



# **Environmental Committee (EVC)**

Managing water scarcity to prevent cross-border conflicts

Aral Altun



**Forum:** Environmental Committee (EVC)

**Issue:** Managing water scarcity to prevent cross-border conflicts

**Name:** Aral Altun

**Position:** Main Chair

## **Introduction:**

Water scarcity has become an increasingly pressing issue, particularly in regions where freshwater resources are shared among multiple member states. Due to climate change, growing populations, and unsustainable water policies, countries are experiencing reduced water availability, which may lead to potential disputes over the resources. Competition for access to water in water-scarce regions increases tensions between member states, straining diplomatic relations. Therefore, cooperation should be ensured, and solutions should be created with immediate effect.

## **Definition of key terms:**

**Canal:** An artificial waterway constructed to allow the passage of boats or ships inland or to convey water for irrigation.

**Convention:** An agreement between states covering particular matters, especially one less formal than a treaty.

**Scarcity:** The state of being scarce or in short supply; shortage.

**Transboundary water resource:** An aquifer, lake, or river basin shared by two or more countries.

**Tributary:** A river or stream flowing into a larger river or lake.

**NGO:** A non-profit organization that operates independently of any government, typically one whose purpose is to address a social or political issue

## Background:

Due to climate change, growing populations, and different water policies around the globe, tensions between member states are rising in water-scarce regions. In the past, such tensions have arisen but have been resolved through coordination between member states.

For example, after the separation of India and Pakistan, disputes arose over the Indus rivers, including the Beas, Ravi, and Sutlej, as India gained control of upstream barrages, which regulated water flow into Pakistan. This severely threatened the Pakistani economy, as Pakistan had excessively relied on these water sources, particularly in its agricultural areas. In 1948, India temporarily stopped the flow of water to Pakistan from the canals originating in Indian territory. This caused increased fears in Pakistan and highlighted Pakistan's vulnerability to water supply. To address the issue and mitigate mistrust between the two nations, the Indus Waters Treaty was signed in 1960, with the involvement of the World Bank. However, the disputes are not yet fully resolved. The ongoing tensions between the two countries, particularly the situation in Kashmir, combined with increasing water needs, worsen the problem, undermining the treaty and dragging the region into chaos. Over the past few decades, Pakistan has made multiple attempts to prevent India from building dams on both the Chenab and Neelum rivers, claiming that such projects are against the Indus Waters Treaty. However, as a result of the most recent conflict between India and Pakistan, India decided to suspend this treaty, changing the situation drastically. India's decision was taken due to security concerns, only 24 hours after a deadly terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir. Pakistan, one of the most water-stressed countries in the world, now faces a great risk of water scarcity.

Further transboundary water-related tensions arose over the Nile River between countries sharing it: Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. In 2011, Ethiopia initiated the construction of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile, the major tributary that is about 85% of the Nile's total flow. This project was intended to give Ethiopia significant control over the Nile River, potentially disadvantaging Egypt and Sudan. Egypt, about 90% of whose water supply is dependent on the Nile River, feared that the project would reduce the water available downstream, potentially impacting its agriculture, economy, and drinking water supply. On the other hand, Sudan supported the project, arguing that it would contribute to regulating water flow and reducing flooding; however, it also expressed concerns over water safety and dam management. In 2020, Ethiopia began filling the reservoir without finalizing an agreement with Egypt and Sudan. This sparked tensions and caused international organizations like the African Union and the United Nations to be involved. Egypt described the situation as a direct threat to its national security. The issue remains unsolved, and the unrest in the region over water sources continues.

Similar tensions in other regions continue to escalate, and not all of them have been fully addressed. As water gets scarcer with the rise of climate change, the risk of cross-border conflicts

over water becomes more crucial. Therefore, the implementation of agreements between member states plays a significant role in preventing the escalation of disputes.

### **Timeline of key events:**

1960, India and Pakistan, with the World Bank as mediator, signed the Indus Water Treaty to share the Indus River system.

1972, Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, the first major UN conference addressing global environmental issues, recognized Water scarcity and pollution as urgent international concerns.

1992, The International Conference on Water and the Environment in Dublin established key principles on water as an economic good and essential for life, laying the groundwork for integrated water resource management (IWRM).

1999, The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was launched by 10 Nile River countries, with the aim of ensuring cooperation on managing shared water resources.

2000, The Orange-Senqu River Commission (ORASECOM) was created, with the collaboration of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa on equitable water use and regional planning.

2010, The United Nations recognized clean, safe water and sanitation as essential human rights.

