

[Theme coordinators
Scientific-Information Center of the Interstate Commission
for Water Coordination of Central Asia (Uzbekistan)
Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture, Saudi Arabia]

Topic Concept Note Template

Thematic Process, 11th World Water Forum

*This template should be completed through collaborative discussions among Topic Coordination Group Members under the leadership of each Topic Coordinator, and submitted to Theme Coordinators **by January 30th, 2026**, after which it will undergo final review by the Co-Chairs of the 11th Forum Thematic Process.*

- **Theme Number:** Water Diplomacy
- **Theme Title:** WATER GOVERNANCE AND DIPLOMACY
- **Topic Number:** 4A
- **Topic Title:** Adopting Policy, Regulatory Frameworks, and Institutional Mechanisms
- **Topic Coordinator:** Geneva Water Hub, Mara Tignino, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Law, University of Geneva

I. Topic Overview

Rationale and Context

Effective water diplomacy increasingly depends on coherent policy frameworks, robust regulatory instruments, and inclusive institutional mechanisms capable of managing water-related cooperation across borders and sectors. Fragmented governance systems, weak international and domestic regulations, limited institutional coordination, and a lack of needed funds and resources continue to undermine water cooperation at the international, regional, basin, and domestic levels. Weak governance mechanisms undermine national water security, especially in arid countries and fragile settings.

Climate change impacts, growing water scarcity, apolitical fragility, and weak accountability mechanisms further intensify existing pressures on water governance, requiring adaptive legal and institutional frameworks that can support cooperation, prevent conflict, and promote equitable water management. Water diplomacy offers a negotiated, cooperative

approach to managing complex water challenges that extend beyond technical solutions and should be based on the inclusion of all stakeholders potentially affected by water-related decisions. This topic addresses these challenges by examining how policy coherence, regulatory reforms, and institutional innovations can strengthen water diplomacy outcomes across diverse contexts and sectors, particularly in transboundary basins, fragile or conflict-affected settings, and countries affected by land degradation. An objective of this topic is also to discuss how the inter-sectoral nexus operates among climate-water-energy-land-food systems. The topic aligns directly with SDG 6 and contributes to SDGs 2, 11, 13, 15, 16, and 17.

Objectives of the Topic

The topic aims to:

- Promote evidence-based regulatory reforms and governance instruments that support cooperative water management at all levels.
- Advance harmonized, innovative, and implementable legal and institutional frameworks that enable effective water diplomacy at the basin, national, regional, and international levels.
- Strengthen institutional capacities through peer learning, case studies, mentorship, and the inclusive participation of women, youth, and local actors.
- Promote inclusive water diplomacy principles through practical, implementable policy and regulatory mechanisms that strengthen cooperative water governance.
- Strengthen water diplomacy based on the inclusion of all countries sharing a basin and the participation of women, youth, marginalized and other local actors.

II. Key Issues, Opportunities, and Scope

Key Challenges

Water governance mechanisms continue to face fragmented and weak legal and institutional arrangements. Climate-induced pressures on water allocation, and insufficient inclusion of gender, youth, marginalized and other local stakeholders in decision-making processes also negatively affect regulatory and institutional mechanisms supporting water diplomacy. Fragmented multi-level coordination, a lack of timely, reliable, relevant data, insufficient information and data sharing, the politicization of water governance frameworks, and the absence of effective preventive and early-response mechanisms to optimize the use of water and manage water-related risks and disputes represent challenges to water diplomacy at the domestic, basin, regional and international levels.

Opportunities and Strategic Importance

Opportunities exist to scale successful basin-level regulatory models and policy-coherent approaches, leverage Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital governance and monitoring tools, strengthen multi-level institutional coordination, and mobilize innovative financing

mechanisms to support institutional reform and sustainability. There is a need to create opportunities to advance adaptive regulatory frameworks, unlock climate-finance linkages, and catalyze peer learning and institutional exchange across basins and regions.

