal and informal institutions that strengthen cooperation, climate resilience, ecosystems, and human wellbeing.”*

MLWG is not simply broad participation or de-centralisation for its own sake. Its value lies in strengthening and aligning existing institutions rather than creating new ones, and in connecting authority, information, finance, and accountability across levels so that decisions taken in one area are credible and actionable in others. Building on this foundation, a core function of MLWG is to create incentives, capacities, and information flows necessary to allow actors to cooperate equitably. Shared data systems, joint assessments, and local–national–regional knowledge loops reduce asymmetries and build a common evidence base. When communities, municipalities, basin organisations, and national agencies have access to the same information and ability to interpret it, decisions become more coherent and politically sustainable. This combination of arrangements, from dialogue, community platforms and basin plans to national policies and regional treaties, links formal structures with the informal processes that sustain cooperation, reducing risks and making agreements implementable.



Multi-level Governance secures the participation and empowerment of vulnerable voices who otherwise would never be heard in transboundary negotiations and decision-making.

Dr. Alejandro Iza, Global Director, IUCN Environmental Law

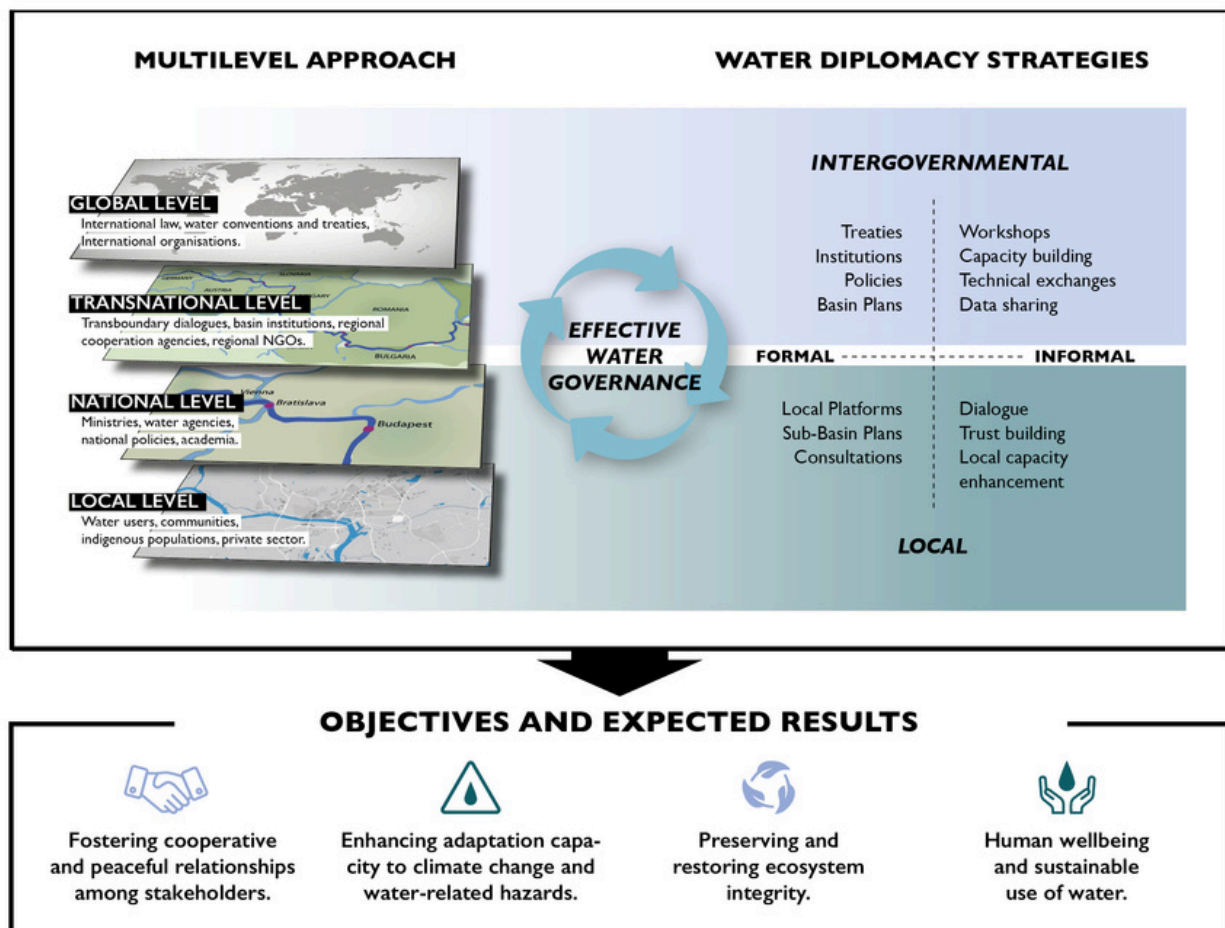
MLWG also strengthens the legitimacy of cooperation. Inclusive processes – involving women, youth, Indigenous Peoples’ organisations, civil society, and local authorities – ensure that agreements reflect local priorities and that trade-offs are negotiated transparently. This broadens ownership, reduces resistance, and increases the likelihood that commitments will be implemented. Over time, these mechanisms create a stable governance environment in which cooperation can deepen, adapt, and endure. Effective governance ultimately depends on how well transboundary, national, and local institutions connect their decisions. When strategies, legal frameworks, and everyday practice are aligned across these levels, cooperation becomes practical, credible, and resilient – even in politically sensitive basins. This coherence across scales is what allows MLWG to turn negotiated intent into outcomes for people and nature.



