

Water: turning the risk of conflict into an opportunity for cooperation and peace

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Editorial

Dear colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that we present the sixth edition of the RésEAU Brief series, a medium to share SDC's learnings from water-related projects and programmes at the global level. This edition addresses **water as a vector for peace**.

Water is a vital element, not only in the fight against poverty but also for **peace and political stability**. In the future, water will be of more geopolitical importance than any other resource, including crude oil, with demand set to rise more than 50% by 2030 ([World Resource Institute, 2021](#)). This will also increase the risk of conflict over water.

Competition over access to water resources and related services **affects people** across the globe in their **daily lives**, from anxiety whether the family's daily drinking water can be secured to struggles over water allocation between rural and urban water users.

Most of the world's water resources are shared between countries. These **transboundary waters** create social, economic, environmental and political interdependencies that make **cooperation a precondition** to sustainable development and peace ([United Nations and UNESCO, 2021](#)).

SDG target 6.5 calls for the implementation of **integrated water resources management** at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation, by 2030.

Against the backdrop of these challenges, this **RésEAU Brief shares project experiences and tools** to approach water as a vector for peace, including strategies that can be used to **strengthen cooperation** on water at different levels.

The current edition contributes learning from concrete projects to this year's global attention and dialogues on **water for peace**. In 2024, the World Water Day focused on [Leveraging Water for Peace](#). Moreover, the [International Cooperation Forum Switzerland 2024](#) poses the question "What is peace?" and provides space to exchange on Water and Peace. Lastly, Switzerland as an elected member of the UN Security Council from 2023 to 2024 focuses on building sustainable peace, protecting civilians in armed conflict and addressing climate security. In all these areas, water and water-related infrastructure is often a key piece of the puzzle.

We wish you a good read and welcome your feedback and comments!

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1. Global outlook on water cooperation

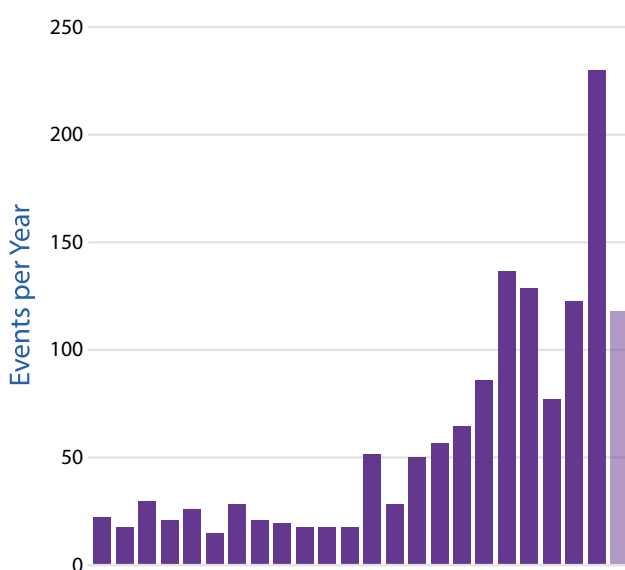
Conflicts tied to freshwater resources have occurred throughout history. Water either triggered conflicts, was used as a weapon, or water systems themselves became a casualty of war. Understanding the causes and patterns of water-related conflicts is essential for prioritising resolution efforts and strategies to reduce the risk of future conflicts ([Gleick and Shimabuku, 2023](#)).



Historic trends

The [Pacific Institute](#) began collecting data on water-related conflicts more than 35 years ago and created an open-source database - the [Water Conflict Chronology](#) (WCC) - to categorize and analyse water-related conflicts. The WCC includes verified instances from 2500 BC to 2023 where water or water systems have been a **trigger** (the control of or access to water leads to conflict), a **weapon** (water is used as a tool), or a **casualty** of conflict (a water system becomes a direct target). A recent analysis focused on the last two decades (see Figure 1) as data availability and reporting methods before this period were less comprehensive and consistent.

