

Report on the Potsdam Africa Dialogues 2025

Bridges Over Troubled Waters: Harnessing the Power of Water Diplomacy in Africa

By Dr. K. Lebek

Over the past decade, the Potsdam Africa Dialogues has established itself as a key forum for fostering regional cooperation. Organized by the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:), the event convenes experts from industry and academia, political leaders, and civil society representatives from both Africa and Europe to examine pressing regional issues. The 2025 edition focused on *Water Diplomacy in Africa*, addressing the continent's growing water-related challenges, which increasingly threaten livelihoods, ecosystems, and regional stability. As governments face mounting pressure amid limited effectiveness in tackling water crises, the conference explored how international cooperation, regional mechanisms, and local initiatives can be aligned to develop sustainable water management strategies that advance both peace and development across Africa.

In her keynote address, J. Sehring (IHE Delft) explored the dual role of water as both a potential source of conflict and a powerful driver of peace. While the concept of “water wars” over transboundary water sources is often evoked, the reality is typically more nuanced. In practice, cooperation over shared water resources is far more common than conflict. Such collaboration can generate significant benefits—not only by preventing disputes, but also by promoting socio-economic development, ensuring environmental sustainability through coordinated river protection, and enhancing political stability.

Sehring emphasized that cooperation around water has the potential to extend beyond the water sector, fostering broader trust and collaboration among states and stakeholders. She highlighted that conflict and cooperation can coexist, and that water diplomacy should be understood as a continuous process of negotiating how cooperation unfolds. Importantly, she argued that water diplomacy is not limited to official diplomatic channels. Non-governmental organizations, technical experts, and local communities also play critical roles—especially through grassroots, people-to-people diplomacy.

A key challenge, Sehring noted, lies in addressing the power asymmetries that often shape transboundary water governance. It is therefore essential to ask who truly benefits from water cooperation and which voices are missing from the conversation. Making water diplomacy more inclusive requires consciously amplifying marginalized perspectives and ensuring that diverse actors have a seat at the table.

The second keynote on Day 2 of the conference was delivered by Julienne Ndjiki from the Global Water Partnership Southern Africa. Her presentation focused on the gendered dimensions of water scarcity and governance. Across many rural and peri-urban areas in Africa, women and girls bear the primary responsibility for fetching, using, and managing water for drinking, cooking, sanitation, and agriculture. Despite their vital role and extensive knowledge at the grassroots level, their contributions are often underrecognized in formal governance structures.

Ndjiki highlighted that women frequently develop innovative, community-based solutions to address water scarcity, such as rainwater harvesting systems, efficient irrigation methods, and informal water-sharing mechanisms. These innovations, often born of necessity, hold significant potential for scaling and broader impact. Beyond their technical roles, women also serve as

health educators and advocates, promoting hygiene, water safety, and conservation within their communities. Their social networks can play a critical role in mobilizing collective action during water-related crises.

However, women face numerous challenges in the water sector. As the primary stewards of household water, they are disproportionately affected by water insecurity. The burden of traveling long distances to collect water negatively impacts their health, education, and economic opportunities. Gender biases and entrenched social norms further restrict women's access to information, decision-making processes, and leadership roles within water governance. Institutional support mechanisms, such as mentorship and professional development programs, remain limited.

Ndjiki discussed the AIP-WACDEP-G (Water, Climate, Development, and Gender Investments), a flagship initiative under the Continental Africa Water Investment Program, which has been piloted in five African countries. This program aims to enhance institutional capacity to ensure that water infrastructure investments, governance, and job creation efforts are inclusive and strategically advance gender equality. She emphasized the critical importance of including women in water management and peacebuilding efforts, noting their unique ability to leverage long-standing intercommunal relationships and their intimate understanding of local water sources and community needs.

The conference panels explored a diverse range of case studies showcasing water diplomacy at various governance levels and involving multiple stakeholders.

The first panel, *“Managing Shared Waters: The Role of Regional Cooperation in Water Diplomacy”*, examined how African institutions and river basin organizations contribute to conflict resolution and equitable water access. Representatives from the Nile Basin Initiative and the Niger Basin Authority shared insights into the specific challenges and opportunities within their respective basins.

The second panel, *“Bridging Continents: Development Cooperation in Water Governance”*, brought together representatives from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the World Bank, and the African Union Commission to discuss how international actors support water governance across Africa.

The third panel, titled *“Blue Africa: Advancing Transboundary Water Cooperation through Africa-Europe Partnerships”*, focused on the “Blue Africa” Action—part of the Team Europe Initiative on Transboundary Water Management in Africa (TEI TWM). Implemented in collaboration with the African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW) and the African Union Commission (AUC), the initiative aims to strengthen institutional frameworks, promote sustainable development, and enhance climate resilience through improved management of shared water resources.

The fourth panel, *“Building Community Resilience: Grassroot Solutions to Water Conflicts”*, highlighted the power of locally driven approaches to resolve disputes and ensure sustainable resource management. One key example presented was the Lake Victoria Region Local Authorities Cooperation (LVRLAC), which demonstrated how local partnerships can foster effective water governance and conflict resolution at the community level.

At the conclusion of the conference, several panelists shared key takeaways that emerged from the discussions:

- The enabling environment for water diplomacy is constantly evolving, requiring adaptive and responsive strategies.

- Targeted investment is essential—particularly in areas where it can have the most meaningful impact. Building grassroots resilience and establishing domestic financing mechanisms are crucial steps toward sustainable water governance.
- Gender considerations must be integrated into water diplomacy efforts. Addressing deeply rooted norms and shifting mindsets are necessary to ensure inclusive and equitable participation.
- As one panelist remarked, “The waters aren’t troubled—the problem lies in our inability to reach agreement over what we must share.” This underscores the need for stronger dialogue and trust-building.
- Water diplomacy should be a whole-of-society effort, engaging all stakeholders—from governments to local communities—in shared governance. The central challenge is finding ways to bring these diverse actors together in meaningful collaboration.
- Water can serve as a powerful catalyst for cooperation, economic development, social transformation, and inclusion.

The conference surfaced a range of innovative ideas, practical approaches, and collaborative opportunities that can inform and advance future water cooperation across the African continent and beyond.