

Transboundary water diplomacy among small states: a giant dilemma for Central American regionalism

HARLAN KOFF (UNIVERSITÉ DU LUXEMBOURG),
CARMEN MAGANDA (INECOL, MEXICO)
& EDITH KAUFFER (CIESAS-SURESTE, MEXICO)

Questions

This study critically analyzes this seemingly accepted truth (small states as facilitators for cooperation) by examining water diplomacy in Central America to respond to the research question,

- **‘Do small states necessarily pursue cooperation and consensus in regional water governance in the absence of large states?’**

A secondary question asks, **‘How do “non-decisions” lead to status quo in water diplomacy?’**

Main concepts/hypothesis

- **Non-decisions** are defined as formal support for regional policy change combined with informal domestic non-compliance/non-implementation. **Formality** refers to the legal regulation of water resources while **informality** refers to decision making in a context that lacks legal regulation
- The **small state governance characteristics** (support regional development because of their own lack of size and power, and their perceived vulnerability); **combine well with the water diplomacy framework** which promotes consensus decision making.
- Hypothesis: **small-state countries should demonstrate active commitment to regional governance as a way to extend their influence in global affairs and lower individual national vulnerability to external shocks. Studying SICA within the framework of water diplomacy permits us to critically examine this hypothesis, as all its member states are considered small.**

Methodology

- This article is based on a review of the water diplomacy and Central American water management literatures; official documents from the Central Integration American System (SICA), the European Union (EU), programmes that funded Central American regional water management, and international organizations such as the United Nations, Global Water Partnership, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, etc.; and reports from national governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
- Selected interviews were conducted in 2013–2016 and 2018 with water experts and water management officials and NGO representatives in SICA member states.

Formal regional water cooperation in Central America

- SICA water management: integrative approach to risk management and the regional environmental Plan.
- Regional water agenda in 2009: policy instruments (Draft Central American Water Agreement CONVERGIRH), a water strategy (ECAGIRH) and a regional water action plan (*grupo interagencial del agua* PACAGIRH). This ambitious agenda was established through water diplomacy, in consultation with a network of governmental and non-governmental actors.
- Formal regional arrangements and implementation instruments, three water diplomacy principles: inter-institutional agreement coordination; review of obsolete or non-functional legal and institutional frameworks; and promotion of the concept of the economic value of water.

“Non decisions” and their impact on Water diplomacy in CA

- In addition to SICA, water scholars and participants in Central America have highlighted the importance of localized transnational networks in the region. Encouraging trends of region’s formal water diplomacy framework: Trifinio Treaty, Grupo Gestor Binacional de la Cuenca del Río Goascorán on the El Salvador/Honduras border.
- Remaining challenges of regional water cooperation: regional programmes are formally institutionalized through SICA, and transnational networks of sub-national stakeholders implement them at the local level, but **national governments have not yet implemented water directives, nor do they seem to support water diplomacy** (defined above as the promotion of formal and informal cooperation among local, national and supranational stakeholders with the objective of maximizing the value of water resources).

Water diplomacy in CA: where ambition meets inaction

- SICA has promoted water diplomacy in Central America through financial and political support from the European Union (EU).
- Weak implementation: 1) lack of financial resources after end of EU's assistance 2) political inaction from SICA member states
- The interregional EU-SICA exclusion of nation-states that undermined water diplomacy
- EU: material and ideational power but external hegemon without formal power in the region
- Regional legal water framework not legitimate for national authorities

Non decisions and maintenance of the status quo

- Therefore, states do not openly oppose SICA but they do not update their water laws or implement regional directives.

Table 2. State of national water laws and Integrated Water Resources Management principles in SICA member states, 2018.

<i>Member state</i>	<i>Water law definition</i>	<i>Water law implementation</i>	<i>IWRM principles</i>
Belize	No	No	No
Costa Rica	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dominican Republic	Yes	Yes	Yes
El Salvador	No	No	No
Guatemala	No	No	No
Honduras	Yes	No	No
Nicaragua	Yes	No	No
Panama	Yes	Yes	Yes

Conclusions

- Central American water management debates present an interesting test of small state theory. **Empirical evidence shows how the emerging regional water management regime has been undermined by national authorities through informal decision-making systems** (i.e. the lack of national water laws) to promote non-decisions and the status quo.
- In response to the first research question, **small states are not instinctively supportive of regional integration**, because **no regional hegemons exist in Central America**.
- The only hegemon present in regional water context is the **European Union**, which is an **external actor** with limited legitimacy because it did not recognize member state control of regional integration.
- The Central American case demonstrates how small states can use **‘non-decisions’ to counter-balance the political will of a global political hegemon (the EU)**.

Thank you for your attention!

harlan.koff@uni.lu
carmen.maganda@inecol.mx
kauffer69@hotmail.com



Sumpul transboundary river basin, El Salvador-Honduras