The analysis shows a **worsening trend** of increasing water-related conflicts during recent decades. This trend was confirmed by another recent study which merged the [Transboundary Freshwater Dispute Database](#) with the WCC for a more comprehensive overview. Therein, a shift in the cooperation-conflict **balance** was observed, with **conflicts surpassing cooperation events** for the first time in 2017 ([Kåresdotter et al., 2023](#)).



► **Figure 1: The number of water conflict events per year from 2000 to 2023. Data from the Pacific Institute WCC.**

Global hotspots

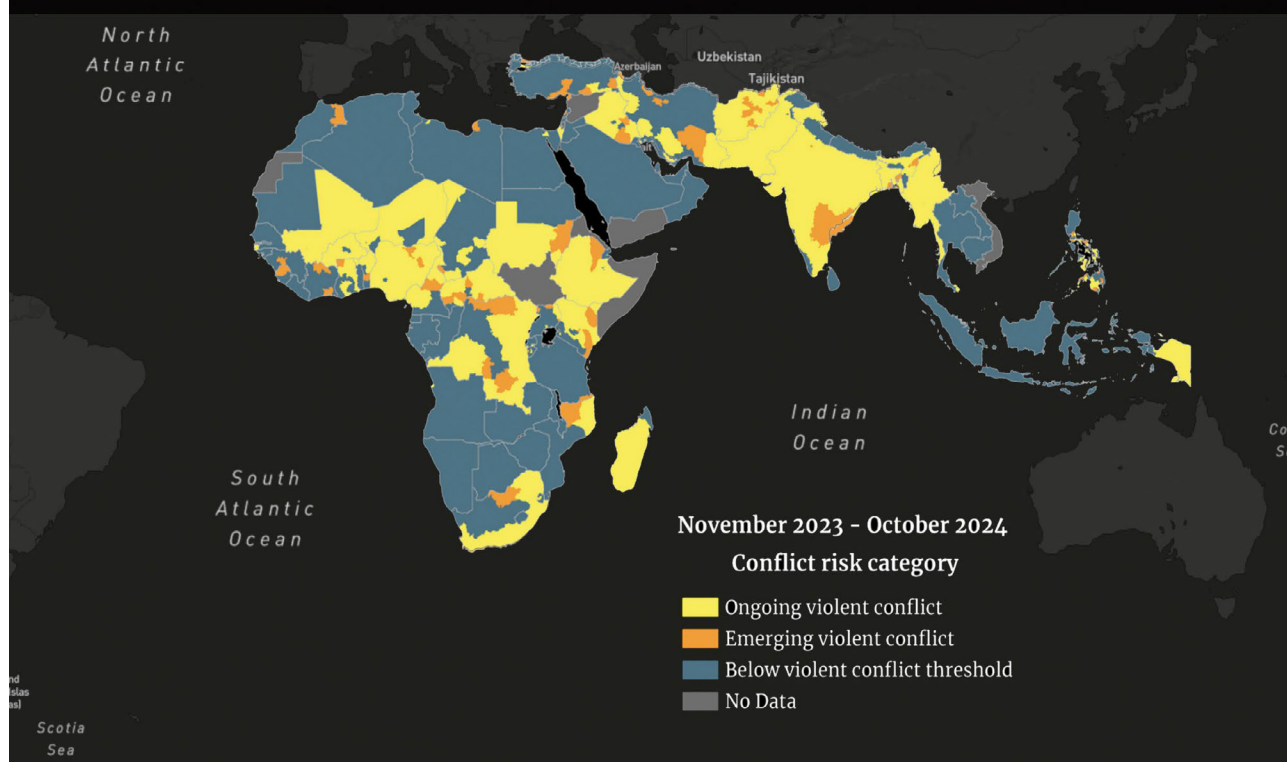
This worsening trend appears to be particularly related to violence in the Middle East, growing disputes during severe droughts over access to water in countries such as India and Iran, and worsening confrontations between nomadic pastoralists and farmers in sub-Saharan Africa. A notable **increase in attacks on water systems** (“casualties”) in recent years is also observed, with deliberate targeting of civilian water infrastructures amidst ongoing conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war ([Pacific Institute, 2023](#)).

