

Defining Effective Transboundary Water Cooperation

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There is an increasing focus on international cooperation surrounding shared waters. For example, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Framework and SDG Indicator 6.5.2 measures and tracks operational cooperation over transboundary waters – both surface and groundwater. However, the global literature on transboundary waters does not have a single accepted definition of transboundary water cooperation and complications can arise when multiple understandings are used. For example, cooperative efforts over shared waters can take many forms; place matters in the development and continuation of cooperation between riparians. Climate, hydrology, socio-political environments, and particularly political will play a role in establishing and maintaining cooperation. The goals and outcomes of transboundary water cooperation can change depending on the definition and understanding of cooperation. One common aim is that cooperation should be effective, but effectiveness has an equally variable definition as transboundary water cooperation. This research addresses the lack of a commonly used definition of cooperation in the literature on shared waters and develops a framework for understanding effective cooperation. A qualitative content analysis of literature on cooperation in internationally shared rivers and groundwaters was combined with interviews with global experts – both academic and practitioners. A framing analysis was used to determine themes within definitions of cooperation and effectiveness. Cooperation was found to have five frames - legal, institutional, relational, process, and outcome – around which definitions were centered in the literature and interviews. Effective cooperation, while centering on outcomes, contains all five elements of cooperation as appropriate for the scale, timeframe, and context. This presentation presents a discussion of this research which aligns with the congress theme of implementing pathways for development and cooperation by attempting to clarify the multiple understandings of transboundary water cooperation, understand how these affect the structure of cooperative processes, and present a framework for establishing effective cooperation.

Keywords : transboundary water, international rivers, cooperation, effectiveness