2014, The Genevan Water Hub, supporting hydro-diplomacy and peacebuilding around water conflicts, was established.

2023, The UN Water Conference was held in New York, encouraging actions to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation).

2025, India suspended the Indus Water Treaty due to ongoing tensions with Pakistan.

### **Major parties involved:**

**National Governments:** Countries sharing transboundary water resources, such as Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia (Nile River); India and Pakistan (Indus River); or Turkey, Syria, and Iraq (Tigris-Euphrates), are stakeholders with great importance in the issue of water scarcity in cross-border conflicts. Their policies, diplomatic strategies, and domestic water needs might lead to disputes over shared water resources and worsen the situation.

**UN Water:** UN Water, being a key United Nations coordination mechanism bringing together over 30 UN agencies involved in water-related issues, such as the WHO, FAO, and UNESCO, plays a vital role in creating a unified and effective global response to water challenges, including transboundary water scarcity. It does not have a direct involvement in combating conflicts; however, it promotes cooperation among member states and sustainable development. Additionally, it provides complete support to Sustainable Development Goal 6, advocating for the importance of achieving clean water and sanitation for all. UN Water is a crucial party in monitoring the implementation of water policies and recording data, fostering dialogues between member states, and preventing possible conflicts.

**UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE):** The UN Economic Commission for Europe plays a crucial role in addressing cross-border water scarcity through its management of the *Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes* (1992). Although initially limited to European member states, the convention later became global with the commitment of non-European states. Therefore, the UNECE is dedicated to ensuring sustainable water management worldwide, aiming to prevent water scarcity in the future.

**Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):** NGOs are immensely significant in advocating for equitable access, sustainability, and human rights in addressing water scarcity in cross-border conflicts. NGOs such as the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), WaterAid, and the World Resources Institute (WRI) conduct research on the issue and raise awareness with the aim of promoting sustainable water management, especially to support vulnerable communities and prevent conflicts from arising.

**Local Communities and Civil Society:** Local communities and civil society are heavily impacted by water scarcity, especially in regions where access to clean and reliable water sources is limited. These populations are also crucial in managing local water resources, adapting to scarcity, and resolving disputes over access and usage by promoting sustainable practices. Therefore, it is important to ensure that water governance is inclusive and culturally appropriate to local communities.

**River Basin Organizations:** River Basin Organizations, intergovernmental institutions established by countries sharing a river basin, intend to promote cooperation and play a vital role in preventing tensions. They aim to ensure sustainable water management through the coordination among member states. Some examples are the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), the

Mekong River Commission (MRC), and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR).

### Relevant UN treaties, resolutions, and reports:

1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Helsinki Convention)

1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses

UNGA Resolution 64/292 (2010)

UNGA Resolution A/RES/75/212 (2020)

UN World Water Development Report (WWDR)

Global SDG 6 Progress Reports vgg

### Previous attempts to solve the issue:

**Indus Waters Treaty:** The Indus Water Treaty, signed in 1960 between India and Pakistan, mediated by the World Bank, intended to promote cross-border cooperation. Despite political tensions between the two member states, this treaty remains a fairly successful attempt in the right direction. In the treaty, India was given control over the three eastern rivers: Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej, while Pakistan received rights over the three western rivers: Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab. Despite challenges over dam construction and climatic struggles, this diplomatic effort, advocating for the equitable usage of water resources, data sharing, and open communication, serves as a milestone in addressing water scarcity in cross-border conflicts.

**Nile Basin Initiative:** The Nile Basin Initiative is a regional partnership launched in 1999 by the 10 countries sharing the Nile River: Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. The primary purpose of the partnership was to build trust and dialogue between the member states by promoting data and information sharing, capacity building, and joint investments in the region. The partnership led to the foundation of the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA); however, it failed to implement the considerable steps to solve the issue. Additionally, Egypt and Sudan have refused to sign the CFA, fearing loss of water access.

**Orange-Senqu River Commission (ORASECOM):** The Orange-Senqu River Commission was established in 2000 by member states that share the Orange-Senqu River Basin: Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa. The commission aimed to ensure sustainable development management and serve as a platform for cooperation over the shared water resource. The commission was often praised for building trust among member states and fostering peace in the region. It laid the foundation of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, where Lesotho supplies water to South Africa while benefiting from hydropower and economic investment.

