LEARNING NOTE

Water, Peace and Security

# The Role of Dialogue and Consultation to Resolve Water-related Conflicts and Insecurity

## Lessons from the Water Peace and Security partnership's work in Ethiopia, Iraq, Kenya and Mali

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# The Role of Dialogue and Consultation to Resolve Water-related Conflicts and Insecurity

## Introduction

Dialogue presents a peaceful and constructive means to address water-related conflicts and water insecurity. It is a central pillar of the integrated approach of the Water Peace and Security (WPS) partnership, that helps identify, address, and prevent water-related conflict and security risks in regions characterised by high vulnerability to water stress and low coping capacity.[1] WPS supports with water systems, stakeholder and conflict analysis, modelling, capacity building and mobilisation for action on water insecurity, as well as stakeholder consultation and dialogue to provide space for marginalised groups to voice their needs, to foster cooperation between conflict parties, and to resolve specific water-related conflicts at national, local and provincial levels. The different project pillars of WPS complement each other; the analysis and modelling work feeds into dialogue processes, and capacity building of dialogue members increases the stakeholders' knowledge of water security and skills relating to conflict-sensitive water management.

The work of WPS has demonstrated that dialogue can foster communication and enable cooperation over water challenges. Dialogue and inclusive and participatory consultation can provide a platform for citizens to give visibility to their grievances and priorities, and can help restore trust in government institutions. While these processes alone cannot resolve structural conflict drivers, they can create the necessary conditions for broader peacebuilding efforts to succeed. Furthermore, dialogue in water-related conflicts can help in creating shared knowledge about the complex links between climate change, ecosystems, land use, water management, conflict, and human security. During dialogue, technical solutions like water infrastructure development can be identified, discussed, and agreed upon as solutions to conflicts. It is important though that restoring broken relations and non-material needs of water users, such as recognition of identity and rights, as well as their participation in decision-making, remain central throughout the process.

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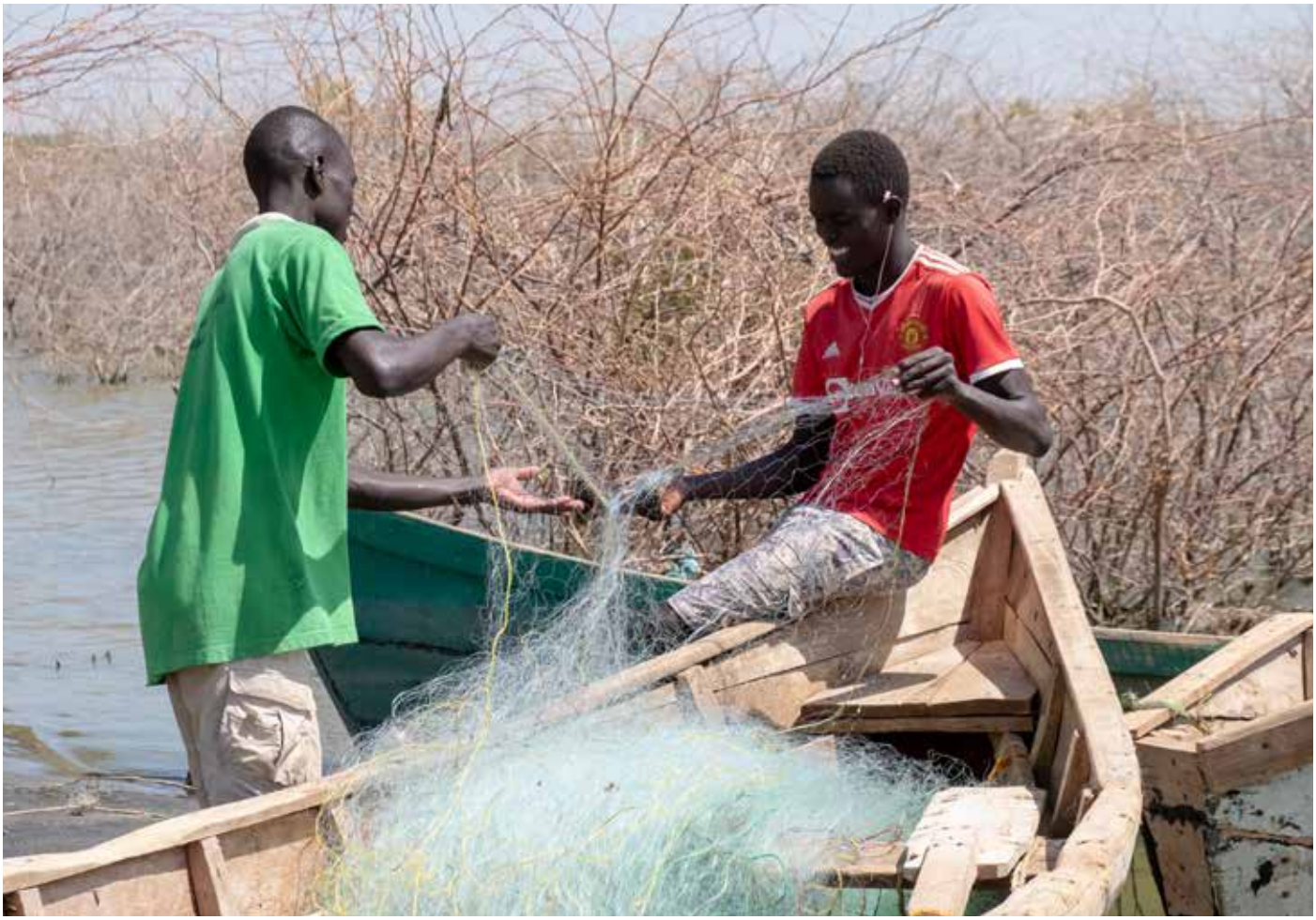
# The Role of Dialogue and Consultation to Resolve Water-related Conflicts and Insecurity