While both too much and too little water can foster cooperation, conflicts appear more prevalent in drier regions where water is scarce ([Kåresdotter et al., 2023](#)). Regions with the highest number of recorded water-related conflicts are the Middle East, Eastern Africa, Central and Southern Asia. These are mostly dry areas, consisting of deserts and steppes with low precipitation, often leading to increased drought risk and water insecurity ([Kåresdotter et al., 2023](#)).

The [Water, Peace and Security](#) (WPS) partnership developed the [Global Early Warning Tool](#) to **forecast water-related conflicts** over the next 12 months. The [Conflict Risk Forecast map](#) (see Figure 2) is currently limited to Africa, Western Asia, South and Southeast Asia, but the [Annual Review 2023](#) mentions other regions as well. The map helps to identify hotspots but does not identify the potential cause of conflicts; this must be analysed through regional studies.



Water, Peace and Security Conflict Risk Forecast Map



▶ **Figure 2: Water-related Conflict Risk Forecast Map.**
Source: [WPS Global Early Warning Tool – 2023 Annual Review](#)

While primarily used to predict water- and climate-related conflict, the tool is designed to forecast any type of violent conflict. Previous early warning tools only focused on political, economic, social, and demographic factors to predict water-related conflict. The WPS tool is unique because it combines these factors with environmental variables linked to water, such as rainfall, water scarcity and crop failure, to understand the full picture. The map shows where the model predicts the likelihood of at least 10 fatalities in the next 12 months in the first subnational administrative unit that faces water challenges.

Progress towards SDG 6.5

SDG 6.5 aims to “by 2030, implement integrated water resources management (IWRM) at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate”. Achieving SDG 6.5 is needed to balance competing social, economic, and environmental demands and negative impacts on water resources. Unfortunately, the world is **not on track to achieve SDG 6.5** at all. While most countries have made some progress, the global rate of progress on **IWRM implementation** within national boundaries needs to double if the goal shall still be achieved by 2030 (SDG 6.5.1) ([UNEP, 2021](#)). Only 24 countries have operational arrangements¹ covering all their **transboundary basin areas**, and only 46 countries

have operational arrangements covering 70 per cent or more of their transboundary basin area (SDG 6.5.2) ([United Nations and UNESCO, 2021](#)).

Key challenges for advancing towards SDG 6.5 in general include the lack of policy coordination, insufficient funding, weak institutional capacity, and insufficient monitoring and data sharing.

The next section will present experiences of water cooperation within national borders, followed by a section on the implementation of innovative financial tools for transboundary water cooperation.

¹ A bilateral or multilateral treaty, convention, agreement, or other formal arrangement between riparian countries that provides a framework for cooperation.

2. Water cooperation within national borders

Roughly half of the world's population currently experiences severe water scarcity for at least part of the year. One quarter of the world's population face 'extremely high' levels of water stress, using over 80% of their annual renewable freshwater supply ([UNESCO, 2024](#)).

Competition over water occurs at **local level**, for example between water users of the same drinking water supply system or between head and tailenders of an irrigation system. Also playing out at local level but with **national implications**, is the competition between different water use sectors over the quantity and quality of water, such as between urban water demand and agriculture or between industry and ecosystems. This competition impacts the daily lives of millions of water users around the globe but does not make it to the headlines.

This section highlights the **strategies** of projects that have improved water governance and cooperation within countries, crossing administrative boundaries and between water use sectors.

2.1 Cooperation across administrative borders

For an example on **community and local level conflicts** around water and how to address them, we focus on the Borana region of southern **Ethiopia**. Access to grazing lands and water is key for pastoralist communities there, yet they face increasingly frequent and intense droughts. Underlying are also the conflicts between nomadic herders and sedentary farmers over natural resources, and the degradation of pastureland – whether through overgrazing, bush encroachment or soil erosion. The consequences are dramatic: a decrease in productivity and an increase in poverty, hunger and water shortages ([SDC, nd](#)).

