



# INTERNATIONAL WATERS EXPERIENCE NOTES

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## Enhancing transboundary water cooperation through multistakeholder regional dialogues



### **Abstract:**

Regional multistakeholder dialogues (MSDs) are an effective way to advance transboundary water cooperation. This experience note aims to capture experiences and key lessons from regional dialogues that have been supported through GEF IW:LEARN. It highlights how successful regional MSD in Southeast Europe was replicated in Central America, fostering cooperation and partnerships. Key enabling factors to foster such regional MSDs are introduced, and key resource materials are highlighted to replicate the effort by relevant actors within the GEF International Waters community. Experiences were also shared through an online session organized in the context of a massive open online course (MOOC) on Governance for Transboundary Freshwater Security, organized jointly with Global Water Partnership (GWP) and IW:LEARN in 2023.

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## Enhancing transboundary water cooperation through multistakeholder regional dialogues

Activities implemented through:

- GEF IW #5279: GEF International Waters Learning Exchange and Resources Network IW LEARN
- GEF IW # 10374: GEF IW:LEARN 5: Supporting Portfolio Coordination Within and Beyond the International Waters Focal Area, particularly in Small Island Developing States, Through Knowledge Sharing, Information Management, Partnership Building and Programmatic Guidance Services

### DESCRIPTION

Regional multistakeholder dialogues bring different stakeholders to the same table, providing an avenue for reaching a common understanding of regional issues. In regions where several countries share water resources, regional dialogues provide an opportunity to raise awareness of the importance of managing the shared resources. The approach has its merit compared to initiating the conversation at the basin level, where the focus of the dialogues tends to be on specific issues of contention where upstream and downstream riparian interests are more clearly drawn from the outset. Regional dialogues allow participants to share joint understandings on the importance of cooperation, providing an opportunity for concretely bringing cooperation forward.

As a neutral multistakeholder platform that exists globally, but with regional and country presence, the Global Water Partnership (GWP) is well positioned to facilitate transboundary water cooperation on the ground. GWP has been the partner of GEF IW:LEARN from its early stages. GEF IW:LEARN supported Southeast Europe regional dialogues, where GWP Mediterranean played a key role in fostering cooperation. The dialogue started in 2006 and is still ongoing to date. The dialogue created an enabling environment for advancing transboundary water cooperation where a Community of Practice among participants was created, which became the vehicle to drive on-the-ground cooperation. The regional dialogue had a positive impact in initiating or advancing existing cooperation in four transboundary river basins and one aquifer system, including the Drin Basin, the Mesta/Nestos basin, the Sava River Basin, and the Dinaric Karst Transboundary aquifer system.

During the IW:LEARN phase 4 (2016-2020), this successful case was replicated in Central America, where the Central American Commission for Sustainable Development (CCAD) and GWP Central America initiated the regional transboundary water dialogue in 2019 and facilitated the dialogue on an annual basis. The dialogue initiated the process of developing joint regional guideline on the principles of cooperation for transboundary water management among countries, which has been validated by the Council of Ministers of CCAD in 2023. The success and lessons from the dialogue was shared globally during the online event in October 2023 as part of [Massive Open Online Course \(MOOC\) on Governance for Transboundary Freshwater Security](#), organized jointly by GWP and GEF IW:LEARN, as one of the first activities of IW:LEARN phase 5 (2023-2026). This experience note provides more information on how this replication took place, and how it can be further replicated in other regions that can potentially benefit from enhancing cooperation through regional dialogues.

### THE EXPERIENCE

#### *Issue*

In Central America, transboundary basins represent more than 42% of its territory and are home to 21 million people. The [Transboundary Water Assessment Program \(TWAP\)](#) estimated that the most critical challenge for the region in terms of Transboundary Water Resources Management (TWRM) is governance due to the absence of specific agreements. This is reflected in the average value of indicator 6.5.2 of SDG, which measures the proportion of the transboundary basin area (river, lake, or aquifer) within a country with

an operational arrangement for water cooperation in place. The survey conducted in 2020 resulted in an average score of 3.64% for Central America, showing the dire need for advancing cooperation in this region.