This learning note illustrates what facilitated dialogue and consultation can achieve, as well as their limitations, by presenting lessons from the WPS-supported processes from 2020 until 2024 in Kenya's Turkana county, southern Iraq, Ethiopia's Omo-Gibe Basin, and the Inner Niger Delta in Mali. The insights are structured into six lessons and illustrated with short case studies. They were collected through semi-structured interviews with dialogue and consultation facilitators and members of the dialogue forums, and in the case of Kenya insights, were gathered in a workshop with dialogue participants. The paper shows key elements of effective dialogue on water-related conflicts, such as the role of facilitators and water experts, and how dialogue relates to water governance and management processes.

The lessons from WPS' work can serve as orientation for policy-makers and practitioners from the peace, security, and water development sector, who work on water insecurity in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. For peacebuilders, this paper provides insights into how dialogue can support identifying successful interventions on water resources, and offers lessons about the importance and sensitivities around water data in dialogue and consultation. For experts from the water sector, the learning note unpacks how their interventions can become more sustainable and effective through dialogue and consultation.



Fishermen preparing their nets before going out to fish on Impressa beach, Kalokol Town, Turkana county, Kenya © Martin Mwangi / International Alert

# The Role of Dialogue and Consultation to Resolve Water-related Conflicts and Insecurity

## Water-related conflicts and water insecurity

Overexploitation, pollution, mismanagement, demographic shifts, and climate change are putting enormous pressure on water resources. In contexts with high water stress and livelihood dependency on water, where inequality and weak governance cause fragility and peaceful conflict management mechanisms fail, water conflicts can escalate into violence. Between 2020 and 2023, 383 incidents of violent conflict of different scales were triggered globally by water – and the trend is increasing.[2]

The WPS partnership works on water insecurity and related conflicts in Mali, Kenya, Iraq and Ethiopia. As different as the contexts are regarding water insecurity, related conflicts, and actors, all share livelihood vulnerability, historical socio-political and economic grievances, and a limited coping capacity of communities and governments to address water stress and manage conflicts peacefully and constructively. Water governance and management[3] concerning access, distribution and/or use of water is driving conflicts between different user groups, as well as fuelling tensions between different government entities or causing resentment towards the government – especially where government presence is weak and water-related services and management systems are dysfunctional and/or absent:

- In **Mali's Inner Niger Delta** fishing, farming and herding communities are highly dependent on the Niger river and surrounding areas, and are finding themselves in competition over access to and use of water and arable land. Intra- and inter-communal conflicts erupt over pastoral mobility in search of pasture and water, limited fishing grounds, and over water access and use for agriculture and herding. Population growth, ecosystem degradation, and ineffective water management systems are contributing to water stress and related conflicts.[4] The insufficient government services and support against water insecurity fuel distrust between state and citizens.