The SDC project Sustainable Natural Resources Management for Enhanced Pastoralist Food Security (or 'NRM-Borana') aimed to improve the food and nutrition security and the resilience of (agro-) pastoralist communities in the Borana Zone, through context-specific and sustainable NRM practices, and through enhanced pastoralist income diversification ([Helvetas, 2021](#)).

Intra-community conflicts occur between members of the same or different villages, clusters, districts or municipalities. They generally concern disagreements over the use of a water source or pasture – especially the enclosure, by an individual, of pastureland that is considered communal ([Helvetas, 2022](#)). The project has sought to address the competition for natural resources through the improved **governance of water and pastures** and managing conflicts immediately associated with these ([Helvetas, 2022](#)). Concretely, through the revitalization of the traditional meetings for determining natural resource management and by building mutual understanding between the local government officers and traditional authorities. Capacities were built of local leaders and Peace Committee members in conflict-sensitive dialogue. Despite their traditional exclusion from such fora, the project insisted on women's involvement in governance processes, recognizing their key role in collecting domestic water supplies and watering weaker animals ([Helvetas, 2022](#)).

Access to water is also contested between governments, **across administrative boundaries** within a country. In Bolivia, the SDC-funded [Integrated Water Management](#) project supported the Ministry of the Environment and Water in improving integrated water and watershed management, and putting the National Watershed Plan into practice ([SDC, nd](#)).



Because of the drought of 2017, rural people in Ethiopia deepen the drenching pond so that more water can be collected.

© [Helvetas](#), 2017

In two strategic watersheds under this plan, shared between subnational departmental and municipal governments, conflicts occur for three reasons: over water access and use rights, over the management of water supply systems, and over water quality, notably due to mining in their upper parts (Helvetas, 2022). The project sought to establish coordination among various state levels, water use sectors and institutions at watershed level. This was done through the organization of **Interinstitutional Basin Platforms**, in charge of defining and implementing **watershed master plans**. Both are instruments for dialogue, for identifying common interests that override differences (such as the protection of water sources) and agreement, placed in the hands of the basin stakeholders.

2.2 Cooperation across sectors

In the **Greater Mekong sub-region** (Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam), the pressure on the river's water is growing due to **hydropower** development, in a context of demographic growth and rapid urbanization and large-scale natural resource exploitation. Downstream river **ecosystems**, the environmental services they provide and the local riverine population whose **livelihoods** depend on them, have been negatively affected through

lower flow rates and pollution of water (OXFAM, nd). Yet people most affected continue to be excluded from decision-making on water resource management.

The [Inclusive Water Governance Project](#) (IWGP), implemented by Oxfam and International Rivers, aims to make **water resource governance** processes at the national and regional levels **more inclusive** of civil society, women and marginalized social groups (SDC, nd).

The project follows three strategies to achieve greater citizen participation in water governance and cross-sector dialogues: 1) promote the **leadership roles** of women and representatives of marginalized social groups in influencing national and regional (non) state actors in water governance and energy policy and planning processes; 2) enhance the engagement of riverine **communities and civil society actors** in those processes, to promote the interests and rights of vulnerable social groups; and 3) increase compliance of **government and private sector** actors at the national and regional levels with **international standards** and best practice for the protection of human rights, and engage with and include the perspectives of civil society in hydropower and renewable energy policies and plans (OXFAM, nd, SDC, nd).



In the upper part of the watersheds in Bolivia, mining is an important economic activity for families. Contamination of the rivers is the greatest impact that the watershed and the population suffer from this activity.

