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STAP BRIEF ON FOSTERING COOPERATION AND MANAGING CONFLICT IN GEF TRANSBOUNDARY WATER PROJECTS

A STAP BRIEF

Fostering cooperation and managing conflict in GEF transboundary water projects



Photo: Conservation Namibia

Introduction

The complex relationship between conflict, cooperation, and environmental benefits in the context of transboundary fresh and marine water resources plays a pivotal role. It fosters cooperation and management of shared waters that benefit the environment and society. Supporting resilience through peace and cooperation, and preventing conflict in GEF International Waters (IW) projects and beyond, are fundamental for achieving Global Environmental Benefits (GEBs).

Transboundary resources, notably water, often cross political borders and span multiple nations. With over [300 shared basins](#), more than [600 transboundary aquifers](#), and hundreds of shared marine ecosystems (among them [64 Large Marine Ecosystems \(LMEs\)](#)), differing national interests and the existence of different governance systems can easily lead to tensions, yet also offer powerful opportunities for cooperation.

When cooperative agreements on water are designed well, transboundary water projects can create “virtuous cycles”, where collaboration through shared resources fosters trust, peace, and achieves GEBs while supporting sustainable development. However, when cooperation is neglected, affected by conflict and fragility, or intentionally exploited, these same waters can create “vicious cycles” of conflict and ecological decline. Managing shared water cooperatively is, therefore, vital to protect ecosystems, sustain livelihoods, and promote stability and peace across borders, as it is a [prerequisite](#)¹ for achieving GEBs.

¹ STAP has defined prerequisite co-benefits as “...local benefits that must be achieved to realize the mandated GEF GEBs and ensure their durability.” See “Incorporating Co-benefits in the Design of GEF Projects”, June 2023. <https://www.stapgef.org/index.php/resources/advisory-documents/incorporating-co-benefits-design-gef-projects>

Supporting water cooperation and similar efforts that strengthen water security have been recognized by the international community through numerous initiatives, multilateral processes, and statements in recent years². In 2026, the UN Water Conference will feature “Water for Cooperation” as one of six interactive dialogues, highlighting the importance of the link between water and cooperation for sustainability, a healthy planet, and stability and peace. Other initiatives include the 2021 [EU Council Conclusions on Water Diplomacy](#), confirming the EU’s commitment to transboundary water cooperation as a tool for peace, security, and stability. Switzerland’s [Blue Peace Initiative](#), aims to transform competition over freshwater into cooperation. The [Nice Commitments](#) emerging from the 2025 UN Oceans Conference, which call for international cooperation through multilateral frameworks for ocean protection and sustainable development. Moreover, water cooperation as a prerequisite for a sustainable future is also recognized in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notable [SDG 6.5.2](#), focusing on integrated water resources management, especially through transboundary cooperation. These efforts demonstrate increased cooperation to address conflict and ensure water security.

Accordingly, water cooperation has also been high on the GEF’s agenda since its very establishment. The impacts of this work have recently been highlighted by the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), in its [Evaluation of the GEF’s approach to and Interventions in Water Security](#), highlighting the importance of water cooperation, for example, for effectively preventing land degradation, reducing the spread of hazardous chemicals through contaminated water supplies, and supporting both the foundational and water-intensive aspects of climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. The [Eight Comprehensive Evaluation of the GEF \(OPS-8\)](#) also highlights the importance of water cooperation, among others, for

addressing current climate challenges. Additionally, the GEF aims to strengthen transboundary cooperation, including across the Integrated Programs (IPs), to address water security in its programming starting from 2026 through 2030. The IPs provide opportunities to address transboundary cooperation in large marine ecosystems and in transboundary water basins.