- In **Turkana county, Kenya**, access to land (pasture) and water between pastoralist communities from Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Sudan is a flashpoint for conflict. In addition, developments including oil exploration, infrastructure projects, and dams, as well as a growing fishing industry in Lake Turkana and rivers, put pressure on water resources and their ecosystems. The county government's responses to the water-related crises have been fragmented and unsustainable.[5]

- In **southern Iraq**, water scarcity drives rural displacement and contributes to conflicts between different tribal groups and communities. Water scarcity also fuels anti-government sentiments about policies and corruption that inhibit the efficient provision of basic services. At times, protests escalate into violent clashes between protesters and law enforcement agencies. At governmental level, water allocation causes friction between provinces and the national government, as current practices fail to achieve equitable water distribution and to effectively counter the pressure of drought, pollution, and overexploitation.[6]

- **Ethiopia's Omo-Gibe Basin** has seen rapid economic developments in recent years, increasing pressure on water resources which are essential to marginalised pastoralist and fishing communities. Water quantity and quality challenges related to urbanisation, landscape degradation, irrigation, and industrialisation, as well as climate change, further exacerbate water insecurity. The Omo-Gibe III dam, built in 2016, caused conflicts between downstream pastoral and agricultural water users and the dam operators, over alteration of the water flow regime and water extraction for large-scale irrigation.[7] Pastoral communities perceive the dam as a cause of their water insecurity.

The four cases illustrate the diverse characteristics and dynamics of water insecurity and water-related conflicts, but all have in common disputes between different user groups over access to and use of water, as well as tensions between citizens and government authorities. Inequality in access and distribution, and exclusion of certain groups from decision making over water and related infrastructures, are driving resentment and conflicts. Dialogue and stakeholder consultations can offer useful instruments for effective conflict management and provide a structure for inclusion of vulnerable groups in water management.

## Objectives of dialogue and consultation processes in water-related conflicts

In peacebuilding,[8] dialogue is understood as a process where two or more conflict parties come together to foster mutual understanding, identify common interests, and jointly explore solutions. Dialogues help to transform relationships over past and ongoing conflicts but may also help prevent an escalation of tensions. Dialogue is not a one-off event, but a process with several, consecutive sessions that build on one another, often accompanied by parallel activities such as capacity building. Even when well-facilitated and prepared, the process never occurs in a straight line from conflict to solution, as it can face setbacks due, for example, to renewed violence or the actions of "spoilers", who derail the process for their gains.[9]

An externally facilitated, inclusive consultation process focusses on providing a safe space for relevant stakeholders to voice their grievances and needs, and provide inputs on a particular issue, like a water policy or infrastructure project.[10] In contexts of water insecurity, consultation processes ensure that the voices of marginalised water-users are heard, their rights are met, and that they can shape water management and decision-making around it. It contributes to resolving tensions over water.

What change can be achieved through dialogue and consultation? Dialogue spaces can open and maintain a means for communication, which is especially relevant when protracted conflict and violence have eroded trust and fuelled hatred between groups. In cases of inter-communal conflicts, dialogue can re-establish ties, and provide conditions for cooperation over joint challenges, like water scarcity or ecosystem degradation. When citizens do not trust the government on fair water distribution, or when governments fail to provide water services, or if private or illegal actors are controlling natural resources, a citizen-state dialogue or consultation process can provide a platform for people to voice their grievances and meaningfully engage with one another. These facilitated spaces can also build bridges between actors who usually work in siloes, like state officials from water ministries and institutions for peacebuilding, or dam operators and universities.

Although a key instrument for trust-building, cohesion, and cooperation, dialogue and consultations do not substitute for other efforts to address power imbalances, structural drivers, and causes of conflicts.[11] However, parallel to other peacebuilding activities, they are important in creating the conditions for these actions to be successful.

Dialogue and consultation processes help to put inequalities and the needs of conflict parties, especially vulnerable groups, at the centre of problem-solving and decision-making in water management. They contribute to making water governance structures, institutions, and their decisions more inclusive.

In water-related conflicts, dialogue and consultation also provide the opportunity to raise awareness and build a shared knowledge on the links between climate change, aquatic ecosystems, land use, water management, and violence. Since these links between water and conflict are complex, a comprehensive analysis is necessary, which is ideally carried out in a

participatory format with affected stakeholders, before or as part of the dialogue or consultation process. In the WPS project, these actions were completed under different working pillars that built on one another, such as the "understand pillar" that aimed to support local stakeholders with water, conflict, and stakeholder analyses and inform the dialogue process. Capacity-building on conflict-sensitive water management and the use of data-based tools for policy planning were also carried out in parallel, to support the dialogue work.[12]

Dialogue benefits from using methods and preparation which can inform and structure the process: Technical inputs in the form of water data, land/water use practices, or laws during a dialogue process inform the joint problem analysis, consensus-building and decision-making on solutions. It is important to keep the different water-users' needs and power dynamics around water resources central throughout the dialogue. Technical solutions like water infrastructure development can be identified and agreed upon as options to resolving water-related conflicts during dialogue. However, the water users' grievances and needs vis-à-vis other conflict parties, and their participation in decision-making in water management, remain key to the process. Since power asymmetries, exclusion and grievances are usually underlying conflict causes and drivers, a purely technical solution will rarely bring a long-term resolution.