© [Helvetas](#), 2022

3. Transboundary water cooperation



3.1 Blue Peace: water as an asset for peace

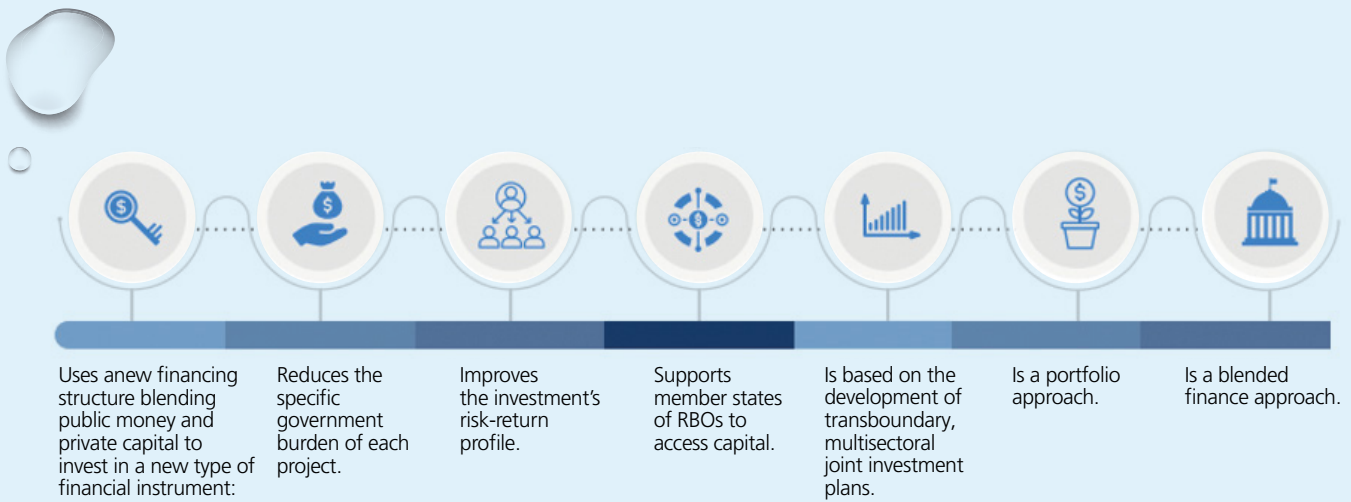
Through the [Blue Peace initiative](#), launched in 2010, Switzerland is supporting both **cross-border cooperation** and **national platforms** for dialogue on water access issues. Blue Peace is based on the idea that managing water resources around the world fairly and efficiently helps to achieve sustainable peace. Switzerland has a range of foreign policy instruments – The “Swiss toolbox” – to meet the current challenges (see Figure 3).

The [Blue Peace initiative](#) uses various **instruments** to reduce tensions over shared water resources and build water cooperation to support peace and stability. These instruments include **innovative financial tools** that facilitate cross-sectoral and transboundary investment in water. Water-related investments are mostly done at a national or sector level. However, local governments and river basin organisations are in many cases the main providers of water-related services and responsible for the integrated and sustainable management of water resources these services depend on.

Promoting access to public and private capital for these non-sovereign entities while strengthening their institutional capacities is the aim of the [Blue Peace Financing initiative](#). The initiative incentivizes countries and sectors to cooperate on sustainable resource management, reducing social, political, economic, and environmental risks and conflicts. It also **reshapes the financial sector’s view of water**: not as a distinct sector, but as an entry-point for multisectoral and regional impact investment opportunities. The initiative is being developed and implemented by SDC, in partnership with the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF).



► Figure 3. The Swiss water and security toolbox (SDC, 2017).



Blue Peace Bond.

↳ **The Blue Peace Bond:**

- Will be issued by a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV);
- Will be issued based on the Joint Investment plan;
- Will be backed by cash-flows from the underlying projects;
- Is the beginning of innovative financing for that RBOs future masterplans;
- Is complementary to classic financial sources;
- Provides a new opportunity for regional and multisectoral impact investing.