Multi-level Water Governance is the backbone of effective transboundary cooperation. It operationalises the rules, relationships, and institutional pathways through which countries can manage shared risks, prevent conflict, and translate cooperation into tangible outcomes for people and nature.

Maria Carreño Lindelien, Senior Water Governance Officer,
IUCN Water and Wetlands Team

BRIDGE | A MULTILEVEL APPROACH TO WATER DIPLOMACY



Five Pathways for Cooperation using Multi-level Water Governance: Insights from BRIDGE

IUCN's BRIDGE programme has supported cooperation in more than 20 shared river basins across Africa, Asia, and Latin America since 2011. One of its central insights is that water governance only functions effectively when all decision-making levels are aligned. BRIDGE operationalises MLWG through a flexible and adaptive strategy tailored to basin contexts but built on the same core elements: demonstration, learning, dialogue, leadership development, and technical support. These components create enabling conditions through which cooperation can take root and expand.

BRIDGE's experience shows that cooperation can begin from many places: a local platform, a women's network, a national policy window, a shared dataset, an existing basin institution, or a sectoral entry point. The more decisions, data, sectors, and actors that work from a shared understanding, the more resilient and legitimate transboundary governance becomes. Progress is rendered visible when roles and mandates align across levels; when local knowledge informs national planning and basin dialogue; when stakeholder platforms – including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, civil society, and economic sectors – shape decisions rather than simply advise; when trade-offs are openly negotiated; and when basin commitments appear in national policies, budgets, or regulations. These shifts show how MLWG can become practice: embedding cooperation across institutions, sectors, and communities, and strengthening collective resilience to shared risks.

The following five BRIDGE action chains illustrate how cooperation emerges, spreads, and becomes durable in real river basins. Each represents a distinct entry point – whether at local, national, sectoral, or transboundary level – and shows how MLWG can turn openings at one level, into momentum across the entire basin.



Photo: © InfoMinZW
Signature of the SAVE agreement

1. Building on existing institutions for the management of shared waters

In the **Sekong–Sesan–Srepok (3S) Basins** (Cambodia – Lao PDR – Viet Nam), cooperation was fragmented despite a dense institutional landscape. When construction of the Sekong A dam began without prior notification, downstream countries were unaware of the risks to the Mekong’s last major free-flowing tributary – now the primary route for long-distance fish migration after the Lower Sesan 2 dam severed the Sesan and Srepok rivers. Evidence from hydrological assessments and fish-passage specialists highlighted major risks to fisheries, sediment flows, and livelihoods. BRIDGE used its neutral convening role to bring institutions and evidence together, enabling quiet diplomacy that led to a construction halt, formal notification, and the first application of the Mekong River Commission’s Transboundary Environmental Impact Assessment (Tb-EIA) guidelines. The process demonstrated that strengthening and connecting existing institutions is more effective than creating new ones in politically sensitive basins.