## Six lessons of dialogue and consultation to manage water-related conflicts and water insecurity

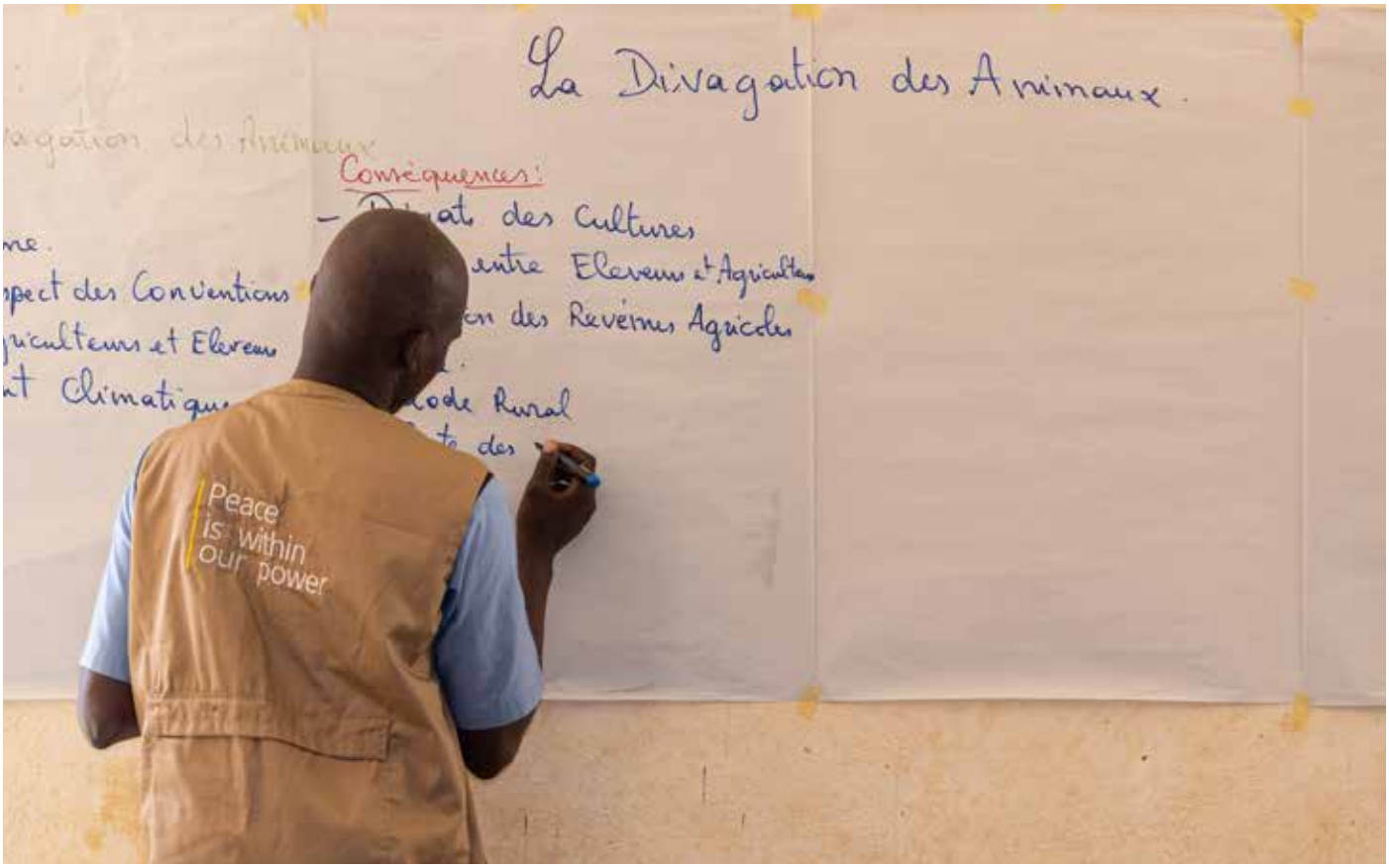
The set-up of the dialogue and consultation processes in the four countries took different forms, according to local needs and priorities, as well as capacities of WPS partners in each context. The reflection and learning process has revealed six overarching lessons around dialogue facilitation, use of data, and technical expertise, as well as opportunities and limits of dialogue and consultations.

