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# Promoting cooperation through management of transboundary water resources

## Conflict

IWMI's research is challenging the conventional wisdom that conflict over water leads to war. Over the past 25 years, politicians, academics and journalists have frequently predicted that disputes over water would be a cause for future wars. The water wars hypothesis has its roots in earlier research carried out on a small number of transboundary rivers such as the Indus, Jordan and the Nile. These particular rivers were a focus because they had experienced water-related disputes. Specific events cited as evidence include Israel's bombing of Syria's attempts to divert the Jordan's headwater, and military threats by Egypt against any country building dams in the upstream water of the Nile. However, while some links made between conflict and water were valid, they did not necessarily represent the norm.



*While there has been conflict related to water in a handful of international basins, in the rest of the world's approximately 300 shared basins the record has been largely positive.*

## Cooperation

IWMI scientists working in partnership with Aaron Wolf at Oregon State University have been investigating the evidence behind the water war predictions. Their findings show that, while it is true that there has been conflict related to water in a handful of international basins, in the rest of the world's approximately 300 shared basins the record has been largely positive. This is perhaps exemplified by the hundreds of treaties in place guiding equitable water use between nations sharing water resources. The institutions created by these agreements can, in fact, be one of the most important factors in ensuring cooperation rather than conflict.

*"We found that places that generally cooperated with each other, usually also cooperated over water. In places where there were conflicts, such as the Middle East, there were often other causes for disagreement. In other words, the water situation didn't help but it wasn't the main cause of war." Aaron Wolf, Professor of Geography, Oregon State University.*

Earlier, most literature on transboundary water began with statements about the imminence of water wars. Now much research starts off by saying that the water wars hypothesis has been disproven, or at least requires cautious consideration.

## Shift in emphasis

This shift in thinking is important because it has helped direct resources towards developing institutions that can effectively manage the world's major rivers collaboratively. Success has the potential to improve lives for millions of people who live within the catchments of the world's major rivers. IWMI's research efforts on transboundary rivers are now focused on understanding how these shared resources can best be managed in a peaceful way. For example, IWMI researchers have looked at what institutions best suit particular, developing-country contexts.

"In Africa you have almost no water development and low levels of economic development, but we found the treaties in Africa to be almost identical to those you'd find in Europe," says Mark Giordano, Head of IWMI's research theme on Water and Society. "This is probably because projects are often driven by donors more familiar with what works in their own physical and socioeconomic contexts. In many cases, transboundary water management could be much more effective if it better suited the geographical, hydrological and socioeconomic conditions of the nations concerned."

## Educating future treaty-makers

IWMI has presented its findings to policymakers in numerous conferences, interviews and publications such as a chapter on transboundary institutions in the book, *Share: Managing water across boundaries*, published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The chapter covers the functions of transboundary institutions; how they can be designed to promote cooperation; overcome internal disputes and ways of coping with the uncertainty created by climate change; and how their effectiveness can be monitored.

*Share* is helping inform the next generation of water specialists about how they can foster cooperation through shared water resource management.

## For more information

Oregon State University's Program in Water Conflict Management and Transformation (PWCMT):

[www.transboundarywaters.orst.edu/](http://www.transboundarywaters.orst.edu/)

*The African Transboundary Water Law:*

[www.africanwaterlaw.org/](http://www.africanwaterlaw.org/)

*Share: Managing water across boundaries (book):*

[data.iucn.org/dbtw-wpd/edocs/2008-016.pdf](http://data.iucn.org/dbtw-wpd/edocs/2008-016.pdf)