In response to the requests of the countries, the CCAD included transboundary water management as part of the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) guideline established in the Regional Environmental Framework Strategy (ERAM), where GWP Central America played a key role in its development through providing technical inputs.

### *Addressing the Issue*

To concretely respond to the need to enhance transboundary Water cooperation, since 2019, the CCAD, in coordination with Global Water Partnership Central America (GWP CAM), initiated a process called Multistakeholder Regional Dialogue (MSRD) to catalyze cooperation among countries in TWRM. This could lead to actions at the basin level, based on the opportunities and benefits identified by the participants and supported by the Ministries of Environment and Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Central America. Initial funding to catalyze the dialogue was provided through GEF IW:LEARN, along with co-financing from GWP, CCAD, and later joined by the Water Convention of UNECE.

The dialogue has taken place every year since 2019 and has evolved through every step as illustrated in figure 1. The first one was initiating a region-wide conversation on the importance of transboundary water cooperation. The dialogue provided an avenue to exchange experiences within Central America and globally on transboundary water cooperation, allowing participants to recognize the benefits of cooperation. Participants came from Ministries of Environment and Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, two key ministries mandated to advance cooperation in each country. The dialogue also brought non-governmental organizations (NGOs), basin level organizations (such as Plan Trifinio and Bi-national commission of Sixaola), and international organizations that are implementing key transboundary water projects in Central America, as well as overseas experts with experience in fostering cooperation. Sharing the knowledge and experience on cooperation was followed by group discussions, allowing participants to engage in open conversations on what type of cooperation can be useful for Central America. The second dialogue in 2020 occurred in parallel to the meeting of CCAD's Council of Ministers, at the same venue. This allowed some of the ministers to join the dialogue themselves and resulted in CCAD adopting political and technical commitments to report all the results and conclusions of the workshop at the high-level forums and Councils of Ministers. The idea to develop a regional guideline promoting transboundary water cooperation arose at this second dialogue, which was fostered and further developed through follow-up activities and subsequent dialogues. The dialogue expanded its scope in terms of participants. Belize, Mexico, and Dominican Republic joined the process. In terms of type of participants, in addition to Ministry representatives, NGOs/civil society participants and local government officials from the region also joined the dialogue. A lively group discussion took place to explore how concrete collaboration can be initiated among different countries and different basins in the region, where some ideas were further taken towards action by participants. The dialogue participants confirmed the usefulness of the regional dialogue on this topic and agreed to continue the dialogues.

Subsequent dialogues took place while the world faced the health crisis of COVID-19. A regional dialogue was conducted in complete online format in 2021 and another in hybrid format in 2022. In these dialogues, the participants discussed international water law principles as the basis for the development of regional guidelines. Concurrent with the dialogues, CCAD, GWP and UNECE co-organized a series of online training sessions on different aspects of IWRM and transboundary water cooperation. These learning sessions helped build the capacities of key participants and relevant personnel who are in the driving seat to promote cooperation.