### 1. Enabling locally led processes through trusted facilitators

The facilitator, a third entity (not a conflict actor) who is accepted by the conflict parties, is key to dialogue, aiding to ease the communication process and parallel engagements before, during and after the dialogue sessions.[13] At WPS, local partners were fundamental for successful facilitation. In Kenya, the Turkana Pastoralist Development Organisation (TUPADO),[14] trusted by the communities due to its longstanding local work on water and peace and engagement with the county government, led the dialogue forums. Its leadership contributed to achieving not just local buy-in but also created a sense among community members that the process was locally led and not imposed by outsiders. TUPADO's expertise on water and peace, as well as its deep understanding of the grievances of pastoralists, helped it to bring conflicting ethnic groups together to build relationships and settle on resource-sharing agreements as well as better water management practices.

In Mali, Community Focal Points facilitated the dialogue forums in the three communes of Mopti, Konna and Djenne. The Focal Points came from the region and, based on their trusted positions, they were appointed by the communities to facilitate the process. They also held a long-established relationship with WPS and received training on conflict sensitivity and dialogue facilitation. They work in close collaboration with local authorities and the different communities and socio-economic groups, herders, pastoralists, and fishing communities, as well as ensured the meaningful inclusion of women and youth representatives in the process.

The WPS-led consultation process over the Gibe III dam in Ethiopia, between the Ministry of Water and Energy, hydropower dam operators, and




Hamidou Niapogou, WPS community coordinator, writes up notes at a dialogue forum session in Konna, Mali. © Ousmane Makaveli / International Alert

pastoral communities, was strongly supported by local universities. Wolaita Sodo University, Jimma University, Jinka University, and Arba Minch University – with some staff members originally from the downstream communities – acted as process facilitators, especially before and after meetings, as they were present locally and in touch with both the communities and with the ministry about water management. They supported effective exchanges by bridging authorities and community-level stakeholders.

Also, in the engagement processes in the four provinces in Basra, Missan, Wasit and Dhi Qar in southern Iraq, WPS worked closely with a local partner. The environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO) Humat Dijlah led the engagement with local communities and water-users and facilitated the talks with the local governments. In these contexts, working through and with trusted partners, who bring expertise about water and/or peacebuilding as well as trust-based relations with local stakeholders, has been essential for WPS dialogue and stakeholder consultation efforts.

## 2. Mobilising technical expertise and accessible water data

Dialogue on water-related conflict needs water experts in the room – and relevant data. The work in all four countries has shown the importance of water data for dialogue and consultations, for example data on wetland health, and flood and climate patterns in Mali's Inner Niger Delta, existing water points and ground water reservoirs in Turkana county, Kenya, and data on water distribution, effects of drought and pollution on rivers in Basra, Iraq, as well as modelled scenarios of dam operation

in Ethiopia. Having accurate data on water-related issues means that options discussed in dialogues are likely to be workable, so data – if the sensitivities are accounted for (see next section) – can therefore enable the development of adequate solutions.

Water experts help to create an informed and shared understanding of water availability, use, quality, and management, and thereby address knowledge gaps and challenge misconceptions. As one member of Djenne's dialogue forum in Mali said: "*Our participation in the dialogue was a real school for us, because it was a chance to be with water experts, and the data shared was well understood by all. Before the dialogue, many leaders did not have information on water, but because of the forum, information was shared in real time and precautions were taken to avert tensions and conflicts.*" In Kenya, information on groundwater levels and quality was crucial for communities in discussing access to water and creating a shared understanding on reasons, for example, for why drilling boreholes in certain areas was not suitable. In Ethiopia, the contributions and discussions between water experts and dam operators uncovered and clarified the reasons for water shortages downstream of the Gibe III dam.

Furthermore, awareness-raising on damaging fishing practices and their effects on aquatic ecosystems and fish stocks, through harmful gear for example, was important both in the forums around Lake Turkana and Mali's Inner Niger Delta, where declining fish stocks have led to increased competition. The involvement of technical experts from water ministries and technical departments in the dialogues in Kenya and Mali was important for the communities to create a scientific and data-informed understanding of natural resources, ecosystems, the different pressures and harmful practices, as well as of technical solutions.