### **Possible solutions:**

**Establishing transboundary water agreements between member states:** Establishing transboundary water agreements and calling for diplomatic efforts would ensure that equitable and permanent solutions are achieved in a transparent manner. Advocating for open dialogue and cooperation between member states sharing transboundary water resources is crucial, considering that such efforts have succeeded in building trust and peace in the past. The agreements might address how the water resources will be distributed between the countries sharing them, as well as encourage joint investments and policies in the region.

**Investing in water-saving technology and infrastructure:** Joint investments with the cooperation of member states would help rebuild regions with transboundary water resources and ensure sustainable water management. Water use efficiency would be maximized by building water reservoirs in the center of shared resources, integrating advanced filtration systems, and implementing data monitoring technologies.

**Promoting Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM):** Prioritizing a collaborative approach, with governments, NGOs, and communities involved, and encouraging efforts by the Integrated Water Resources Management is crucial in addressing the needs of different stakeholders and achieving sustainable solutions. While ensuring agricultural productivity, energy generation, and the efficient usage of water, this approach also provides cooperation between member states and paves the way for the creation of long-term regional partnerships. Through joint monitoring, investment, and planning, countries can adapt to climate change and the worsening situation.

## Bibliography:

- Bauer, Patricia. "Indus Waters Treaty | History, Provisions, & Facts." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, [www.britannica.com/event/Indus-Waters-Treaty](http://www.britannica.com/event/Indus-Waters-Treaty).
- BBC. "Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: Why It Is Worrying Egypt and Sudan." *BBC News*, 13 Sept. 2023, [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66776733](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66776733).
- Climate Diplomacy. "Water Conflict and Cooperation between India and Pakistan | Climate-Diplomacy." *Climate-Diplomacy.org*, 2019, [climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/water-conflict-and-cooperation-between-india-and-pakistan](http://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/water-conflict-and-cooperation-between-india-and-pakistan).
- "Cooperative Framework Agreement | Nile Basin Initiative." *Nilebasin.org*, [nilebasin.org/about-us/cooperative-framework-agreement](http://nilebasin.org/about-us/cooperative-framework-agreement).
- Environment, U. N. "Integrated Water Resources Management." *UNEP - UN Environment Programme*, 16 Nov. 2023, [www.unep.org/topics/fresh-water/water-resources-management/integrated-water-resources-management](http://www.unep.org/topics/fresh-water/water-resources-management/integrated-water-resources-management).
- "General Assembly of the United Nations." *Www.un.org*, [www.un.org/en/ga/75/resolutions.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/ga/75/resolutions.shtml).

Hogan, Libby. “Water Tensions Build between India and Pakistan as Indus Treaty Suspended.”

*Abc.net.au*, ABC News, 14 May 2025, [www.abc.net.au/news/2025-05-14/india-suspends-indus-water-treaty-pakistan-tensions-water-war/105286366](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-05-14/india-suspends-indus-water-treaty-pakistan-tensions-water-war/105286366). Accessed 14 May 2025.

International Hydropower Association. “International Hydropower Association.”

*Www.hydropower.org*, 2022, [www.hydropower.org/sediment-management-case-studies/ethiopia-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-gerd](http://www.hydropower.org/sediment-management-case-studies/ethiopia-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-gerd).

“SDG 6 Progress Reports.” *UN-Water*, [www.unwater.org/publications/sdg-6-progress-reports](http://www.unwater.org/publications/sdg-6-progress-reports).

“The Human Right to Water and Sanitation - Resolution Adopted by the UN General Assembly [A/RES/64/292].” *Paho.org*, 30 Aug. 2010, [www.paho.org/en/documents/human-right-water-and-sanitation-resolution-adopted-general-assembly-ares64292](http://www.paho.org/en/documents/human-right-water-and-sanitation-resolution-adopted-general-assembly-ares64292).

*UN-Water Annual Report 2020*.

United Nations. “Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International

Watercourses.” *Leiden Journal of International Law*, vol. 10, no. 3, Sept. 1997, pp. 501–508, [legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/8\\_3\\_1997.pdf](http://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/8_3_1997.pdf),  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0922156597000368>.

---. “Egypt | Department of Economic and Social Affairs.” *Sdgs.un.org*, 2021, [sdgs.un.org/basic-page/egypt-34124](http://sdgs.un.org/basic-page/egypt-34124).

“United Nations Treaty Collection.” *Treaties.un.org*,

[treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=XXVII-5&chapter=27&clang=\\_en](http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXVII-5&chapter=27&clang=_en).

“United Nations World Water Development Reports.” *Unesco.org*, 2024, [www.unesco.org/reports/wwdr/en/reports](http://www.unesco.org/reports/wwdr/en/reports)