In this brief, the Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) to the GEF builds on its information note, [“Fostering Cooperation and Managing Conflict,”](#) as well as on STAP’s document, [“Environmental Security: Dimensions and Priorities”](#). It offers key insights for the GEF to encourage greater cooperation over shared resources, mitigate risks, and manage conflicts related to shared water resources. The brief begins by describing four dimensions that define the strategic importance of transboundary water systems. Additionally, STAP presents four recommendations to support each dimension. These recommendations are:

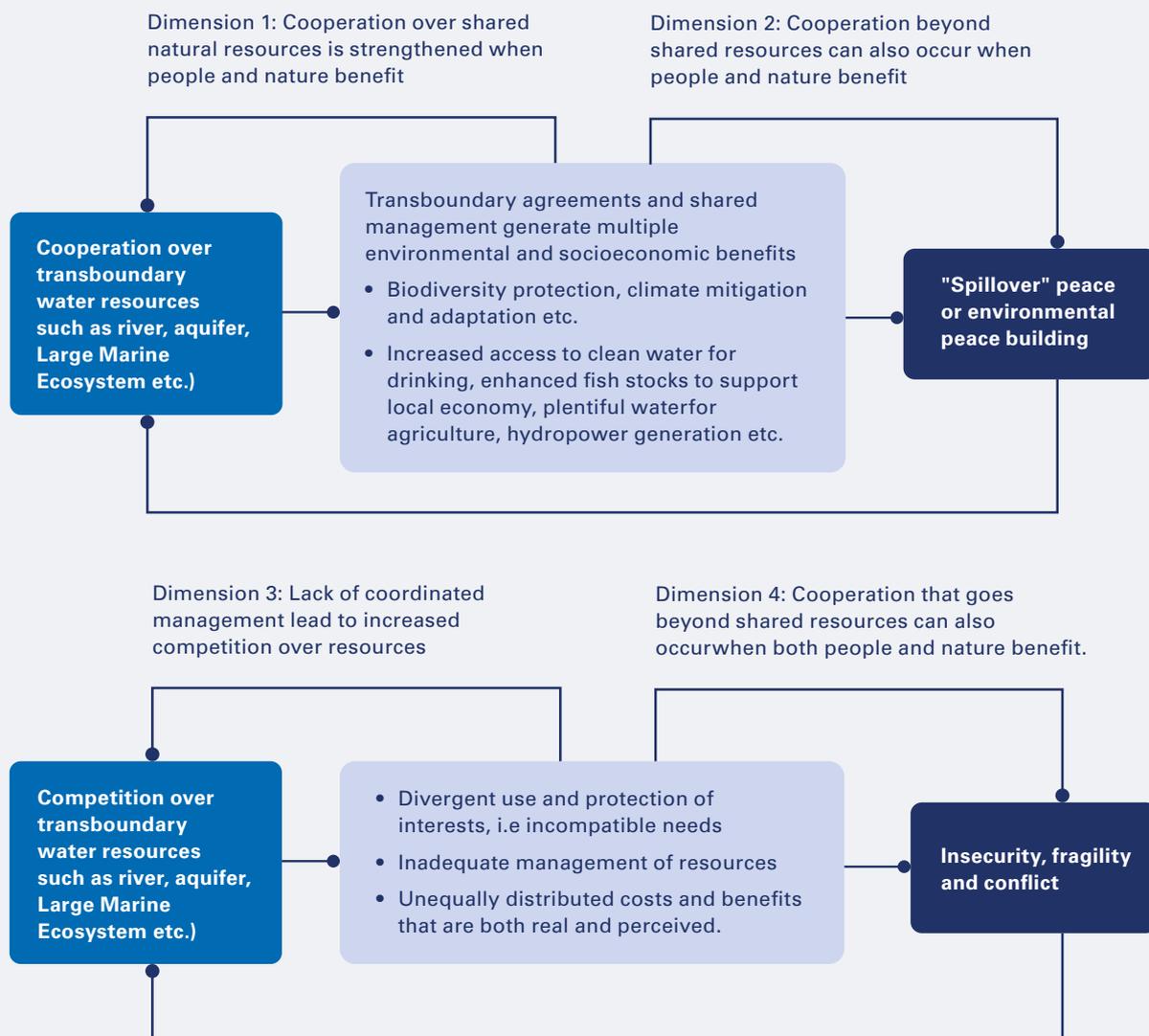
- i. Promote cooperation over international water and define the intended GEB for each International Waters project, along with the specific cooperation mechanism needed to achieve these benefits, and establish robust monitoring systems to track and evaluate progress toward outcomes;
- ii. Harvest co-benefits arising from water cooperation beyond the water sector itself and identify, track, and communicate these co-benefits;
- iii. Prevent and mitigate conflicts arising from shared waters and therefore assess factors and trends contributing to conflict to better inform project design and implementation; and
- iv. Ensure conflict does not compromise GEBs in international waters by encouraging adaptive management responses to conflict situations during project implementation, alongside considering conflict and fragility in monitoring project outcomes.