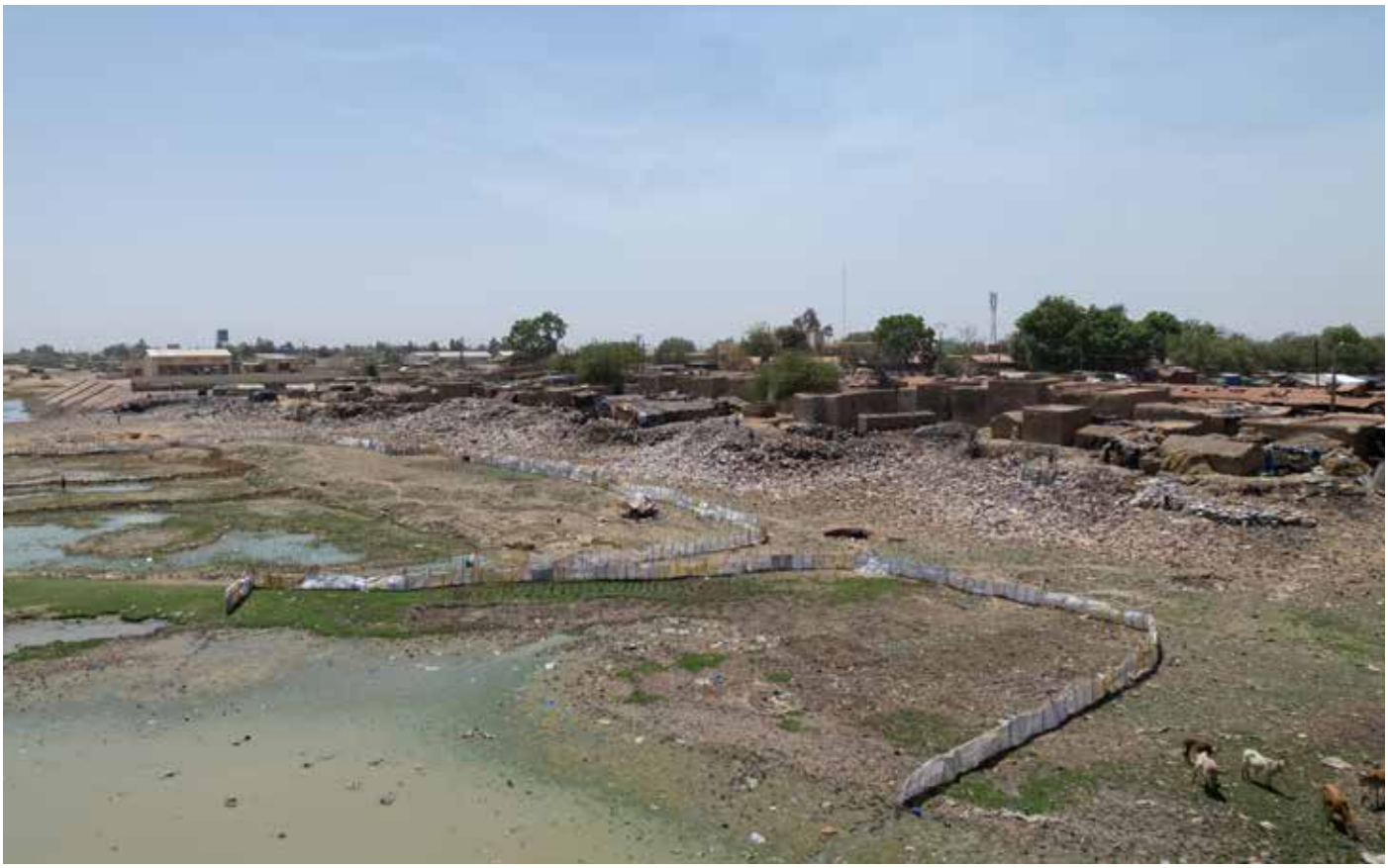
At the same time, being part of the dialogue enabled the technocrats to hear first-hand from affected communities about their grievances. Participating in the dialogue was essential for them to learn about societal conflicts around access to water and to make their work, like planning for boreholes in Turkana, more sensitive to local dynamics, needs and power relations over access to and use of water.

In Iraq, WPS identified the need for a more centralised data dissemination platform to update and unify the data on river and lake levels, and reports on the state of infrastructure, gathered by different ministries and institutions, in one system accessible to governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. The absence of clarity on these factors made the conversations and solution identification between local governments and civil society more difficult.[15]

Ultimately, data can support the short- and long-term solutions arrived at in the dialogue and consultations by local stakeholders. Data and technical expertise do not replace the need for relationship-building and the recognition of needs and rights, but they have proven to help a dialogue process in identifying and agreeing on challenges and solutions, like in the case of optimisation opportunities of the Ethiopia's Omo-Gibe dam. As one interviewee said, "*It was a break-through. The modelling showed that the dam operations can be optimised*." This was a crucial step for the consultation sessions between dam operators, government members, and pastoral communities.