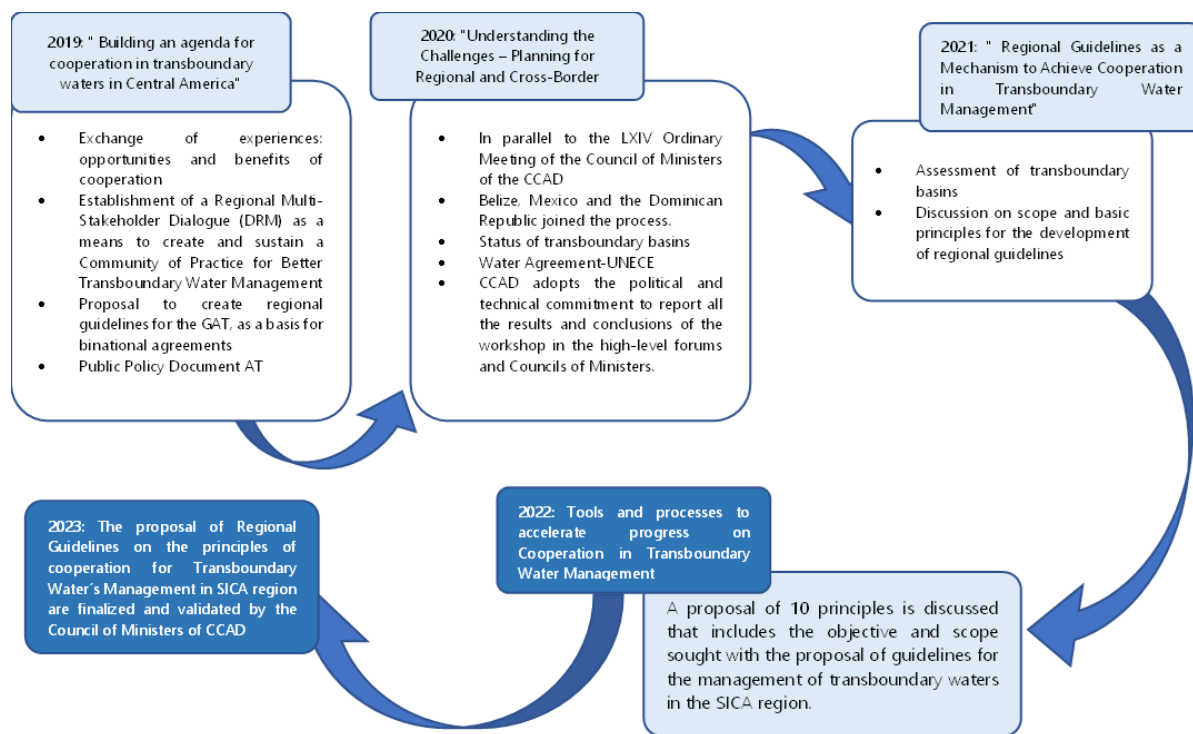


Figure 1: Evolution of regional dialogue in Central America

## RESULTS AND LEARNING

Through the MSRSD, countries recognized the importance of transboundary water management and expressed the need to prepare Regional Guidelines that identify common objectives to guide the establishment of agreements which foster cooperation. Considering country requests expressed through the MRSD, the Regional Environmental Framework Strategy ((ERAM) 2021-2025 of the CCAD, approved in February 2021, includes as a result<sup>1</sup> to have "Constituted and operating a regional framework of work for the management of the courses of International Waters, Basins and Transboundary Aquifers", and as a strategic action to advance on such result, "The elaboration of a proposal for adoption of the Regional Guidelines for Cooperation in International Waters, with the participation of priority political and institutional entities<sup>2</sup>".

Following up on the implementation of the ERAM, and as part of the MSRSD, in 2021, the discussion around the scope of guidelines began and was continued in 2022 in Panama. This led to a discussion on a proposal of 10 principles as a basis for the regional guidelines. As part of the agreements reached in Panama in May 2022, the regional guidelines document was prepared, which was put to the consultation of the countries through the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Ministries of Environment during the last quarter of 2022, receiving feedback from the countries through a workshop and official communications. After incorporating all comments from countries, in July 2023 the proposed guideline was presented and validated by the Council of Ministers of CCAD.s.

Awareness raised during the dialogues has stimulated one of the participating countries, Panama, to accede to the Water Courses Convention, being the first country to accede to this Convention in Latin America. This also shows the catalytic effect and impact of this type of regional dialogue in promoting cooperation.

<sup>1</sup> Result 3.4 of the the Regional Environmental Framework Strategy ((ERAM) 2021-2025

<sup>2</sup> Strategic action 3.4.1 of the the Regional Environmental Framework Strategy ((ERAM) 2021-2025

## REPLICATION

Four enabling factors should be considered to replicate the successes achieved in these regional dialogues.