2 [The six interactive dialogues include](#): Water for people, the human rights to water and sanitation, including for those in vulnerable situations, for healthy societies and economies; Water for Prosperity: Valuing water, water-energy-food nexus, advancing integrated and sustainable water resource management, wastewater and water-use efficiency across sectors, and economic and social development; Water for planet: climate, biodiversity, desertification, environment source to sea, resilience and disaster risk reduction; Water for cooperation: transboundary and international water cooperation, including scientific cooperation, and inclusive governance; Water in multilateral processes: Sustainable Development Goal 6, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and beyond, and global water initiatives; Investments for water: financing, technology and innovation, and capacity-building.

Box 1: The interlinkages between international water and conflict and cooperation

A four-dimensional STAP framework

As detailed in STAP’s information note on “Fostering Cooperation and Managing Conflict there are four dimensions that define the relationship between transboundary waters and conflict or cooperation among states. The first two dimensions showcase the “virtuous cycles”, while dimensions three and four showcase the potential “vicious cycles”.

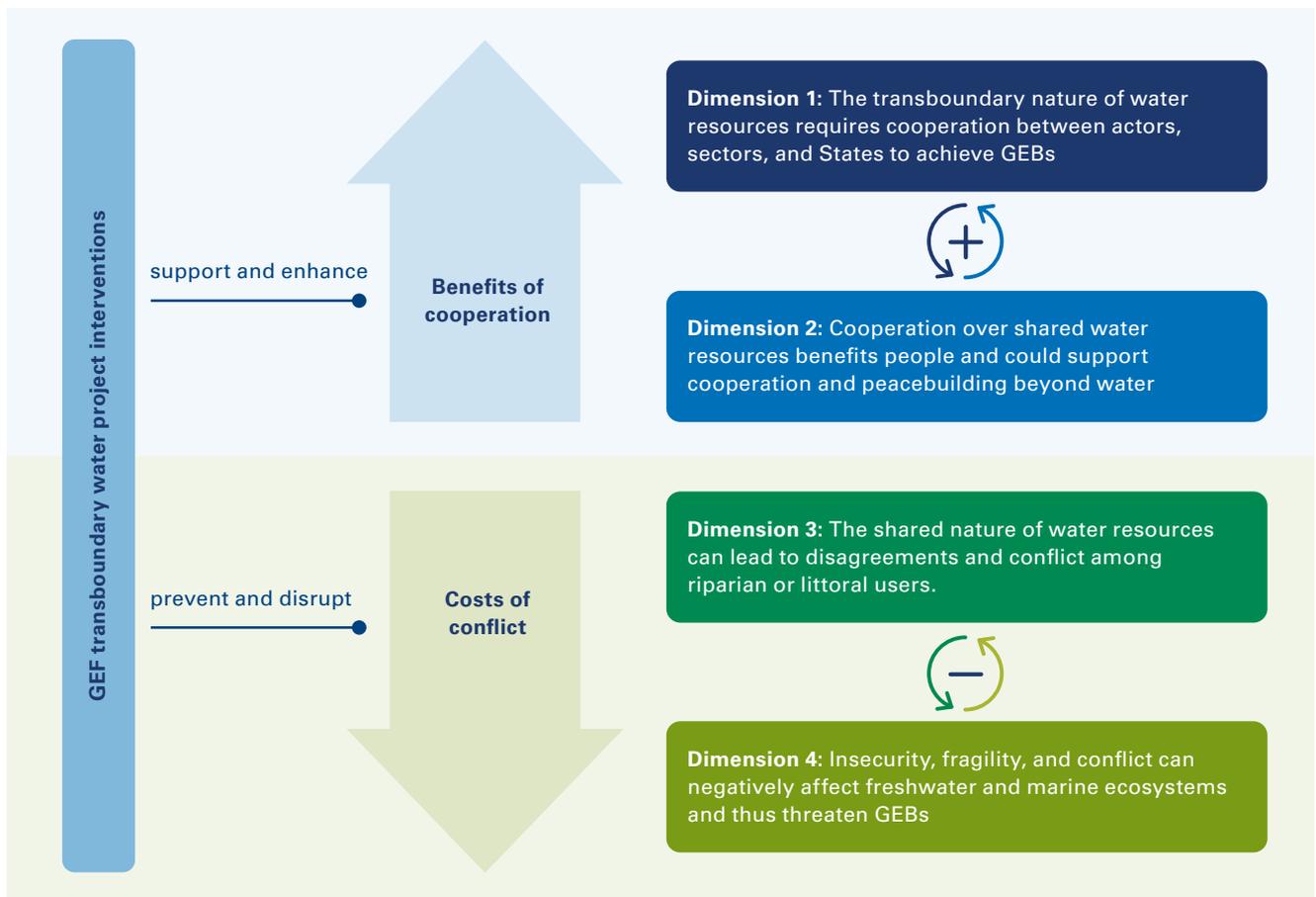


The first dimension suggests that shared water resources necessitate cooperation for coordinated and integrated management across political borders, benefiting both nature and people, and generating GEBs and co-benefits. This may include developing agreements by multiple countries to control and maintain the river’s flow regime beyond national borders, supporting greater protection and restoration of transboundary wetlands. The second dimension stipulates that cooperation over shared water resources can amplify the benefits of cooperative behavior. This fosters a culture of trust and cooperation beyond transboundary resources to contribute to environmental