2. Enabling consultative, jointly-owned decisions over water

In the **Lake Chad Basin** ratification of the Water Charter had stalled because national negotiations lacked legitimacy and were disconnected from local priorities, leaving water users excluded from decision-making spaces. To address this gap, BRIDGE supported the creation of national multistakeholder platforms in Cameroon and Chad, bringing together NGOs, farmer associations, pastoralists, fisherfolk, women’s organisations, mayors, and village chiefs. These platforms strengthened Article 73 of the Water Charter (“public information and participation”) and generated the political momentum needed for Nigeria and Cameroon to ratify the Charter in 2017. The same inclusive approach later revitalised cooperation on the Logone River (Cameroon – Chad), where BRIDGE’s diagnostic studies and dialogues – including dedicated spaces for women’s leadership – laid the groundwork for revising the long dormant Memorandum of Understanding concerning hydraulic developments on the Logone River (known as the Moundou Agreement) signed by Cameroon and Chad. Broad-based inclusive ownership transformed a stalled agreement into a legitimate, jointly held framework, showing how MLWG turns participation into political traction.



Photo: © IUCN
Y4M led FDG and water quality monitoring training and ES data collection, Silchar, India



Photo: © Green Compass
Medjerda River, Tunisia

Youth Engagement in Multi-level Governance

Young people bring innovation, digital skills, and grounded local knowledge to water governance. Through the **Youth for Meghna (Y4M) initiative**, IUCN provides mentorship, micro-grants, and tools that help youth design solutions and engage in policy dialogue. In the Meghna Basin, members of Y4M- in Bangladesh and India are monitoring water quality, raising awareness, and contributing evidence to local and national discussions. By linking youth-led action to basin processes, MLWG ensures cooperation reflects next-generation priorities.

[Youth for Meghna](#) >

3. Facilitating inclusive multi-stakeholder negotiations of benefit-sharing agreements

Benefit sharing reframes cooperation away from zero-sum allocation focused solely on water volumes and towards positive-sum development. It identifies and distributes a wide range of social, economic, environmental, regional, and security benefits that shared waters can generate. In the **Sio-Malaba-Malakisi Basin** (Kenya-Uganda), BRIDGE convened government agencies, local authorities, civil society, youth, women's groups, and technical experts to jointly analyse development scenarios. Using shared criteria, stakeholders prioritised projects, bundling the top options into four investment clusters covering infrastructure, catchment restoration, and livelihoods. These were incorporated into a Basin Investment Plan with a fundraising strategy. Inclusive negotiation created a shared development vision and a practical pathway for joint investment, demonstrating how MLWG enables diverse actors to shape decisions that deliver benefits across levels.

