

New insights on governing transboundary water – hydro diplomacy, cooperation and international conventions

Shammy Puri, Hassan Tolba Aboelnga and Hazim El-Naser



In October the Middle East Water Forum (MEWF) staged **a webinar on transboundary water governance**. The event brought together 350 water experts from 52 countries to hear an expert panel discuss how transboundary water issues are best dealt with. During the event the audience was polled on what they believed worked and what didn't. Their answers may surprise you. Here, Shammy Puri, Hassan Aboelnga & Hazim El-Naser share what was discovered and discuss why it's important.*

Sustainable management of our water resources is one of humanity's most pressing challenges. In many regions the governance of transboundary waters is expected to be an even more significant factor than how countries manage water resources they have exclusive rights over. So, when it comes to transboundary water, what are the available options and what works?

In October, MEWF brought together 350 people from 52 countries to discuss the issue of transboundary water governance at a high-level webinar. Participants came from seven regions (see Table 1) and all had an interest in water management and governance in their home countries. During the webinar the audience was polled on several issues regarding transboundary water governance and their responses revealed there was a strong preference towards country-to-country arrangements over international conventions. That's something the international community would be wise to make note of.

Table 1: Regional representation at the Transboundary Governance Webinar

Region	Number of respondents
<i>Eastern Mediterranean region</i>	<i>52 respondents</i>
<i>Far East, South & Central Asian region</i>	<i>54 respondents</i>
<i>Gulf Area</i>	<i>15 respondents</i>
<i>European Region (representing worldwide experience)</i>	<i>131 respondents</i>
<i>North African region</i>	<i>37 respondents</i>
<i>Americas & Oceania</i>	<i>27 respondents</i>
<i>Sub Saharan African region</i>	<i>27 respondents</i>
<i>Eastern Mediterranean region</i>	<i>52 respondents</i>

When asked what was relevant for sound transboundary governance, only 11% of the professionals in the audience thought that signing on to one of the UN water conventions was most important (Figure 1). Overwhelmingly 57% of those polled stated that bi- or multi-lateral cooperation was more effective, and 31% felt that hydro diplomacy was needed.

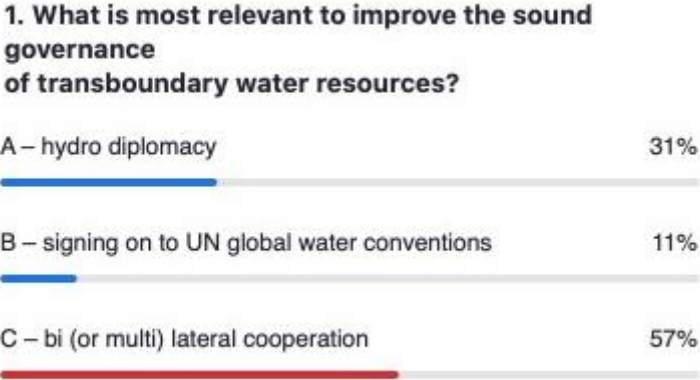


Figure 1

This finding should give pause for thought to UN agencies that have long promoted, and strenuously encouraged, countries to sign on to UN Conventions (eg UN Water 2008¹).

Currently there is the *UN 1997 Convention on the Non Navigational Uses of International Water Courses*, which potentially has worldwide applicability and has **been in force since August 2014**. However, this Convention does not have a Secretariat nor a permanent technical team of supporting experts.

On the other hand the **1992 UNECE Convention on Protection and Use of Transboundary Water Courses and International Lakes** (which originated in the European & North American region) does have a well established Secretariat. In the recent years, the Member States of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) agreed to open this convention for adoption by countries outside of the UNECE region. Several countries (Senegal, Chad) have acceded to this Convention and the Secretariat of the UNECE have been keenly promoting this Convention.

In March 2020, a series of stakeholder meetings were held in Beirut for the Middle East & North Africa region to promote the adoption of the UNECE Convention by countries of the region. However, as the findings of the MEWF webinar might suggest, are global instruments really what these countries want or should they be looking more towards spontaneous bi-lateral or multi-lateral cooperation?

In many regions sound governance of transboundary waters may be more important than domestic water resources (Figure 2), so the issue is taking on a renewed urgency, especially in the face of climate change. Serious political instability in some regions makes this even more complicated as poor relations between neighbours can weaponize water governance.

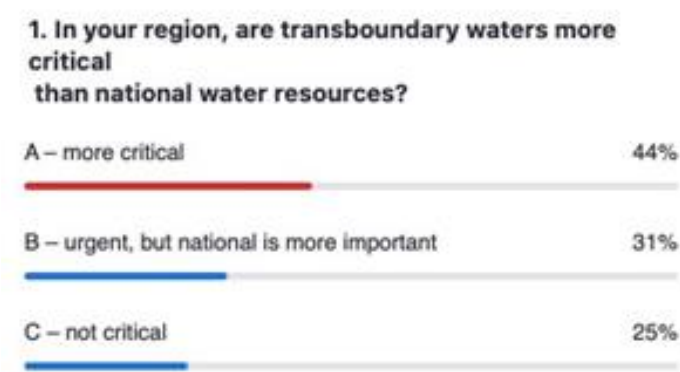


Figure 2

The live polling indicated that 44% of the audience considered transboundary water resources governance to be more critical than national water resources and 25% of the audience (primarily from the European region) felt that transboundary resources are not critical. This is not surprising since in the European region, which is not water scarce, collaboration on transboundary waters has been underway for many decades. In much of the rest of the world, it follows from the polling, the need for urgent efforts to increase bi-and multi-lateral cooperation is clear, especially in the North African, East Mediterranean and South Asian regions, some of which suffer significant water scarcity.