peacebuilding. Examples include the practice of cooperation between government actors through established treaties and joint organizations, which can help solidify relations between states that share freshwater or marine waters, thereby increasing the likelihood of future cooperation across fields beyond water.

The other two dimensions relate to the vicious cycles that can occur if water resources either lead to or contribute to conflict or if conflict affects waters. Starting with the third dimension presents that the shared nature of transboundary waters can become a source of contention when states perceive their water needs as incompatible, underscoring the importance of cooperative management to prevent instability. For example, when neighboring countries within a shared marine environment pursue conflicting objectives, such as conservation versus commercial use, imbalances in outcomes can arise, underscoring the need for collaborative governance to prevent conflict. The fourth dimension highlights that in contexts of fragility or conflict, transboundary waters and their associated natural resources, alongside the communities that depend on them, are likely to face heightened pressure to use and manage them sustainably. Weak or fragmented management, along with other context-specific challenges, can lead to resource degradation and intensified competition over vital ecosystem services. For example, in a shared basin affected by persistent conflict, the absence of effective water governance can reduce both the quality and availability of water, ultimately undermining GEBs provided by transboundary waters.

Issues and Recommendations for Managing Conflict and Fostering Cooperation for GEFs in International Waters

Along the four dimensions of water conflict and cooperation, the GEF portfolio provides four entry points for fostering cooperation over shared water resources and harvesting the co-benefits of such cooperation, while preventing conflict and ensuring effective project implementation in spite of conflict and fragility.