1. Inclusion and role of facilitators: Multistakeholder regional dialogues should demonstrate convening power and stakeholder inclusiveness while balancing and managing different inputs during the dialogue. The role of facilitator plays a vital role. In the case of regional dialogue in Central America, GWP CAM and CCAD played key roles in facilitating the dialogue and bringing the right actors to the table.
2. Using existing regional political and economic processes: Anchoring the dialogues in the existing regional priorities and utilizing ongoing socio-economic-political processes is another key enabling factor for a successful and impactful dialogue. In the case of Central America, dialogues build onto the ongoing political process through CCAD, as well as the Central American Integration System (SICA).
3. Fostering social learning across scales: Designing and structuring the dialogues is another key factor. Dialogues need to take into consideration: ensuring topics of the dialogues flow from one dialogue to another reflecting key regional priorities, ensuring long-term engagement of participants, and geared towards enhancing social learning processes on key identified priorities in the region. In the case of Central America, the initial dialogue design allowed participants to be aware of the issue, and to jointly discuss what possible joint actions can be taken throughout the region. Subsequent dialogue design evolved based on interests and needs identified through previous dialogues, responding to the needs of participants and key stakeholders who are in the position to act on the ground.
4. Leveraging sustainable finance: For MSRD to be successful, leveraging long-term sustainable financing is crucial. In the case of regional dialogues in Central America, initial support from GEF IW:LEARN was catalytic in initiating the dialogue, but each dialogue has also mobilized co-financing through GWP and CCAD. The last dialogue was co-financed by UNECE. Conducting dialogues back-to-back with existing key meetings was another success factor where participants could be leveraged through other existing regional events and meetings.

These factors were identified through research that GWP conducted to identify enabling factors towards successful regional multistakeholder dialogues that aim to advance transboundary water cooperation. The publication [“Multi-stakeholder regional dialogues: Pathways for advancing transboundary water cooperation”](#) reviewed three cases of regional dialogues: South East Europe, South Africa, and South Asia.

To support the replication of these experiences, GWP and IW:LEARN co-hosted an online event in 2023 as part of the MOOC interactive session series “Transboundary freshwater security train,” where experts presented key learnings from the initiative in a highly interactive way. Key lessons from this event are summarized in [GWP’s event article](#). Event recordings and slides are available from <https://iwrmaactionhub.org/Multi-stakeholder%20regional20dialogues>

## SIGNIFICANCE

Regional dialogues provide a unique entry point to fostering cooperation. While typical dialogue takes place at basin level where they can be an effective means to address upstream-downstream conflict resolution at the relevant scale, it does not always give an opportunity for stakeholders to step away from specific conflictual situation, and to consider a wider benefit of cooperation dialogue context is placed within a regional context. Regional dialogues would allow key government actors and stakeholders engaged in transboundary water management to bring a new perspective towards promoting and advancing cooperation.

Another associated aspect of regional multistakeholder dialogues is the creation of Communities of Practice (CoP). Through the exchange and learning that individuals will face through the dialogue, CoP of like-

minded practitioners and stakeholders are established, which can be key driving forces not only in the continuation of the dialogue but also by advancing cooperation concretely on the ground.

## REFERENCES

- Multi-stakeholder regional dialogues: Pathways for advancing transboundary water cooperation. [Full text](#). [Summary](#).
- Online event 'How can multi-stakeholder regional dialogues advance transboundary water cooperation. [Event article](#). [Event materials](#) (videos and PPT)
- Massive Open Online Course on Governance for Transboundary Freshwater Security. [Information about the course](#), [Course and registration](#)

## KEYWORDS

- ◆ Dialogues
- ◆ Multistakeholder
- ◆ Transboundary water cooperation
- ◆ Stakeholder engagement
- ◆ Water / Freshwater

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) *International Waters Experience Notes* series helps the transboundary water management (TWM) community share its practical experiences to promote better TWM. **Experiences** include successful practices, approaches, strategies, lessons, methodologies, etc., that emerge in the context of TWM.

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