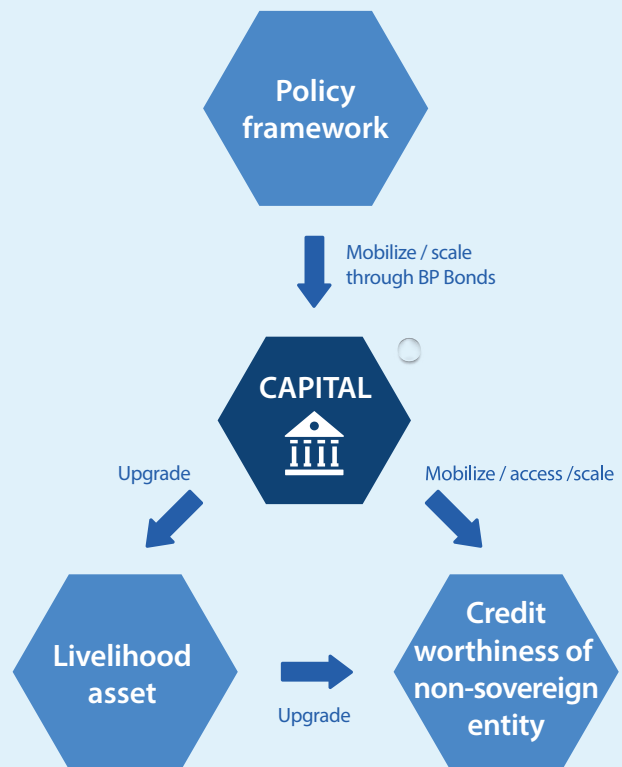
► **Figure 4. Advantages of the Blue Peace Bond (UNCDF, 2022).**

3.2 The Blue Peace Financing Initiative: Transboundary and multisectoral investments in the Gambia river basin

Background

The first phase of the [project](#) (2018-2024) aims to enhance sustainable economic development and peaceful societies by creating new and additional ways to access financial capital at **transboundary and municipal level**, based on joint multisectoral investment plans. The pilot phase is currently taking place in **West Africa**, with the [Gambia River Basin Development Organisation](#) (OMVG). The OMVG was created in 1978; its member states comprise The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Senegal. OMVG funds its projects mainly through individual contributions from its four member states. However, without a direct funding mechanism, it faces challenges due to a complex network of contracts and conditions, making it ineffective ([OMVG, 2023](#)).

This River Basin Organization (RBO) has proven to be the **ideal pilot case** to demonstrate the Blue Peace Financing Initiative. It is a well-established RBO with a legal framework that provides the necessary authority to raise and manage funds. In addition, the OMVG is open to trying new ways of financing. Moreover, OMVG has proven to have a strong political will and support from its member states ([UNCDF, 2022](#)).



► **Figure 5. Theory of change of the Blue Peace Financing Initiative (UNCDF, 2022).**



How it works

First, the OMVG has been supported in the development of the **Masterplan** for the integrated development of its river basins. The [Masterplan](#) was adopted unanimously in November 2023 and will serve as the basis for the OMVG's joint investment plans. These enable the OMVG to issue a financial instrument – the **Blue Peace Bond** (BPB) (see Figure 4) –, to get access to the capital market, be better positioned to absorb the financing, roll out physical infrastructure and pay back investors ([UNCDF, 2022](#)) (see Figure 5).

The Masterplan includes **183 cross-sectoral projects**, as diverse as the development of hydropower, access to drinking water, natural parks, irrigation, or transport and navigation systems. The projects are expected to positively impact **6.6 million people**, at a total cost of approximately seven billion USD.

In the second stage, UNCDF and SDC aim to equip the OMVG with the tools to develop innovative financing mechanisms that will enable it to directly access the financial markets through the **issuance of BPBs**. The OMVG, a regional, multi-state organisation and a non-sovereign entity, will issue BPBs to mobilise capital. This is done through a special-purpose entity created and owned by the RBO, which manages and implements the **Investment Plan**.

The BPB is designed from the investor's standpoint, offering significant advantages. The portfolio approach combines large infrastructure projects that generate revenue with smaller but equally important projects which have a higher dependence on subsidies. This diversification and cross-subsidization offered by BPB helps to **de-risk investments** while also funnelling funds to smaller projects.

Next steps

The first BPBs are expected to be on the market by the beginning of 2025. Other RBOs have indicated their interest in replicating this model in their region. The next phase of the Blue Peace Financing Program is currently being prepared and will therefore focus on replicating this and other successful financing instruments for water in different regions globally ([Manaz, UNCDF, 2023](#)).