1. The transboundary nature of water resources requires cooperation between actors, sectors, and States to achieve GEBs

Managing shared water resources ultimately requires collaboration for a coordinated and integrated approach across political boundaries to benefit both nature and society, resulting in GEBs and co-benefits. As countries collaborate to maintain a river's flow regime across national borders, it can lead to enhanced protection and restoration of transboundary resources, such as wetlands. Thereby, transboundary water management supports biodiversity conservation, climate stability, and human well-being.

This approach is centered on the deliberate articulation of the GEBs from international water projects. These are benefits that can only be attained through cooperation across countries and stakeholders such as improved water quality, enhanced ecosystem integrity, or biodiversity protection. By establishing clear objectives for the targeted GEBs, parties can align a common vision and purpose. Equally important is the identification and implementation of specific cooperation mechanisms. These include joint governance structures, legal frameworks and treaties, basin or marine commissions, harmonized policy frameworks, and data-sharing protocols that are necessary to achieve these outcomes. The success of such collaboration also depends on the design and application of robust, appropriate, and transparent monitoring systems.

Recommended Action:

The GEF is encouraged to identify the necessary cooperation between the actors responsible for the shared water resource to achieve GEBs, and the necessary interventions to establish, or strengthen existing, cooperation between those actors. A valuable addition would be for the GEF to strengthen measurement and monitoring of the cooperation and its results to gain a better understanding of how this aspect of the project's design affects the delivery of environmental benefits, ensure accountability, and make possible adaptive management strategies in response to new challenges or opportunities. The GEF could draw upon previous work to characterize different types of shared fresh and marine water resources and different cooperation mechanisms, through the GEF Transboundary Water Assessment Program.³ Additionally, satellite remote sensing and other emerging technologies (such as responsible use of artificial intelligence) offer promising tools for monitoring environmental change. Relevant data sets could also be made available through [IW: Learn](#) or the [GEF Geospatial Platform](#), and targeted in-country training can help prioritize actions and monitor change over time. Some cooperation mechanisms are already monitored in the [Transboundary Freshwater Diplomacy Database](#) maintained by Oregon State University and its partners, which has been supported by the GEF previously.

³ The [GEF Transboundary Waters Assessment Program](#) aims to provide a baseline assessment to identify and evaluate changes in water systems caused by human activities and natural processes and their consequences for human populations.



Box 2: Cooperation for GEBs: GEF-supported cooperation in the Danube/Black Sea Basin

The Danube River Basin is one of Europe's largest basin, flowing through the territory of 19 countries, making it the most internationally diverse basin in the world. Beginning in the 1970s, the basin's water quality and ecosystem deteriorated due to the development of new infrastructure, resulting in severe hydro-morphological alterations and sharp increases in nitrogen and phosphate pollution. These changes also negatively impacted the Black Sea, the Danube River basin's recipient water body. As environmental pressures and overfishing in the Black Sea began to take a toll on local livelihoods, riparian and littoral countries recognized the need to cooperate to reverse declining environmental trends.

The Danube River Protection Convention was signed in 1994, providing the basis for the establishment of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, which addresses water resource management challenges in the basin. For the Black Sea, the 1992 Bucharest Convention established a basis for institutionalized cooperation in the form of the Commission on the Protection of the Black Sea Against Pollution (or the Black Sea Commission) to provide a platform for cooperation.

GEF support for these efforts began as early as GEF-1, with the Developing the Danube River Basin Pollution Reduction Program (GEF ID 342). Since then, more than 30 GEF-funded projects have been implemented in the region, including the first [Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis](#) (TDA) for the Danube River basin in 1999. This TDA and the subsequent Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis–Strategic Action Program (TDA-SAP) addressed numerous pollution pressures, including from land-based sources, using a [SOURCE-TO-SEA APPROACH](#), with the goal of achieving GEBs.

