

Multi-stakeholder regional dialogues

Pathways for advancing transboundary water cooperation

Publication Brief

Background and rationale

Regional multi-stakeholder dialogues (MSDs) convene different stakeholders around the same table, providing an avenue for reaching a common understanding on regional issues. In regions where several countries share water resources, regional MSDs have the power to raise awareness of the importance of the management of this common resource, without necessarily focusing on basin-specific issues nor on contention associated with water management. Yet, the transboundary water cooperation potential of regional MSDs has not been thoroughly examined thus far.

This paper **explores the extent to which regional MSDs contribute to advancing transboundary water cooperation and reflects upon key enabling factors to establish and sustain such dialogues.** The three cases of MSDs that were selected for analysis were South East Europe, South Asia, and Southern Africa. The analysis revealed that in all three cases, dialogues contributed to advancing transboundary water cooperation at multiple scales.

Insights from three regional multi-stakeholder dialogue processes

1 South East Europe Dialogue



The regional MSD process was initiated in a post-conflict environment where countries were rebuilding nations and regional integration was high on the political agenda. The dialogue process which started in 2006 and is still ongoing has created an enabling environment for advanced transboundary water cooperation in the region, as well as catalysed spin-off action in four specific basins and one aquifer system: the Drin Basin, the Mesta/Nestos Basin, the Drina Basin, the Dinaric Karst Transboundary Aquifer System, and the Sava River Basin.

2 South Asia Dialogue



The regional dialogue process began with the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD) which took place in 2006–2012. The ADD aimed at creating knowledge-based partnership of States managing the Himalayan river systems. A key conclusion from this process was to continue the dialogue at the basin level under the South Asia Water Initiative (SAWI), which was carried out between 2013 and 2021. Subsequent basin-level dialogues proceeded in the Indus, the Brahmaputra, and Sundarbans while national-level project developments followed for the Ganges. The regional dialogue under SAWI has catalysed basin-wide and multi-stakeholder exchanges, in a context where much of the cooperation had historically been on a bilateral intergovernmental basis.

3 Southern Africa Dialogue







Through the Southern African Development Community (SADC) regional programme, SADC and GWP Southern Africa (GWP SA) have been convening SADC regional water dialogues since 2007. The process has resulted in a ministerial-level political commitment: the adoption of the Water–Energy–Food (WEF) nexus approach towards managing water resources, including transboundary waters in the SADC region. This nexus approach has been implemented in several transboundary water basins.



Key enabling factors for multi-stakeholder dialogues

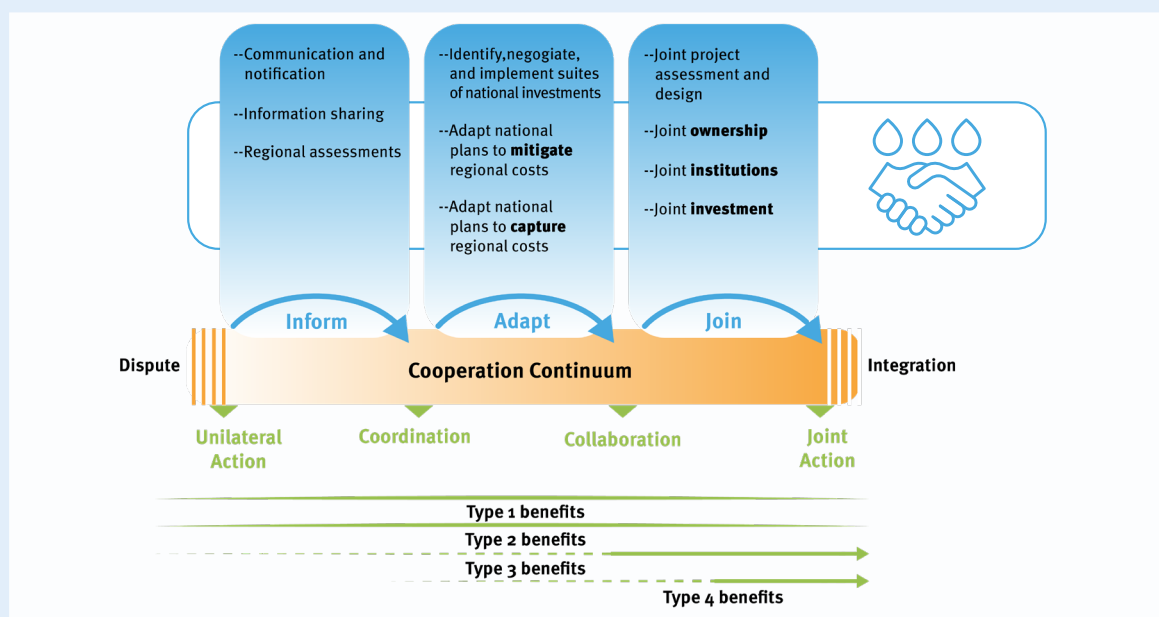
One of the objectives of this paper is to reflect upon key factors that enable regional MSDs to positively influence transboundary water cooperation. In this context, this paper proposes a conceptual framework composed of four key enabling factors as a starting point to discuss how MSDs function and identify what helped or prevented their progress.

<p>Inclusion and role of facilitators</p> 	<p>Using existing regional political and economic processes</p> 	<p>Fostering social learning across scales</p> 	<p>Leveraging sustainable finance</p> 
<p>MSDs should demonstrate convening power and stakeholder inclusivity while managing power relations. The role of dialogue facilitators is key in carefully balancing this aspect.</p>	<p>MSDs should be anchored in regional priorities and create synergies with ongoing processes and alliances.</p>	<p>Designing and structuring of MSDs should sustain long-term engagement and be geared towards enhancing social learning processes on key identified priorities in the region.</p>	<p>MSDs should seek to diversify their finances beyond the initial source of funding and become financially sustainable in the long run.</p>

Key takeaway

The comparative analysis of case studies shows that regional MSDs can be a powerful mechanism to advance cooperation over shared waters (Figure 1). In places where basin-wide cooperation was previously non-existent, regional dialogues have often resulted in initiating spin-off basin dialogue processes, which in some cases have resulted in countries signing agreements or taking joint action over shared waters. In cases where basin-wide cooperation is already in place, regional dialogues offer a unique opportunity for stakeholders to take greater ownership of existing cooperation arrangements, as well as for raising capacities of staff of joint institutions or creating further entry points for advanced cooperation.

Figure 1. Cooperation continuum. **Source:** Adapted from [Sadoff and Grey \(2005\)](#)



The analysis also revealed that regional MSDs generally create a community of practice (CoP) among basin decision-makers and stakeholders, leading to relationship and trust building, which are crucial elements in fostering transboundary water cooperation. They do so by allowing stakeholders to exchange on issues surrounding transboundary water more broadly, rather than focusing on issues related to a particular basin, as well as through joint activities such as trainings and site visits. The development of CoPs ultimately feeds back into the MSD process through mobilising additional partners, selecting the right approaches, and cultivating a conducive environment for transboundary water cooperation.

The views expressed in this document do not necessarily represent the official views of GWP. This is one in a series of reports on *MSPs for Improved Water Governance*, under the *A Stake in Water Project*, funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC).