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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Multistakeholder regional dialogues as catalysers for transboundary water cooperation

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ABSTRACT

Multistakeholder dialogues (MSDs) provide unique opportunities for partners and key stakeholders to meet in a neutral space, get to know each other, and build trust and mutual understanding before getting into the issue of water cooperation. The study identifies four key enabling factors stimulating regional MSDs: (a) balancing inclusion and role of facilitators, (b) utilizing existing regional political and economic processes, (c) using thematic anchoring and strategic design, and (d) leveraging sustainable finance. An examination of transboundary regional MSDs in South East Europe, Southern Africa, and South Asia reveals the pivotal role played by these four factors.

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Introduction

Transboundary water cooperation typically unfolds as a journey, evolving gradually through various phases, with its share of complexities and unpredictability. Initiating collaboration can take various forms, sometimes stemming from incidents that impact shared water bodies, such as droughts, floods, or accidents. Conversely, cooperation may commence on a more positive note, characterized by activities like data exchange, shared vision development, or engaging in dialogues.

Multistakeholder regional dialogues are one pathway that can potentially initiate cooperation. Multistakeholder dialogues represent a collaborative policy-making approach that offers an alternative perspective to the traditional top-down and government-centric decision-making process (Gray & Purdy, 2018; Innes & Booher, 2003). Within the realm of transboundary water resources management, where multiple sectoral water users and varying viewpoints from different jurisdictions, countries, cultures, and historical relationships are involved, Multistakeholder dialogues can serve as a neutral and inclusive platform to spark and sustain meaningful engagement. In contrast to basin-level dialogues, which tend to focus on resource use within specific basins, regional multistakeholder dialogue processes tend to establish connections with issues and actors beyond the specific water bodies and confined issues and thus contribute to broadening the conversation and multiplying the entry points for collaboration.

This study sheds light on the use of regional multistakeholder dialogues as an instrument to catalyse and advance transboundary water cooperation. This paper identifies key enabling factors to leverage and sustain these regional dialogues and uses an illustrative case study approach, drawing from experience in south-east Europe, Southern Africa, and South Asia, to reflect on how each of these factors have played out.

Methodology

This paper adopted a two-step methodological approach. First, we conducted a review of the extant literature pertaining to collaborative multistakeholder processes in transboundary water management, with the aim of identifying four key enabling factors applicable to regional multistakeholder dialogues. Second, we used these factors as an analytical lens to examine three cases of regional dialogues and to reflect on how these factors were relevant in enabling these multistakeholder regional dialogues (Yasuda et al., 2022).

Analytical framework: the four key enabling factors for regional multistakeholder dialogues

Drawing from the literature on multistakeholder processes for environmental management, the four enabling factors for promoting and sustaining regional multistakeholder dialogues that we identified are as follows.

Balanced inclusion and the role of facilitators

The literature indicates that striking the balance between ‘inclusion’ as well as ‘working with those with power’ is key factor for successful multistakeholder processes (Cheyns, 2011; Brouwer et al., 2013; Warner, 2007). While multistakeholder input is needed, the presence of government actors is also needed so that the multistakeholder dialogue process does not become only a ‘talk show’, but leads to concrete decisions and political outcomes (Warner, 2006). Efforts to promote transboundary cooperation through dialogues necessitate a facilitator recognized as a credible convener by high-level authorities. Simultaneously, this facilitator should guarantee the participation of voices that have typically been on the periphery or excluded from decision-making processes (Sigalla et al., 2021). For instance, in their review of multistakeholder consultation processes towards the SDG6 monitoring and reporting around the world, Sauvage et al. (2021) demonstrate the importance of having a neutral convening party able to effectively bring different perspectives together in a consensual manner.

Using existing regional political and economic processes

Building alliances with established regional actors is another key enabling factor for regional multistakeholder dialogues. Coalition building is a crucial aspect when building the demand side for change through multistakeholder engagement (Verzosa & Fiutak, 2019). The importance of making use of existing processes is one key element of building effective multistakeholder dialogues for transformational change (Ratner & Smith, 2020). In many regions, there is an existence of regional political and economic process where dialogues can build onto. Such alliance building

is often already visible between transboundary river basin organizations and their respective regional economic and political cooperation entities, as seen, for instance, between the Mekong River Commission and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Mekong River Commission [MRC], 2010) or the between the Danube Commission and the European Commission (expressed through EU Strategy for the Danube Region (European Commission, 2010)).

Using thematic anchoring and strategic design

A well-founded anchoring theme for the dialogue is crucial to engage stakeholders and explore new perspectives jointly (Brouwer et al., 2015; Tremblay-Lévesque et al., 2022). Designing the engagement around an anchoring theme fosters collaborative learning that allows peer-to-peer learning among practitioners and decision-makers (Matin, 2008; Ratner & Smith, 2020). For instance, transboundary water management negotiators often use specific legal instruments such as the Water Convention under the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe as an anchoring tool to advance discussions among parties (Timmerman et al., 2023). Another tactic is to aim to focus the attention on specific themes during particular phases of the multistakeholder dialogue, which can help circumvent talking about more sensitive issues. Using the priorities and changing hydrological, social, and political circumstances can also help find new entry point for collaborative engagement (Ratner et al., 2018).

Leveraging sustainable finance

Sustainable financing is a key to ensure that the multistakeholder dialogue processes happen over a prolonged period of time (Dore, 2007). A financing strategy for the multistakeholder dialogue should be established so that investments can be leveraged beyond the initial seed funding that sponsored the establishment of the dialogue (Ratner & Smith, 2020). To ensure a consolidated approach towards resources mobilization, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), which brings together 15 Contracting Parties, for instance, set up in 2001 the DABLAS (Danube – Black Sea) Task Force that brings together the ICPDR Secretariat, the Black Sea Commission, international financing institutions, and EU Member States (DABLAS, 2023). Several multi-million euro projects have been successfully leveraged through the DABLAS Task Force, thus ensuring the financial sustainability of the ICPDR's action in the basin.

Case studies

To put these four enabling factors into context and allow for a deeper understanding of how they influence dialogue processes, we selected three regional multistakeholder dialogues, namely in south-east Europe, Southern Africa, and South Asia. Illustrative case-study approaches are effective and efficient ways of testing and refining the validity of conceptual frameworks (Baškarada, 2014). The three cases were selected because of their vast differences, for instance, in terms of ethnocultural background, hydroecological conditions, geopolitical history, and socioeconomic trajectories. We believe that such diversity in cases was needed in order to attempt going beyond anecdotal beliefs and developing somewhat generalizable conclusions on how these four key factors enable and shape regional multistakeholder dialogue processes.

Multistakeholder dialogues in south-east Europe

The initiation of regional multistakeholder dialogues in south-east Europe occurred in a post-conflict environment, during which countries were engaged in reconstruction efforts and emphasized regional integration. The Water Convention, along with the body of EU water- and environment-related legislation, gave fertile grounds for transboundary water cooperation to happen and facilitated discussions at the regional level. As an outcome of the regional multistakeholder dialogues, some basin-level dialogues were established in the Drin and Mesta/Nestos Basins, where a Memorandum of Understanding for enhancing cooperation was signed. The multistakeholder dialogues also contributed to advancing cooperation in the Dinaric Karst Transboundary Aquifer System, Drina Basin, and Sava River Basin.

Multistakeholder dialogues in South Asia

This multistakeholder dialogue process started as the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, which was then followed by the South Asia Water Initiative (SAWI) programme. The South Asia multistakeholder dialogue took place in an environment characterized by historically limited regional cooperation and the absence of robust political and economic integration mechanisms. An important outcome of this dialogue process, spanning the years 2006–2012, was the realization of the need to shift the focus from bilateral engagements to basin-level conversations. As a result, subsequent basin-level dialogues were initiated in the Indus, Brahmaputra, and Sundarbans, while the Ganges basin witnessed national-level initiatives instead of basin-level dialogues.

Multistakeholder dialogues in Southern Africa

The Revised Protocol on Shared Watercourses in the Southern African Development Community (SADC, 2000), a regional framework agreement outlining key principles of transboundary water cooperation, created space and anchored the multistakeholder dialogue process in Southern Africa. Commencing in 2007 and still ongoing, the Southern African regional multistakeholder dialogues have directly contributed to advancing cooperation as seen by the adoption of the SADC Water Energy Food (WEF) Nexus Governance Framework (SADC, 2020; Nexus Resource Platform, 2020). This WEF Nexus Framework represents a commitment to harmonized and integrated approaches to water resource management and basin governance across various sectors and borders, providing new entry points for initiating and advancing cooperation in transboundary basins.

Case analysis

The three cases introduced above and their outcomes are assessed through the analytical lens of the four key identified enabling factors for regional multistakeholder dialogues.

Balancing inclusion and role of facilitators

All three regional multistakeholder dialogues brought together a diverse set of stakeholders, ranging from governmental institutions and scientists to practitioners and civil society representatives operating at the local, basin, national and regional levels. These dialogue processes also secured the active participation and political buy-in of key governmental institutions with either a mandate over transboundary cooperation or the ability to implement regional cooperation programmes. For example, the south-east Europe dialogue benefitted from the presence of stakeholders from different European countries that were contributing with their experience in different aspects of transboundary cooperation, e.g., in creating institutional and legal settings or addressing management issues. The wide presence of stakeholders from within Europe beyond the south-east region was enabled by the convenors of the dialogue, the German Ministry for Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the SADC dialogues, the leadership of SADC as a regional economic commission was instrumental to bring government and key stakeholders together. SADC's role was crucial in achieving consensus on a universal regional WEF Framework that was used as means for enabling enhanced cooperation and management of shared waters. The South Asia multistakeholder dialogue managed to secure the participation of several governmental entities, including of national and basin level agencies in India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh (World Bank Group, 2020).

All three regional dialogues also benefited from having strong facilitators who, on the one hand helped convene and secure the participation of relevant, legitimate, and committed governmental actors in the dialogue process, and on the other hand, had a technical role as knowledge producers, brokers, and disseminators. The presence of facilitating entities, such as Global Water Partnership (GWP)-Mediterranean in south-east Europe, GWP Southern Africa in SADC dialogues and the World Bank, together with the International Water Management Institute and International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in South Asia, played a critical role in coordinating multistakeholder dialogue activities and nurturing the dialogue processes. Although the relationships between facilitators and key stakeholders varied among the case studies, facilitators were generally regarded as credible and relatively neutral partners by water-related authorities and actors at national and regional levels. Their long-term commitment ensured a positive ripple effect in advancing transboundary water cooperation.

Using existing regional political and economic processes

Building alliances with established regional actors and coalitions gave significant impetus to the South African and south-east Europe regional multistakeholder dialogues. The SADC dialogues happened in the context where regional governments (SADC member states) had signed a regional binding agreement to collaborate over transboundary water, the Revised Protocol on Shared Watercourses (SADC, 2000). This enabling environment allowed regional dialogues to take place in a context aligning with the SADC objectives: to advance socioeconomic development and poverty reduction. In the case of south-east Europe, countries in the region shared the common objective of European Union (EU)

integration, an important driving factor that affects the sociopolitical–economic development of countries in the region. This driver has also incentivized countries to closely follow the EU Water Framework Directive (European Parliament, 2000) as well as the subsequent national transposition of the EU *acquis* into national legislation, as a vehicle for coordinating basin management plans in transboundary basins.

