



Water Diplomacy: Why, What, Who, and How

Why do we need Water Diplomacy?

Can we address ever increasing supply-demand gap through the lens of water scarcity?

Can we provide access of water in urban slums through the lens of water security?

Can we develop adaptation and mitigation strategies for a changing climate through the lens of sustainability?

For each of these questions: some say “yes”; some say “no”; others say “it depends”.

Of course, it depends. But, it depends on what? Why (and how) do we get yes and no answer for the same question? This is partly because of our search for certainty and clear-cut solution for problems we face. For simple problems, where cause and effect relationships are well understood, we have more certainty in the outcomes of the action we take and we can pre-define solutions.

What do these problems of water scarcity, security, and sustainability have in common? In a colloquial sense, these problems are complex. But, what makes these problems complex? What do we need to address these problems for actionable outcome? For complex problems, however, this certainty of a clear-cut solution does not exist. Neither do we have a consensus on what action to take to address these problems effectively.

When we neither have clear certainty nor consensus what we need is Water Diplomacy.

What is Water Diplomacy?

The Water Diplomacy Framework (WDF) aims to help resolve water related conflicts. It acknowledges that traditional problem solving frames are adequate to address simple problems where reasonable scientific certainty and consensus about intervention exists. When water challenges stem from complex – interconnected, uncertain, unpredictable, and boundary crossing – system dynamics with feedback, traditional frames for problem solving can be limiting or counter-productive.

A recurrent factor for such limitations is that traditional problem solving frames often separate the observation-based technical (what is) from the value-based socio-political (what ought to be) dimensions of the problem. The WDF emphasizes that when dealing with complex problems, these dimensions cannot be de-coupled.

The WDF acknowledges both the limits to knowledge – objectivity of observations and subjectivity of interpretation – and the contingent nature of our action. The WDF proposes a principled pragmatic approach to negotiation that is based on credible scientific



knowledge mediated through equity and sustainability as guiding principles for policy action.

The WDF approach emphasizes that, when addressing complex water problems all parties have a legitimate right to have a voice about the evidence used and its interpretation, the past evidence and future implications of an intervention, metrics of equity and sustainability, and the package of actionable solutions. These parties include users and producers of water knowledge, managers, technical experts, policy makers, decision makers, and politicians. Furthermore, the WDF asserts that parties need to seek consensus and mutual benefits when negotiating a resolution.

Who is a Water Diplomat?

Simply: A water diplomat facilitates the process of resolving water conflicts by finding creative sustainable options that improve mutual gains.

A more technical view: A water diplomat is an interdisciplinary professional who contributes to the resolution of complex water problems that include: (i) multiple stakeholders with conflicting or divergent interests and (ii) sources of uncertainty in either or both the scientific or sociopolitical domain. Water diplomats facilitate sustainable water solutions by problem-solving with a mutual gains negotiation approach and synthesizing information across disciplinary boundaries and sociopolitical perspectives. Water diplomats are literate in multiple water-related academic and applied fields.

How can Water Diplomacy Help?

[Water Diplomacy was conceived](#) by professionals at Tufts, MIT, and Harvard in collaboration with reflective researchers and practitioners from around the world. Our global [Water Diplomacy Network](#) involves over 300 reflective water professionals from around the world. If you need any assistance related to water issues anywhere in the world, we will be happy to connect you to appropriate experts from our network. Please feel free to get in touch by sending an email to thinkanddo@waterdiplomacy.org with a brief description of the problem and type of assistance you are seeking.