### 3. Navigating the sensitivities of water data

When water data is available, for example on water quality or baseline water stress,[16] it raises questions on its source, who creates and keeps it, and who has access to it. Water data can mean power and influence, or if publicly available, make a certain actor, like a dam operator or local government, a target of criticism. Data on transboundary rivers or watersheds has geopolitical and strategic weight regarding relations between neighbours, for example in



Animals search for water and pasture in Konna, Mali. Ousmane Makaveli / International Alert

the cases of the Euphrates and Tigris in Iraq and its neighbours, or of the Omo River across Ethiopia and Kenya. In these instances, water data is sensitive and can be used politically.

In the case of southern Iraq, the data on water allocation between provinces is highly political and fuels tension. The Iraqi water management system is centrally controlled and top-down. Yet certain provinces have stronger influencing power due to their economic weight, like the oil producing Basra. Data on water use, distribution and quality also means control and influence.

This also accounts for the Strategy for Water and Land Resources in Iraq (SWLRI), which was developed in 2015 based on a large-scale research project considered "*the most comprehensive assessment of the rivers, lakes, groundwater and critical infrastructure to date*".[17] Even though the SWLRI is currently under revision, the primary data has never been made publicly available. Communities struggle with the lack of information, as this could help inform their advocacy for changes in water management. Being able to apply the data to water management would also facilitate finding a more efficient approach to water use at the sub-national levels. But information and data as displayed in the national water strategy are sensitive and not available as they can fuel tensions between the national government and different provinces.

Water data may also be a source of suspicion or distrust. Many of the Ethiopian pastoral communities in the WPS project location do not trust meteorological forecasting (weather

data). The simple reason is that weather stations are too sporadic to provide reliable weather forecasts. This example is anecdotal, but illustrates the crucial point that data, be it related to weather or water, is not always reliable or taken as truth and may not serve as a neutral starting point for dialogue – especially in a context characterised by historical grievances of certain groups and dynamics of exclusion and inequitable water distribution. In the case of Ethiopia, together with its partners WPS has worked to make scenarios, based on data about discharge and dam operations, accessible and understandable to the affected pastoral community representatives. The stakeholders now have a solid understanding of the options on equitable water distribution through dam optimisation and have been shown to trust WPS data modelling.

For dialogue and stakeholder consultation processes, this means that organisers and facilitators must assess the sensitivities over data and carefully prepare how it is used and presented. For the preparations it means to reflect on the questions: Is there enough data available? What are the sources? Who collected and processed the data? Is it comprehensible? And how, when, and by whom can it be shared in the dialogue process?

It matters who gathers data. External researchers and sources can be seen as neutral and or as verifiers, especially in locations where some population groups do not trust government services. WPS partners, as outside actors, have been playing that role by collecting, verifying, and modelling (their own) data and building local trust and capacities in understanding the data sources and data itself. As such, WPS has found that water data can help to find technical solutions to water insecurity. In dialogue and stakeholder engagement processes, accessible and accurate data can support the identification of solutions.

Conflict sensitivity training and results validation workshop in Hawassa, Ethiopia © Tinebeb Yohannes / World Resources Institute

# The Role of Dialogue and Consultation to Resolve Water-related Conflicts and Insecurity

## Ethiopia: How data and modelling of dam operations supported conflict management

WPS works in the Omo-Gibe Basin with the Gibe III hydropower dam operators, Wolaita Sodo, Jimma, Jinka, and Arba Minch universities, the Ministry for Water and Energy, and pastoral communities downstream. The dam, constructed in 2016, is causing conflicts between dam operators and large-scale government priority developments on one side, and pastoral and fishing communities who perceive the dam as the source of their water insecurity. Pastoral communities have historical grievances as they perceive their development and socio-political interests and needs have been neglected by the Ethiopian government. The dam, as seen by the communities, is an example of how a development project to improve electricity supply and flood control has not created benefits for them. For example, power lines from the hydropower dam cross community territory, but community members lack access to electricity. More importantly, the dam operations have altered pastoral livelihoods, as controlled release of water has changed downstream flood levels and areas (used for pasture), which interferes with seasonal migration and livelihood activities.[18]

At the same time, dam operators are under pressure to maintain electricity production to feed the national grid. The Ministry of Water and Energy is interested in implementing plans to foster socio-economic development in the Omo-Gibe Basin, in a balancing act between interest and needs for energy production, downstream agricultural irrigation, and pastoral livelihoods.

The WPS partnership came in to support the analysis of the water security challenges of different stakeholders around Gibe III and bring together dam operators, communities and the Ministry to address the conflicts over dam operations and related water risks. The objective was to create a common understanding on the effects of dam operations on water security of different users and to explore – via modelling – possible scenarios for dam optimisation, balancing the needs of electricity production and water supply for livelihood subsistence.