In contrast, the analysis of South Asia dialogues did not indicate clear use of regional political and economic platforms or processes that exist in the region. One reason for this arises from the complex hydropolitics around the region's transboundary rivers (World Bank Group, 2020). According to the World Bank, despite the emergence of regional economic partnership, power asymmetries among the countries, historical tensions, and divergent interests cause challenges in fostering cooperation over river basin management (World Bank Group, 2020). Due to this situation, regional multi-stakeholder dialogue was convened through non-political and technical work aiming to develop collaborative forums (World Bank Group, 2018, 2019). Our analysis suggests that this sociopolitical context in the region may be one of the reasons why the South Asia regional multistakeholder dialogue also produced less-tangible advancements in terms of transboundary cooperation than the two other regional multistakeholder dialogue cases.

Using thematic anchoring and strategic design

The analysis of three regional multistakeholder dialogue cases underscores the pivotal role of strategically framing the dialogue process around an anchoring theme (Ratner & Smith, 2020). Employing an anchoring theme acts as a unifying catalyst that encourages stakeholders to engage in dialogue and progress towards joint analysis in subsequent stages (Brouwer et al., 2015). For instance, the utilization of the WEF Nexus Framework, a well-established approach for fostering shared visioning at transboundary levels (Mohtar & Daher, 2016), was introduced in the SADC dialogue (SADC, 2020; Nexus Resource Platform, 2020). It served as a tool to initiate joint regional planning. Other key joint regional strategies such as SADC Regional Water Policy and the five-year rolling Regional Strategic Action Plans (SADC, n.d., 2016) also served as structuring theme in the South African multistakeholder dialogue (SADC, 2022; Kabeya et al., 2022).

The experience with SAWI shows that the anchoring themes need to be strategically and carefully chosen, depending on the process and timing of the dialogue. Prioritizing least-contested issues for early inclusion on the multistakeholder dialogue agenda fosters a positive environment and consensus building (Hanasz, 2017). SAWI dialogues at regional level focused on four broader themes (groundwater management, inland navigation, disaster risk and climate resilience, and ecological integrity), whereas discussions on basin level had to focus on a more specific and neutral anchoring theme, which was key for engaging governmental actors (World Bank Group, 2020). Basin dialogues and events, which happened later in the process, were thoughtfully designed to avoid addressing politically sensitive issues regarding the management of any specific basins.

In contrast, the south-east Europe dialogue used an anchoring theme for different dialogue periods such as shared lakes management, management of shared aquifers, multipurpose use of dams, etc. Each time the theme was commonly accepted as important both in relation to water resources management as

well as in relation to socioeconomic development. This approach proved to be very effective in sustaining high stakeholder engagement. In addition, each dialogue agenda had a set of roundtables addressing specific issues at the national and basin scales, which broadened stakeholders' outlook by revealing similar challenges in other regions and potential unique solutions to be agreed upon by riparians. The agenda's attention to details such as seating and the mix of stakeholders proved crucial to creating an environment that was conducive to learning. South-east Europe dialogues were also coupled with site visits and capacity development activities, allowing informal exchanges among participants engaged in the dialogues.

Aside from thematic anchoring, several other structural design choices have proven to influence the multistakeholder dialogue processes. For example, scaling up the discussions to regional level in between basin-level dialogues, as well as involving various ranks of government officials (i.e., meetings at ministerial level), decision-makers at the highest level were able to effectively adopt crucial policies (as seen in the SADC context) and solidify concrete actions at the basin level (as observed in the cases of south-east Europe and South Asia). Holding dialogues after site visits, exchange tours, and capacity-building activities effectively fostered social learning, and established trust among stakeholder leading to creating a community of practice, which is crucial for transboundary water cooperation (Timmerman et al., 2023). Lastly, the rules of engagement during the dialogue were another important enabling design factor. The adoption of the Chatham House Rule (Chatham House, 2022) for dialogues in South Asia created an environment where participants were able to express their opinions without being concerned about how the information would be utilized beyond the dialogue (Yasuda et al., 2017).