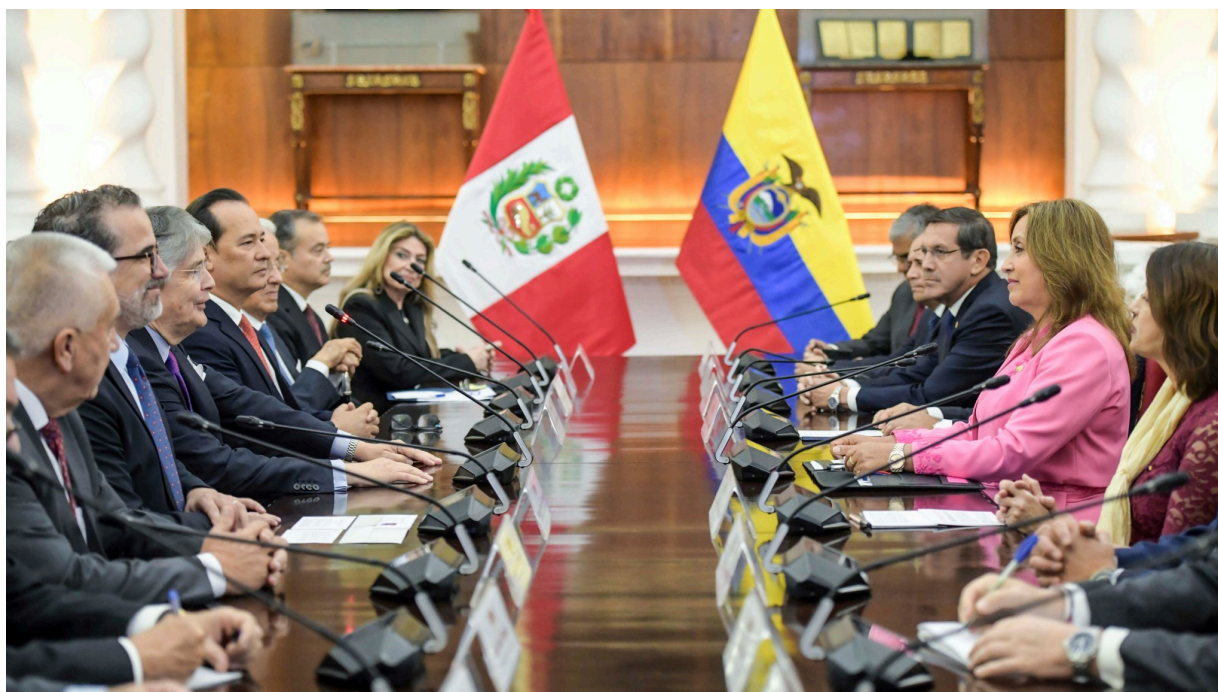


Photo: © Presidencia Perú
EC-PE signature, October 2023



Photo: © IUCN

The youth research team interviewing the village leader about cultural beliefs related to the Salween River in Belu Island, Myanmar

4. Connecting local knowledge to national and transboundary decisions

Ecuador and Peru share nine basins but lacked harmonised data, clearly defined basin boundaries, and coordinated monitoring and decision-making around water management, limiting their ability to negotiate on equal footing. Local institutions were generating valuable hydrological and ecosystem information, yet this knowledge rarely reached national agencies or informed transboundary dialogue. BRIDGE strengthened water information systems, harmonised basin maps, and revitalised local coordination in the **Zarumilla and Catamayo-Chira basins**. These shared datasets and exchanges built trust and created a common technical foundation for cooperation. This groundwork informed national positions and supported negotiations of an agreement setting up a binational commission, a Transboundary Basin Organisation that works as an umbrella to regulate all nine shared basins – each with particular environmental and social characteristics – which was established in 2017 and ratified by both States by 2022 – a clear example of local knowledge shaping national and transboundary governance through MLWG.

5. Allowing community-level success to motivate national reform

In the **Buzi-Pungwe-Save Basins** (Zimbabwe-Mozambique), environmental flows (e-flows) became a critical entry point because the basins were experiencing pressure from droughts, upstream abstractions, and ecosystem degradation, and neither of the basin States had a shared framework for maintaining minimum e-flows. BRIDGE's early work on e-flows began with local training, joint assessments, and demonstration sites that showed tangible benefits for communities and ecosystems. These practical results motivated national authorities to strengthen the Pungwe Agreement (2016), adopt the Buzi Agreement (2019), finalise the Save Agreement (2023), and ultimately establish the BuPuSa Watercourses Commission (BUPUSACOM) in 2023. Local technical cooperation catalysed basin wide institutional reform, illustrating how MLWG enables community level success to scale upward and shape national and transboundary decisions.

BRIDGE's Network of Water Governance Champions

BRIDGE has cultivated informal networks of water governance champions across its target basins – leaders from communities, civil society, government, and technical institutions who build trust, share practical experience, and strengthen dialogue. Working across levels and sectors, they support problem solving, sustain cooperation through political shifts, and create a multiplier effect by reinforcing each other's efforts. Their leadership helps translate local initiative into broader influence without creating new or competing institutions.

Spotlight: Women and Multi-level Water Governance in Practice

Declining water quality in **Lake Titicaca** (Peru–Bolivia) prompted Aymara and Quechua women to mobilise and establish the network Women United for the Defence of the Lake Titicaca Basin to respond to pollution and ecosystem degradation. With support from Agua Sustentable (NGO) and BRIDGE, they organised clean-ups, raised awareness, and monitored environmental changes, strengthening community-level stewardship. By 2025, they had also begun formalizing themselves as an association called “**Lideresas**”, strengthening their institutional voice in basin governance. As critical actors in water governance, these women then connected their leadership to wider processes through dialogue spaces, training, and practical tools on water governance and environmental monitoring. A **BRIDGE Women Leadership Grant** is now supporting their advocacy, digital skills, and participation in dialogue Roundtables with the Binational Authority (ALT), demonstrating how MLWG enables women to move from community action to basin-wide influence and strengthen resilience in a shared basin.



Photos: © Agua Sustentable

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For more information, contact:

Maria Lindelien,
Senior Water Governance
Officer, IUCN,
maria.lindelien@iucn.org



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