Although recent conflicts in the region have affected cooperation and are eroding past environmental gains in parts of the basin, evaluations of past GEF investments in the Danube's cooperative frameworks highlighted improvements in environmental conditions. It is unlikely that these types of results could be achieved in the absence of cooperation among littoral and riparian States, with support from the international community, including the GEF.

2. Cooperation over shared water resources benefits nature and people, and could support cooperation and peacebuilding beyond water

Cooperation over shared water resources highlights the advantages of collaborative behavior and builds trust, which in turn fosters cooperation beyond water-related issues and contributes to environmental peacebuilding. Cooperative efforts between government actors, through the adoption of treaties and the establishment of collaborative organizations, can strengthen

relationships between states that share freshwater or marine waters, increasing the likelihood of future collaboration in areas that extend beyond water as a resource. Identifying, tracking, and communicating the co-benefits of water-related cooperation is essential. These benefits often extend far beyond the water sector, supporting economic development, climate resilience, public health, and greater regional stability. By effectively communicating the wider impacts of these co-benefits, IW projects help build stakeholder trust, strengthen political cooperation, and clearly demonstrate their contributions to peace and shared prosperity.

Box 3: Socio-economic co-benefits from GEF support in the Okavango River Basin

The Okavango River basin is shared by Angola, Botswana, and Namibia and supports important ecosystems and biodiversity hotspots, including the famous Okavango Delta, a UNESCO biosphere reserve and a Ramsar site. The basin is facing increasing development pressure, particularly upstream in Angola and Namibia, threatening the fragile ecological balance.

GEF regional investments through UNDP with Angola and Namibia in GEF-2 (2007-2017) and in GEF-5 (2017–2023), with the addition of Botswana, have contributed to enhancing the institutionalized cooperation architecture for the basin. While the Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM) was originally established with the 1994 Okavango Agreement, it only became fully functional after support from external partners, including the GEF. Today, OKACOM is considered a well-functioning basin organization that effectively provides member states with a platform to address and prevent conflict over emerging water resource challenges, facilitating cooperation among states in other issue areas as well.

Improved cooperation in the Okavango River basin has provided multiple socio-economic co-benefits to riparian populations, especially those living in the Okavango Delta. The sustainable management of the delta has provided natural resources to sustain communities’ livelihoods and allowed for the development of a valuable eco-tourism industry, which contributes more than 10% of Botswana’s gross domestic product and provides tens of thousands of jobs. These achievements would not have been possible without states cooperating on the basis of a treaty and a basin organization, indicating how crucial cooperation over shared water resources is for attaining GEBs that could not be attained through unilateral action.

Recommended Action:

The GEF can more clearly capture the cooperation benefits that IW projects generate and account for these increasingly important peace co-benefits throughout the project cycle, from planning to monitoring and evaluation. Identifying co-benefits in context and incorporating them into project and

program design, as noted in [STAP’s information note on co-benefits](#) helps ensure their realization. Integrating peace and other co-benefits into ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and learning enhances understanding of their impacts. Improved accounting of socio-economic co-benefits from transboundary water projects can build broader support, demonstrate value for money, and inform future investments.



Photo: UN-Habitat

3. The shared nature of water resources can lead to disagreement and conflict among nearshore users and states, with repercussions on GEBs

When countries share the same water resources, they may compete over these water resources. This can create tension or even conflict. For instance, if one country wants to protect fish in shared waters while another wants to keep fishing for profit, the costs and benefits won't be shared fairly, increasing the risk of conflict. Likewise, the development of water resources infrastructure in one country and the negative environmental and social impacts of that infrastructure in another country can trigger conflict when agreements across countries are not met.⁴

Recommended Action:

Proactively assessing the conflict potential related to shared water resources in designing projects is important. Considering ways to prevent or mitigate conflicts in theories of change would assist in delivery of GEBs. This requires a sound understanding of the basin, aquifer, or LME that GEF intends to engage in, including the diverse interests of stakeholders, particularly across national boundaries. In many cases, key factors are context-specific and would be best developed through continued multi-stakeholder dialogue throughout implementation and may require adaptive management. To ensure durability, project teams are also encouraged to develop short future narratives of how key drivers of change and trends could interact and unfold in the future, so that projects remain robust to plausible futures.