Leveraging sustainable finance

In all three cases of regional multistakeholder dialogues, the existence of financing partners was the key enabling factor to foster dialogues. Even despite ample number of initial investments, a multistakeholder dialogue process should be able to generate funding beyond the initiation stage in order to produce tangible outcomes for the stakeholders (Ratner & Smith, 2020). In the south-east Europe multistakeholder dialogue, for instance, diversifying funding sources beyond the initial ones facilitated sustained engagement and contributed to the production of basin-level outcomes. The initial financing from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) facilitated the alignment of objectives between IW:LEARN and Petersberg Phase II/Athens Declaration Process activities (GEF IW:LEARN and Global Environment Facility, 2018). The World Bank also provided significant in-kind support. Additional financing at later stages was made possible through effective matchmaking between dialogue facilitators and funding opportunities, with stakeholder involvement in anticipation of funding prospects. Similarly, financial support from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, European Commission Directorate-General for International Partnerships, and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit was essential in sustaining the dialogues in the SADC.

Throughout the dialogues in south-east Europe and SADC, GWP-Med and GWP South Africa, respectively, being the facilitators have assumed a leading role in

fundraising further resources from other regional projects and partners, as well as utilizing available funding at respective institutions. This shows the importance having a convenor and facilitator working together towards diversifying the dialogue's financial model to capture financial opportunities as the dialogue advances, as well as to establish pooled funding arrangements using initial core funding to sustain the multistakeholder dialogue. As the dialogue continues, ongoing financial support from the GEF (in case of south-east Europe) and EU (in case of SADC) sustains the dialogue efforts. In SADC, upon entering the dialogue process as a key financing actor, the EU has collaborated with convenor and facilitator to attract new financing partners, using this platform to sustain the level of political commitment needed in order to continue the exchanges (Beerhalter, 2018).

The long-term effects of the existence or absence of sustainable funding become evident in the South Asia dialogue. In this case, financing from the trust fund coordinated by the World Bank played a key role in sustaining the dialogue process, particularly at the basin levels. While the process in the Indus Basin continued with support from the Upper Indus Basin Network (UIBN) and the ICIMOD, the dialogues in the Ganges and Brahmaputra Basins concluded in 2020 upon conclusion of the SAWI programme of the World Bank (World Bank Group, 2020, 2022). However, in case of the Sundarbans, two working bodies established by SAWI, the Sundarbans Regional Cooperation Initiative and Joint Working Group, are still facilitating the dialogue on basin level even after financial support from the World Bank to the Sundarbans dialogue ended. This demonstrated that financing partners of an multistakeholder dialogue need to plan well in advance their exit strategy and identify alternative means of financing for the multistakeholder dialogues as they withdraw. Single-donor multistakeholder dialogues are more vulnerable in terms of its sustainability compared to those that manage funds from a diversity of projects and programmes from regional and international development partners (Ratner & Smith, 2020).

Discussion and conclusion

Through analysis of regional dialogues in selected case studies, it becomes apparent that there have been certain commonalities and differences in the way that the multistakeholder dialogues were organized and key enabling factors that shaped the dialogues. Both the south-east Europe and SADC dialogues had all four enabling factors in their dialogues, and were successful in reaching consensus on key transboundary challenges, enabling the participating states to collaboratively formulate a programme of priority actions. This approach allowed transboundary water management to be fostered through identifying intersectoral issues and addressing competing water uses. Additionally, another shared success is the adoption of the nexus approach in basin planning.