In addition, as indicated by those polled, the pathway to such cooperation in these regions is through *hydro diplomacy*, rather than by acceding to international Conventions. The increasing importance of hydro diplomacy has been becoming clear in recent years, though the principles for its implementation have yet to be established. A study conducted by the Adelphi Research², has indicated that for effective enhancement of hydro diplomacy, the pre requisites are a direct and effective role of foreign policy makers, rather than the technocrats. The study concludes that foreign policy-makers should use their political mandate and leverage to ensure that the (potential) benefits of transboundary cooperation are fully considered in the bilateral and multi-lateral relations. However, since foreign policy makers are poorly versed in transboundary water governance, a new form of capacity development is needed – an area that the UN Agencies and others could focus on.

UN agencies and others have discussed the possibility of the Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) as being the vehicle for better transboundary collaboration. Goal 6.5.2. focusses specifically on this issue. Progress on its implementation has been monitored by the UNESCO and the UNECE secretariats in 2018. At the mid term assessment point, the findings are that countries have not made extensive efforts on this aspect of their shared water resources. The UNESCO-UN ECE assessment states quite starkly that *“At the current rate of progress, with on average three agreements entered into per year, we are not on track to achieve target 6.5.”*

The live polling in the MEWF webinar indicated that 56% of the audience believed that national efforts to achieve SDG’s countries did not include a focus on the governance of transboundary water resources (Figure 3). Nevertheless, UN Water, a grouping of 25 UN organisations, have formulated an SDG acceleration plan that aims to accelerate actions to achieve the SDG’s by 2030³. This plan has been formulated to some extent in connection with efforts to counteract the impact of COVID-19 on global economies and on social conditions.



Figure 3

The live polling in the MEWF seminar overwhelmingly indicated that COVID-19 would have an impact on transboundary water governance – but opinion was divided between those that felt that as a result of COVID-19 much more attention would be paid to transboundary waters (43%), with 36% indicating that much less attention would be paid. Only 15% stated that there would be no change in the attention that countries paid to their shared water resources (Figure 4).

1. If impact of COVID-19 means less economic growth in the next 5 years (ie lower GDP's), will attention to cooperation over transboundary waters change?



Figure 4

Achieving the SDG's requires significant financial expenditures. This has been made even more challenging given the hard economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a worrying observation that funds to manage improved governance on transboundary waters as well as bi- or multi-lateral cooperation may well be seriously constrained.

Even though the poll respondents have indicated that greater attention should be paid to cooperation over transboundary waters, the institutions that address transboundary waters and their technical and financial capacities will be much constrained. As the mid-term evaluation on the progress of SDG 6.5.2 has showed, the goals are not on track. In a post COVID-19 era dealing with climate change, the likelihood of success seems even less certain.

More information: Eng. Hassan Aboelnga, Vice Chair, MEWF, hassan.aboelnga@mewf.de

References

3. UN Water (2008). *Transboundary Waters: Sharing benefits, sharing responsibilities*. UN Office to Support the International Decade for Action 'Water for Life' 2005-2015 (UN-IDfA), Zaragoza, Spain.
4. Adelphi Research (2014). *The Rise of Hydro Diplomacy – Strengthening foreign policy for transboundary waters*. Report prepared for Climate Diplomacy with support from the German Federal Foreign Office, accessible from www.adelphi.de
5. UN Water (2020). *The SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework – Delivering the promise, Safe water and sanitation for all by 2030*. Accessed at <https://www.unwater.org/publications/the-sdg-6-global-acceleration-framework/>

Main image: Like most major river systems, the River Nile flows through several countries. Transboundary governance is emerging as one of the most important issues the world has to face as it struggles to meet the Sustainability Development Goals. (Image by [Ron](#))

Porter from **Pixabay**)



Shammy Puri chaired the MEWF Webinar on Transboundary Governance. He is the Director of the Centre for Sustainable Solutions in Practical Hydrology (CSSPH), and was the former Secretary General of the International Association of Hydrogeologists and the former Chair of the IAH Commission on Transboundary Aquifers. **Hassan Aboelnga** is the Vice Chair of MEWF and is a PhD researcher on Water Security. **Hazim El-Naser** is the Chair of MEWF and was a former Minister of Water and Irrigation and former Minister of Agriculture in Jordan.

***The Middle East Water Forum (MEWF)** is a pioneer platform with a regional perspective on raising public awareness and enhancing management of water challenges in the Middle East through the exchange of data, expertise and innovative technologies without the need to cross borders. Its mission is to promote best practices for cooperation and exchange of knowledge among the various parties and stakeholders involved in water issues and actions through an online forum that ensures the impartial and transparent dissemination of information towards sustainable water security in the Middle East and the Arab region. More information: <https://www.mewf.de/>

The article was originally published at Global Water Forum at <https://globalwaterforum.org/2020/12/14/new-insights-on-governing-transboundary-water-hydro-diplomacy-cooperation-and-international-conventions/>