4. Water cooperation across generations

The unsustainable use of water of one generation will negatively affect the livelihoods possibilities of the next ones. Subsequent **generations** have sometimes conflicting interests which need to be transmitted and negotiated. Effective transboundary water resources management is a particularly **long-term process** for which cooperation across generations is essential. Progress will unfold gradually, often spanning multiple generations, and requires continuous engagement to overcome occasional setbacks.

The International Secretariat for Water is contributing to the **Blue Peace Central Asia** initiative by empowering young people in the region and establishing an **inter-generational dialogue** to exchange knowledge and experience. All this promoting a **culture of peace** based on the sharing of resources.

In 2022, the International Secretariat for Water and its partners organised a series of **transboundary dialogues** between young people in the **Syr Darya river basin**, as part of the second high-level international conference on the International Decade for Action “Water for Sustainable Development” 2018-2028 (Dushanbe, Tajikistan). Built

around the themes of water sharing and diplomacy, understanding water-related issues and regional solutions, these talks brought together more than 30 participants in the Nurek Dam region as well as several high-level speakers and senior experts.

By offering formal and informal spaces for dialogue, this event contributed to **bridging the gap** between the soviet generation and the younger generation which was born and/or educated in post-soviet times.

It was an opportunity to use the **Blue Peace Youth Calculation** inspired by the Blue Peace Index² developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit, to calculate the degree of good water governance in this river basin and to talk with experts and decision-makers. The results from the Blue Peace Youth Calculation were very similar to the results from the Blue Peace Index for the Syr Darya river.

This initiative provided an **enabling and safe environment** for young professionals to openly discuss and exchange on sensitive subjects related to water and peace, which are rarely discussed in public settings.



Participants of the Syr Darya river basin dialogue share the score calculated with the Blue Peace Youth Index.
© ISW, 2022

2 The [Blue Peace Index](#) examines the extent to which countries and basins are managing their shared water resources in a sustainable, equitable and collaborative manner.

It is a tool for understanding challenges and opportunities for improving transboundary water cooperation and management of shared water resources.

5. Protection of water infrastructure during armed conflicts

As previously indicated, a notable **increase in attacks on water systems** (“casualties”) has been observed in recent years ([Pacific Institute](#), 2023). These acts have severe direct consequences on the environment and most importantly, on the civilian population, especially vulnerable groups such as children ([Geneva Water Hub](#), 2019). In addition, the long-term consequences, or so-called **cumulative civil damage** and harm of attacks on water infrastructure, are not to be overlooked. The cases of acute watery diarrhoea and the high incidence of cholera for several years now in Syria, are a tragic illustration of this.

Efforts are needed to **increase the effectiveness of the protection** given to water-related infrastructure, water-related personnel, and the objects necessary for their work. In 2017, the Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace, an initiative of fifteen countries, underscored the need to elaborate the **international law protecting water infrastructure during armed conflicts**.

To that end, the Geneva Water Hub developed the [Geneva List of Principles on the Protection of Water Infrastructure](#) initiative to prevent the impact of armed conflicts on water infrastructure and to enhance the protection of this vital resource. It is the first text that **systematizes the main rules applicable** to the protection

of water infrastructure during armed conflicts, specifically in the conduct of hostilities, as well as in post conflict situations. It sets forth recommendations which go beyond existing law.

In November 2023, the Geneva Water Hub and the Republic of Slovenia jointly called for the creation of a [global alliance to spare water from armed conflicts](#). The alliance will provide a roadmap to disseminate these existing legal and technical tools for the protection of freshwater and related installations from armed conflicts. It will harness expertise from the development and humanitarian sectors to identify actions which can increase resilience in times of conflict and post conflict situations.

On 22 March 2023, Switzerland and Mozambique, both elected members of the UN Security Council, led an informal meeting on the occasion of the World Water Day. They discussed safeguarding **access to water and sanitation infrastructure during armed conflicts**, emphasizing its pivotal role in protecting civilians.