A clear illustration of this success in the south-east Europe region is the Drin dialogue process. Here, the process leveraged the outcomes of the regional Petersberg Phase II/ Athens Declaration Process, ultimately giving birth to a 'Shared Vision' for Drin basin management, highlighting use of existing regional political and economic processes (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe [UNECE], 2011). GWP-MED, facilitator of regional dialogue, has also played a catalytic role in fostering the consensus-building in the Drin basin, which was driven by the Drin Core Group and Expert

Working Groups (GWP-Med, 2016). The approach of thematic anchoring through regional dialogues also positively influenced riparian states in paving a way towards jointly conducting transboundary diagnostic analysis as an avenue to develop a strategic action programme for the basin. Notably, this approach mirrors that of the Drina basin, where the regional dialogue process from 2016 to 2019 selected the nexus approach as an anchor theme, drawing from national-level nexus assessments. Two critical issues for advancing transboundary cooperation in the Drina basin were identified, leading to the development of the Drina Nexus Roadmap, fostering joint planning among the riparian states. Sustainable finance to foster the regional dialogue, as well as to foster basin-level interventions through donor funded projects have been crucial in further concretizing basin-level cooperations.

When examining the outcomes of the SADC dialogues, one notable fact was that ‘Nexus’ was a key theme in the design of the multistakeholder dialogue. This theme was fostered across different countries, sectors, basins and stakeholders by GWP South Africa, a dedicated facilitator of the process. The development of the SADC WEF Nexus Framework, developed based on national-level nexus assessments conducted in SADC countries, played a pivotal role in fostering a common understanding of the WEF Nexus approach within the region (Kabeya et al., 2022). This shared understanding became a prerequisite for continued political support. SADC’s existing regional political and economic processes played a basis for common process, allowing regional dialogues to utilize existing key political forums among countries and ministers, which played a crucial role in gaining political support to the outcome of dialogues. The commitment to address transboundary challenges through the nexus lens found its way into RSAP IV, which acts as a regional action plan on water-related issues. This high-level commitment and availability of continued funding both at regional and basin level subsequently catalysed basin-level action, as exemplified in the Limpopo basin, where the Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis/Strategic Action Programme (TDA/SAP) processes were informed by the preceding Limpopo Watercourse Commission Nexus Assessment (Global Environment Facility, 2019).

In the South Asia case study, not all four enabling factors were present. Multistakeholder dialogues in South Asia placed a strong emphasis on fostering social learning and more general anchoring themes, favouring informal knowledge exchange, primarily among research institutes rather than government bodies. This approach was viewed as less politically charged, providing a unique avenue for collaboration. Although SAWI identified key themes for regional engagement, such as groundwater management, inland navigation, disaster risk, climate resilience, and ecological integrity, the regional dialogue process was less rigidly structured around these themes (World Bank Group, 2019). Reflecting the political context of South Asia, where it was challenging to build the dialogue on regional political and economic processes, may have been one of the key challenges for regional dialogues in this region. Sustainable finance for the multistakeholder dialogues was strongly connected with the World Bank’s SAWI programme and associated investments by the World Bank. Reliance on one key donor for the regional dialogue was perhaps one of the factors that may have contributed to discontinuing some of the processes that have developed at basin level, such as Indus basin knowledge forum process.

The success of regional multistakeholder dialogues in advancing transboundary cooperation at the basin level is influenced by various aspects and conditions, such as the regional and basin-specific context, existing cooperation levels, geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions, water utilization patterns, institutional and legal frameworks, and human and financial capacities (Barua, 2018). This paper examined enabling factors for establishing and advancing regional multistakeholder dialogues that contribute to advancing transboundary water cooperation. Whereas the regional dialogues cannot directly influence all aspects and conditions that influence transboundary cooperation, they operate within the framework created by them (GEF IW:LEARN and Global Environment Facility, 2018).

The assessment of the enabling factors in the three case studies demonstrates that by having a well-planned process and the right actors and resources, the regional dialogues have the potential to create conducive conditions and processes for enhancing transboundary basin-level collaboration. The identification and verification of the four key enabling factors can serve as a vehicle to replicate such initiatives in various contexts to promote further cooperation across borders. The availability and the extent of importance of these factors varied between the cases. Whether and to what extent the availability of these enabling factors have impact on influencing transboundary water cooperation was beyond the scope of this analysis. However, it is an area where future research will benefit in advancing cooperation.

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