



Water and Peace

Water can create peace or spark conflict. When water is scarce or polluted, or when people have unequal or no access, tensions can rise.

Access to drinking water is a human right. There is an urgent need to work together to protect and conserve our most precious resource. Cooperation on water paves the way for cooperation on all shared challenges. We must use water as a tool to create a more peaceful and prosperous world for all.



UN Photo/Diego Ibarra Sánchez

The issue explained

Water is under growing pressure. The water-related impacts of climate change are worsening and a growing global population is placing increasing demand on a finite resource. Within many countries, people's access to safe drinking water is unevenly and unfairly distributed. Between countries, the widespread lack of transboundary cooperation on shared water resources poses a risk to the quality and quantity of

water supplies and therefore threatens social and international stability.

Poor provision of water services can delegitimize States. The inability of a government to provide basic water services can lead to a delegitimization of State institutions and ignite social unrest, especially in the context of food insecurity, high unemployment and internal migration.

Water often plays a role in conflict:

1. **Water can be a trigger** when interests of different water users, including States and provinces, clash and are perceived as irreconcilable, or when water quantity and/or quality decreases, which may affect human- and ecosystem health.
2. **Water can be a weapon** during armed conflict – used by both State and non-State actors – as a means to gain or maintain control over territory and populations or as a means to pressurize opponent groups.
3. **Water can be a casualty** of conflict when water resources, water systems or utility employees are intentional or incidental casualties or targets of violence. Attacks on civilian infrastructure, including water systems, pose serious health risks and violate international humanitarian law.

The way forward

Water can be a tool for peace. Over time, there have been many more incidences of cooperation than conflict over water, but there is much more to do. Peaceful cooperation around water – within and between countries – can pave the way for peaceful cooperation in all sectors.

Water can be a stabilizing force and a catalyst for sustainable development. We must act upon the realization that water is not only a resource to be used and competed over – it is a human right, intrinsic to every aspect of life.

- At the local and national level, different water users – particularly water and sanitation utilities, energy, food and industry – must cooperate through an integrated water resources management approach and promote a circular economy that fulfils people's human rights.



UN Photo/Mark Naftalin

- At the basin level, countries should develop agreements and set up institutions to peacefully manage water resources that cross international borders.
- Governments should cooperate on transboundary waters bilaterally, regionally or globally, for example through signing up to and implementing the United Nations Water Convention and Watercourses Convention.

Water cooperation creates a positive ripple effect. Working together on water across borders and sectors will accelerate progress across the Sustainable Development Goals, enhancing food security, sustaining healthy livelihoods and ecosystems, helping to build resilience to climate change, contributing to disaster risk reduction, providing renewable energy, supporting cities and industry, and fostering regional integration and peace.

Links

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report: Fact sheet – Food and Water

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability

United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Water under fire – report series on the role of water in conflicts around the world

United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Children living in protracted conflicts are three times more likely to die from water-related diseases than from violence

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Transboundary Aquifers: Challenges and the Way Forward

UN-Water. Blueprint for Acceleration: Sustainable Development Goal 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023

UN-Water. Summary Progress Update 2021: SDG 6 – water and sanitation for all

UN-Water GLAAS. Investing in Water and Sanitation: Increasing Access, Reducing Inequalities

World Meteorological Organization (WMO) Protect our people and future generations: Water and Climate Leaders call for urgent action

World Meteorological Organization (WMO) 2021 State of Climate Services: Water

World Bank. Water resources management

Facts and Figures

- Financing transboundary water cooperation poses several challenges due to a perception that such projects are high risk, or because the associated benefits are not well understood. ([UNECE, 2021](#))
- Water cooperation across borders and sectors generates many benefits including enhancing food security, sustaining healthy livelihoods and ecosystems, helping to address resilience to climate change, contributing to disaster risk reduction, providing renewable energy, supporting cities and industry, and fostering regional integration and peace. ([UNESCO/UNECE, 2023](#))
- Roughly half of the world's population is experiencing severe water scarcity for at least part of the year. ([IPCC, 2022](#)) These numbers are expected to increase, exacerbated by climate change and population growth. ([WMO, 2022](#))
- Only 0.5% of water on Earth is useable and available freshwater – and climate change is dangerously affecting that supply. Over the past twenty years, terrestrial water storage – including soil moisture, snow and ice – has dropped at a rate of 1 cm per year, with major ramifications for water security. ([WMO, 2021](#))
- Climate change, population growth and increasing water scarcity will put pressure on food supply ([IPCC, 2014](#)) as most of the freshwater used, about 72% on average, is used for agriculture. ([UN-Water, 2023](#))
- Children under the age of 15 living in countries affected by protracted conflict are, on average, almost three times more likely to die from diarrhoeal diseases caused by a lack of safe water, sanitation and hygiene than by direct violence. ([UNICEF, 2019](#))
- Transboundary waters account for 60 per cent of the world's freshwater flows, and 153 countries have territory within at least 1 of the 310 transboundary river and lake basins and inventoried 468 transboundary aquifer systems. ([UN-Water, 2023](#))



UN World Water Development Report 2024: Leveraging water for peace and prosperity

[Learn more.](#)

Learn More

Concept paper for the UN 2023 Water Conference on 'Water for Cooperation: Transboundary and International Water Cooperation,