Proposed Priorities of the Topic / Guiding Questions

- How can policy and regulatory frameworks better support inclusive water diplomacy? What reforms and innovations are needed in these frameworks?
- How can community participation, including marginalized people, be institutionalized within regulatory frameworks?
- Which institutional models are most effective in transboundary and fragile contexts? What innovations are needed to address the challenges of these contexts?
- How can water policies integrate climate adaptation, equity, and conflict prevention?
- What financing mechanisms and capacity-building interventions can sustainably strengthen institutional performance?
- How can regulatory flexibility and adaptive governance arrangements be designed to sustain cooperation amid political volatility and climate uncertainty?
- How can information and data sharing, transparency, and joint monitoring mechanisms be systematically embedded within cooperation frameworks to strengthen trust, accountability, and compliance?
- What roles can inclusive basin organizations and regional institutions play as effective diplomatic, regulatory, and technical intermediaries in preventing disputes, facilitating cooperative water governance, and ensuring peace?
- How can common risks be better used to foster transboundary water cooperation, particularly in settings where shared data are contested?

Proposed Sessions of the Topic

1. What reforms for transboundary water cooperation? The role of basin organizations and inclusive water diplomacy for dispute prevention.
2. Innovative tools and mechanisms for inclusive water diplomacy in fragile and conflict-affected contexts: climate-responsive water governance and policy innovation.
3. Financing and capacity building to strengthen institutions for water cooperation and inclusive water diplomacy.
4. Climate-responsive water governance and policy innovation.
5. Coherent policies to address the nexus in climate-water-energy-land-food systems, especially in countries affected by land degradation.

III. Expected Outcomes and Deliverables

Each topic is expected to deliver concrete, action-oriented outcomes that support the objectives of the 11th World Water Forum and its long-term legacy. The anticipated outputs under this topic include the following:

Policy and Strategic Outcomes

- Policy recommendations and strategic guidance to strengthen policy, regulatory, and institutional frameworks for water diplomacy, including in UN multilateral processes such as the UN Water Conference.
- Frameworks and guidance notes that support cooperative, climate-responsive, equitable, and inclusive water governance in transboundary and fragile contexts.
- Inputs to ministerial and political processes related to water security, governance, and cooperation, and sustainable development, within and beyond the World Water Forum processes.
- Actionable roadmaps for context-specific institutional reforms tailored to transboundary, fragile, and politically sensitive water contexts.
- Targeted policy briefs that articulate linkages between water diplomacy, climate adaptation, peacebuilding, and human and regional security agendas, aligned with human rights and related SDGs.
- Practical guidance on aligning national water policies and regulatory instruments with basin-level institutions and regional cooperation frameworks to enhance coherence and implementation.
- Development of benefit-sharing frameworks with pilot applications in selected basins.
- Establishment of basin-level crisis coordination protocols for droughts and floods.
- Creation of transboundary digital data-sharing and monitoring platforms.
- Operational frameworks for inclusive and participatory water governance.
- Integration of water quality management into transboundary agreements.
- Linking water cooperation with regional stability and security frameworks.
- Development of pilot “cooperation corridors” within shared basins

Technical and Knowledge Deliverables

- Analytical case studies documenting good practices and lessons learned across diverse regional and basin contexts.
- Technical tools and methodological approaches to support regulatory enforcement, inclusivity, institutional coordination, and monitoring.
- Synthesis notes and knowledge products that consolidate evidence on effective policy and institutional mechanisms for water diplomacy.
- Comparative, evidence-based analyses of institutional and governance models, identifying enabling factors and constraints behind success, stagnation, or failure in transboundary and politically sensitive water contexts, with dissemination through appropriate channels.
- Technical guidance and best-practice frameworks on data governance, transparency, information-sharing, and joint monitoring mechanisms to support trust-building and cooperative decision-making.

- Development of decision-support systems (DSS) for transboundary water management.
- Set up standardized indicators to measure performance of water cooperation.
- Establishment of shared geospatial and remote sensing platforms for basin monitoring.
- Development of methodologies for integrating water quantity and quality assessments.
- Creation of stakeholder mapping and engagement in water governance.
- Development of digital twins for river basin planning and scenario analysis.
- Design of early warning systems for climate and conflict-related water risks.

Partnerships and Financing Outcomes

- Strengthened partnerships with development banks, regional organizations, academic institutions, and the private sector to support institutional and legislative reforms.
- Identification and promotion of innovative financing models for water governance, regulatory strengthening, and institutional capacity development.
- Engagement with financing initiatives that support climate-resilient and cooperative water management.
- Partnerships with research networks to strengthen evidence-based policymaking, applied research, and knowledge translation for decision-makers and participation in public-private mechanisms to mobilize sustainable finance for cooperative water management and climate-resilient infrastructure
- Partnership with civil society organizations and initiatives supporting inclusive water diplomacy to develop strategic partnerships with regional institutions and basin organizations to pilot, validate, and scale innovative water governance, and diplomatic approaches across diverse contexts.
- Establishment of blended finance platforms tailored for transboundary water projects.
- Development of regional funding windows dedicated to cooperative basin initiatives.
- Engagement with climate finance mechanisms (e.g., adaptation funds) for shared water systems.
- Strengthening partnerships with technology providers for digital water solutions.
- Development of capacity-building partnerships with regional centers.
- Promotion of green and blue financing instruments for water and climate resilience projects.

