

DEVELOPMENT POLICY FORUM (DPF)



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THE RIPPLE EFFECT

WATER AS A TOOL FOR PEACE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

EVENT REPORT



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WATER DIPLOMACY IS ABOUT IMPROVING CITIZENS' LIVES

Access to the world's shared water resources is inextricably linked to socio-political and economic 'power dynamics' that impact hugely on people's lives and livelihoods. This was one of the key messages of Friends of Europe's 25 March Policy Insight debate "The ripple effect: water as a tool for peace and sustainable development".

But while water competition between regions or states can generate friction and conflict, water diplomacy can also be used to help broker peace and cooperation and, crucially, should aim to make a tangible difference to ordinary citizens.

As we prepare for the "changing of the guard" in the EU "we have a topic that's so essential for world peace that we should keep it high up on the agenda," said Shada Islam, Friends of Europe's Director for Europe & Geopolitics.

Naho Mirumachi, lead of King's Water research hub and Senior Lecturer at King's College London, said it was vital to remember that conflict wasn't necessarily driven by a lack of water resources. Cautioning practitioners against "the binary trap of thinking of water as a tool for peace or a tool for war", she suggested that they consider the "socioeconomic power dynamics that make it easy for some people to access water and others to have to bear the burden."

"I would ask 'who is the peace for?' I think that's the real question," she said.

WHY IS WATER SO IMPORTANT?

In the same way that rivers and lakes do not respect national borders, the topics of water management, use, allocation and access flow indiscriminately through almost every area of life.

Linked to the wider issues of climate change, food security and energy security, as well as related areas such as migration and trade in agricultural goods, panellists at the debate agreed that water cannot – and should not – be considered in isolation.

In fact, Mirumachi noted, the drivers of water conflict are normally not attributable to a "lack of physical water availability".

"If you think about how water is used and accessed in different parts of the world – for example, a dry region that enables rich neighbourhoods to have access to water while poor neighbourhoods

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Dominic Porter

Head of Division for Economic and Global Issues
at the European External Action Service (EEAS)

“... this institutional structure and the engagement of top political leaders are used to make a real difference for the people”

Sundeep Waslekar

President of the Strategic Foresight Group

have to struggle to find [it] – it’s very much about the socio-political economic conditions that shape the way water is accessed and used,” she said.

With 40% of armed conflicts having a resource-based stress factor, water is a “foreign policy issue... in the broadest sense,” said Dominic Porter, Head of Division for Economic and Global Issues at the European External Action Service (EEAS).

Citing work being done, particularly by EU members, at the UN Security Council where water was previously considered to be a development issue, he said, “There is a gradually increasing acceptance that these subjects need to be treated at the highest political level. They contribute to, if not cause, threats to international peace and security.”

TOOL FOR PEACE, NOT WEAPON OF WAR

With the goal of ensuring regional cooperation, stability and peace, water diplomacy uses diplomatic – as opposed to technical – instruments in existing, and emerging, disagreements and conflicts over shared water resources.

“The talk is often about the drivers of confrontation and conflict... but we also want to look at the drivers for peace and transboundary cooperation,” said Islam.

Sundeep Waslekar, President of the India-based Strategic Foresight Group, set out the three factors which define good practice in transboundary water cooperation: “There is a strong institutional mechanism. There is engagement of political leaders at the highest level. And this institutional structure and the engagement of top political leaders are used to make a real difference for the people.”

Where in the world does such good practice exist? Waslekar cited Finnish-Russian agreements on shared rivers and lakes as among the world’s best cases of trans-boundary cooperation, as well as work on the Rhine, the Danube, and the Gambia and Senegal river basins. In respect to the latter, he said that treaties had “actually prevented wars”.

Mirumachi said it was crucial to take into account the local context in which water is being contested. “There’s no one-size-fits-all type of treaty or framework,” she said. “We can follow some good principles, but how that actually plays out in each river basin will be different.”

WHAT DOES THE EU BRING TO COOPERATION EFFORTS?

The EU has a responsibility to share its political wisdom on the ways it has navigated some of its transboundary issues, said Islam.

While Waslekar said that the EU's focal point was in the development arena, when it "should be in the political", Porter believes that the EU is influential in driving a "growing interest from the foreign policy community" to look at water cooperation holistically.

The EU's integrated approach to preventing conflict and managing crises highlights that "water is an issue for sustainable development, but also a cause of tension, and an issue for diplomatic engagement and dialogue," Porter said, noting that the European Commission Directorate-Generals for development and environment, as well as the EEAS, had worked closely together to "push from all ends".

He added there were good examples of cooperation within Europe – citing the "world's most international river", the Danube, and the EU's Water Framework Directive 2000 – as well as between Europe and its neighbourhood. A recent such example is the EU's involvement in a new photovoltaic solar field in Gaza, which Porter said will provide water for 250,000 people by fuelling a desalination plant.

PRIVATE SECTOR 'CAN ADD VALUE'

Providing a private sector perspective, Therese Noorlander, Sustainability Director for Europe at The Coca-Cola Company, said that by being active in 200 countries and involved in the whole supply chain, her company has the opportunity to do a lot of positive work.

"Water is a vital ingredient for us," she said. "And a lot of the other ingredients we use are grown with water so it's very important for our crops in the ecosystem, and for the communities in which we're working."

Noorlander also noted that the private sector has a role to play in taking a people-centred approach to water resource management, saying that while they "cannot fix the politics, by working on a local level and trying to add value for communities... we can help out and make the right investments that really help build those communities."

She highlighted that much can be achieved through education, describing a project around the Danube, where – along with the World Wildlife Fund – they toured around talking to residents about restoring and replenishing the water. "You can overcome some of the roadblocks you might have from a policy point of view," she added.

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Lead of King’s Water research hub and Senior Lecturer at King’s College London

PEACE FOR WHOM?

With one in nine people in the world still lacking access to clean water, successful cooperation on shared resources comes down to outcomes for citizens.

“Unless you are making a difference to the life of common people, it’s all useless,” cautioned Waslekar.

Agreeing, Mirumachi explained, “It’s important to not just think about how water can be simply a technical tool for achieving a nice-looking handshake between premiers or beautiful words on paper, it’s about how you can qualitatively change the everyday struggles of people who are suffering.”

One audience contributor added that even where there were agreements, for example in the Senegal basin, there was a lack of information being passed to people on the ground.

Porter agreed on the importance of disseminating information to impacted communities: “The point is involvement at community level from the beginning. Those people are going to have to physically manage the water cooperation on the ground.”

CONCLUSION: CHICKEN OR EGG?

At the end of the day, is water cooperation a result of existing peaceful cooperation, or is it itself a creator of peace, questioned one participant.

Often the road to peace begins with a political settlement and on other occasions it starts with water cooperation, said Waslekar. “The two go together.”

“The answer is both. It’s a circle,” agreed Porter. “Soft power, hard power, technical, political, which way do you go? It’s something the EU does quite well. We can talk technical to start with, but... at a higher and higher level it becomes political. To exchange experience in a non-confrontational way, facilitate dialogue.... this is our aim and, in some cases, our achievement.”

Quoting a recent statement by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, he added, “It’s not about hard power or soft power, it’s about cooperative power.”



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