4. Insecurity, fragility, and conflict can negatively affect freshwater and marine ecosystems and thus threaten GEBs.

Finally, where fragility or conflict already exists within a transboundary water context, natural resources and the people who depend on them face heightened pressure. Weak or absent coordination in resource management often worsens these strains, leading to further degradation of shared ecosystems and growing competition over their declining services. For instance, persistent conflict and limited water governance in a shared basin can not only negatively affect GEF projects directly but also reduce both the availability and quality of water, ultimately undermining GEBs. As dynamics in conflict or fragility settings can evolve rapidly throughout a project's lifecycle, ongoing assessments enable project teams to detect emerging tensions or fragility risks for projects early and adjust interventions before they escalate into violence or disrupt/delay implementation.

Recommended Action:

The GEF may consider closely monitoring developments related to conflict and fragility throughout project development and implementation, allowing for adaptive management approaches in response to conflict or high-risk situations, and incorporating conflict and fragility considerations into monitoring project outcomes. The GEF may consider:

- i) evaluating conflict and fragility conditions before project design and identifying political, economic, environmental, and social drivers of instability;
- ii) strengthening implementation capacity by training project staff in conflict sensitivity and crisis response;
- iii) integrating consideration of institutional trust, equity in access to resources, and perceptions of safety throughout the project. By embedding flexibility and conflict sensitivity into project management and monitoring, projects can remain responsive to changing conditions.

4 STAP provides advice in its note "[Clarifying risks in GEF projects, including innovation risks](#)", on how to design projects accounting for challenges that undermine its logic. It also clarifies how risks to the project can persist despite a robust project logic, and how it is necessary to define these risks in the risk table for GEF projects, along with identifying mitigation measures.

Conclusion and the way forward

Transboundary fresh and marine water resources are intricately linked to both cooperation and conflict. Accordingly, they can generate multiple benefits for ecosystems, people, and countries, but they can also be the source of considerable environmental, economic, social, and political costs or be affected by conflict themselves. A focus on transboundary resource management is crucial for interrupting or mitigating vicious cycles of water-related conflict and promoting virtuous cycles of water-related cooperation for GEBs and co-benefits. Above, STAP suggests four areas of action to further strengthen GEF investment in international waters and harness the co-benefits of cooperation, while also preventing water-related conflicts and effectively managing broader conflicts that can impact GEBs. Some of these actions can be taken during project design, such as through the theory of change, future narratives, and risk assessment, further complemented in STAP's information on [Real-Time Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning](#). Others can be addressed during project implementation through an adaptive management process. While others, such as defining and monitoring environmental outcomes (GEBs) as well as cooperation or peace benefits, could be considered for future GEF programming.

Together, these recommendations highlight the importance of a more integrated, adaptive, and evidence-based approach to managing shared freshwater and marine resources for a sustainable, cooperative, and peaceful future. Incorporating conflict indicators into monitoring and evaluation, recognizing co-benefits beyond the water sector, and clearly defining GEBs and the cooperation mechanisms required for achieving them can significantly strengthen environmental and social outcomes. At the same time, systematically assessing and responding to conflict and fragility risks helps ensure that projects remain resilient and context-appropriate. By coupling robust data with inclusive cooperation mechanisms and conflict-sensitive design, the GEF and its partners can more effectively safeguard shared water resources. This approach helps mitigate related conflict risks and generate co-benefits across freshwater and marine resources, thereby better supporting the people and ecosystems that depend on them.

Photo: Susanne Schmeier



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