Actions and Initiatives for Implementation

- Development of pilot projects and basin-level initiatives demonstrating the application of policy and institutional reforms in practice.
- Establish and strengthen cross-sectoral partnerships and inclusive multi-actor platforms to advance inclusive water diplomacy.
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- Deploy integrated monitoring systems, data-sharing technologies, and early-warning tools to improve transparency, manage climate and conflict-related risks, and support evidence-based decision-making.
- Launch of transboundary pilot zones (“cooperation corridors”) to test integrated solutions.
- Development of joint emergency response mechanisms for droughts and floods.
- Implementation of real-time data-sharing platforms and interoperable information systems.
- Deployment of basin-wide early warning systems for climate and conflict risks.
- Initiation of capacity-building programs for basin institutions and technical staff.
- Pilot implementation of performance-based agreements between riparian states.

Communication and Visibility

- Key messages and policy-relevant insights contributing to the Forum’s thematic, ministerial, and political declarations.
- Public communication opportunities, including policy briefs, session summaries, and dissemination through World Water Forum channels.
- Enhanced visibility of successful policy and institutional approaches to water diplomacy at global, regional, and national levels.

IV. Monitoring and Post-Forum Action

The topic will contribute to the long-term legacy of the World Water Forum through follow-up initiatives, contributions to UN and climate-related processes, and sustained institutional partnerships. These actions will support continuity toward the 12th World Water Forum and ensure monitoring of post-forum implementation.

V. Proposed Cross-Process Dialogue Areas

Cross-Topic and Cross-Theme Dialogue Ideas

The topic will promote structured dialogue with other topics within the Water Security theme and across relevant themes to enhance coherence and impact. Proposed areas for joint dialogue include:

1. **Policy and Institutional Coherence for Climate-Resilient Water Security**
Joint dialogue with topics addressing climate change, adaptation, and resilience to examine how regulatory and institutional frameworks can integrate climate risks into water diplomacy and governance mechanisms.
2. **Financing Policy and Institutional Reform for Water Cooperation**
Collaboration with finance- and investment-related topics to explore innovative financing mechanisms that support regulatory enforcement, institutional capacity strengthening, and cooperative water management.
3. **Inclusive Governance and Participation in Water Diplomacy**
Cross-topic dialogue focusing on gender-responsive and inclusive policy frameworks, linking regulatory and institutional reform with social inclusion, youth engagement, and stakeholder participation.

Dialogue with Other Forum Processes

The topic will engage with other official Forum processes to ensure policy relevance and political uptake, including:

1 Ministerial and Parliamentary Processes

Dialogue on translating policy and regulatory recommendations into actionable commitments, legislative reforms, and governance frameworks supporting water diplomacy and transboundary cooperation.

2. Basin Authorities and Local and Regional Authorities Processes

Joint exchanges to connect national and transboundary policy frameworks with basin-level implementation, operational coordination, and local governance practices.

Regional Focus Areas

The sessions on this topic will include a large number of case studies from different regions of the world. The topic should be discussed in close collaboration with the Regional and Political Process. The recommendations highlighted in the sessions should inform water diplomacy efforts in various parts of the world, in particular:

1.Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

Given the prevalence of transboundary water basins, water scarcity, climate stress, and political complexity, the region offers critical lessons on policy, regulatory, and institutional approaches to water diplomacy.

2.South Asia

This region offers critical insights into the need for policy reforms and innovation in various basins.

3.Sub-Saharan Africa

The region presents diverse experiences in basin-level cooperation, institutional reform, and climate adaptation, providing valuable insights for scaling policy and regulatory innovations in different governance contexts.

V. References

United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health, *Global Water Bankruptcy: Living Beyond Our Hydrological Means in the Post-Crisis Era*, 2026.

World Bank, *Continental Drying: A Threat to Our Common Future*, 2025.