Despite international humanitarian law obligations and Security Council resolutions, water facilities continue to be destroyed or damaged in armed conflicts. This must change without delay.



As in other conflict regions around the world, a large proportion of the civilian population in Yemen suffers from a lack of basic services and resources - including lack of access to clean water.

© Keystone, 2015

6. Lessons in a nutshell

A **worsening trend** of increasing water-related conflict has been observed during recent decades. Transboundary water conflicts are on the rise, and more alarmingly, water is being used more and more often as a strategic weapon.

Water can be a source of conflict between citizens and states, but it can also **encourage cooperation**. There are reasons to be **optimistic** as many previously conflicting parties are embracing **collaborative water-sharing treaties**, which can de-escalate hostilities.

The underlying capacity for **more integrated water management** needs developed. Yet implementing IWRM, particularly at transboundary level, is a complex undertaking that demands continuous efforts through incremental measures and long-term commitment.

Within **national boundaries**, key strategies are those that build on the **empowerment** of local actors and their (female) leaders, on building **water governance** spaces that foster common understanding of challenges, interests and benefits at watershed level and on bottom-up developed water resources **planning instruments**. At the same time, pressure based on international standards and rights-based advocacy, can persuade governments and private sector actors to ensure local livelihoods and ecosystems are protected.

An increasing number of **promising mechanisms and tools** for **transboundary water cooperation** are being developed and made available. Switzerland views water diplomacy as a gradual, enduring **path to peace**, emphasizing sustained efforts to manage shared water resources through dialogue and cooperation.

Financing remains a major barrier to accelerate **IWRM** implementation and transboundary cooperation. Concrete instruments and mechanisms to facilitate cross-sectoral and transboundary investment in water are being developed and piloted in the **Blue Peace Financing Initiative**.

International support for more transboundary water cooperation requires a combination of **water diplomacy** and **technical assistance**. Switzerland's expertise in transboundary water cooperation, developed given its upstream location along major European rivers and lakes, can contribute valuable references globally.

In light of the celebrations of the 75th year of the Geneva Conventions and the 2nd Swiss presidency of the UN Security Council, there is a momentum to raise the issue of **water and peace** at the highest level. Particular attention requires the still pending nomination of a UN special envoy on water, a request supported by over 150 UN member states.



“Water is essential to all life on earth and access to water is a fundamental right. It must be guaranteed at all times, including in times of war”.

Christian Frutiger, Assistant Director General,
Head of Thematic Cooperation -
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Resources

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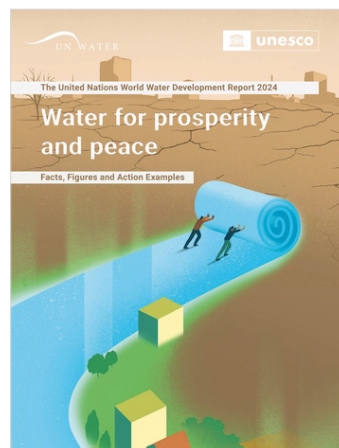
UNEP, 2021

[Progress on Integrated Water Resources Management. Tracking SDG 6 series: global indicator 6.5.1 updates and acceleration needs](#) 88pp.

Water Peace and Security Partnership, 2023

[WPS Global Early Warning Tool](#). Annual Review.

Further reading



The new UN World Water Development Report 2024 on [Water for Prosperity and Peace](#) calls attention to the complex and interlinked relationships between water, prosperity and peace, describing how progress in one dimension can have positive, often essential, repercussions on the others

The [RésEAU Brief 4](#) shows how a Political Economic Analysis can help to understand countries' potential and opportunities for an IWRM approach at national and regional levels to describe the underlying dynamics of political, economic, and social change.

Explore SDC's [handbook for Conflict-Sensitive Programme Management](#) and learn how to implement violence prevention concretely and appropriately in a given context.

Imprint

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Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
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Section Water

Cover photo

A boy dived into a crater filled with water due to a destroyed pipe
in Aleppo, Syria, July 2014
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