After careful trust-building with the authorities, navigating sensitivities around making data on dam productivity and flood control public in light of ongoing water disputes with neighbouring Kenya – WPS modelled different scenarios about water release, considering climate as well, and its effect on hydropower, irrigation and downstream floods. The data analysis and modelling confirmed that controlled water release can provide water security for pastoral communities as well as hydropower production and thereby contribute to equitable water flow for all stakeholders. A controlled release of water (from the reservoir) during drought periods, for example, can benefit downstream pastoral communities.

In the WPS-led consultation process between dam operators, local communities and the government, under the auspices of local universities, these modelling results were shared and discussed. The challenge was to communicate complicated modelling data to a rural constituency in a comprehensible way. Apart from communicating the science, the process centred on promoting mutual understanding and empathy between the stakeholders, beyond their position towards dam operations, focussing on their different and shared interests and needs. For example, it was important for the dam operators and government to realise and account for the dam's impact on pastoral livelihoods and people's way of living. WPS succeeded in gaining dam operators' and the Ministry trust to work on dam optimisation in a conflict- sensitive manner, considering the interests and needs of affected communities downstream.

Crucial to the modelling and stakeholder engagement was also the training for dam operators and the national authorities on dam optimisation as well as conflict sensitivity and participatory approaches to water management. The engagement with local communities, mainly through our partners from Wolaita Sodo University, has paved the way for future participatory processes to achieve equitable water management, based on a common understanding of water (in)security. Moving forward, conflict sensitive and participatory water and dam management should be fostered by continuous support and cooperation with the government and dam operators. A deepened dialogue process with downstream water users, pastoralists and farmers, should be at its core. The local universities may closely accompany the pastoral communities in such a process.

## 4. Embedding consultation and dialogue on water-related conflicts within a wider transformation process on water governance and management

Dialogue processes give visibility and clarity on people's interests and needs vis-à-vis water insecurity. They can build trust, create a common understanding of water insecurity, and support stakeholders to identify solutions. However, dialogues alone do not bring a structural transformation. Water-related conflicts are connected to wider conflict drivers, including, often, historical grievances and deficiencies in natural resource governance and management, which in turn are linked to wider ecological, political and socio-economic structures as well as power imbalances.

This includes, for example, the national or provincial/county policy and legal frameworks that govern water allocation and use, and/or decision-making bodies for water management at local level. Wider transformation processes are needed to address exclusion, inequality, and unsustainability, as well as corruption and ineffectiveness. Dialogues and consultations can help to inform these reforms and transformation processes, if they are embedded or connected with activities that support these changes. So how can they be embedded or linked to other, needed transformations?

In Mali's Inner Niger Delta for example, access and use of water is governed by "modern laws" and traditional customs. The regulations stipulated by the Water Code are not well known to remote communities and a reliance on traditional customs is at times challenging official laws. At the same time, the dilemma is that traditional practices and authorities over water are losing legitimacy. Neither system is effective to manage water and conflicts sustainably.[19]

The WPS dialogue forums contributed to address localised conflicts over water, yet more is needed to address challenges of governance and management. Therefore, under the "mobilisation pillar" of the integrated approach,[20] WPS worked with a network of "Water Champions". These traditional and state officials at national, sub-regional and local level, were accompanied and trained by WPS on data-informed and conflict-sensitive water management, including the use of a policy dashboard for climate- and conflict-informed planning and decision-making.[21] Some of the Champions also took part in the dialogue sessions and hence were directly "plugged" into the analysis and discussions to identify solutions for water insecurity and conflicts at community level. The Water Champions became catalysts for change at the institutional level to address ineffective and unequal water management practices.

Additionally, with public awareness-raising campaigns through radio shows with members of the dialogue forum, WPS was able to achieve access to a larger audience throughout the communities to share insights on the water-related challenges and advocate for peaceful and data-informed responses. Dialogue and consultation processes, connected and embedded with other project activities – in the WPS project structured under the integrated approach – that foster transformation in water governance or resource management, can bring positive change for more participatory, equitable and environmentally sustainable water use.

# The Role of Dialogue and Consultation to Resolve Water-related Conflicts and Insecurity

## Iraq: Raising local grievances with national water stakeholders to improve water management

Southern Iraq relies on water from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, and the rivers' flow is largely impacted by water management both within Iraq and in neighbouring countries, as well as by the effects of climate change. Next to the impact of drought and decreased rainfall, water insecurity in southern Iraq takes the form of severe shortage in the quantity of water, and, related to this, the worsening quality of the remaining water supply. This is caused by domestic issues, including increased demand due to population growth, urbanisation, and inefficient use by industrial actors, especially the oil industry, and agricultural sectors, as well as pollution by untreated wastewater.[22]

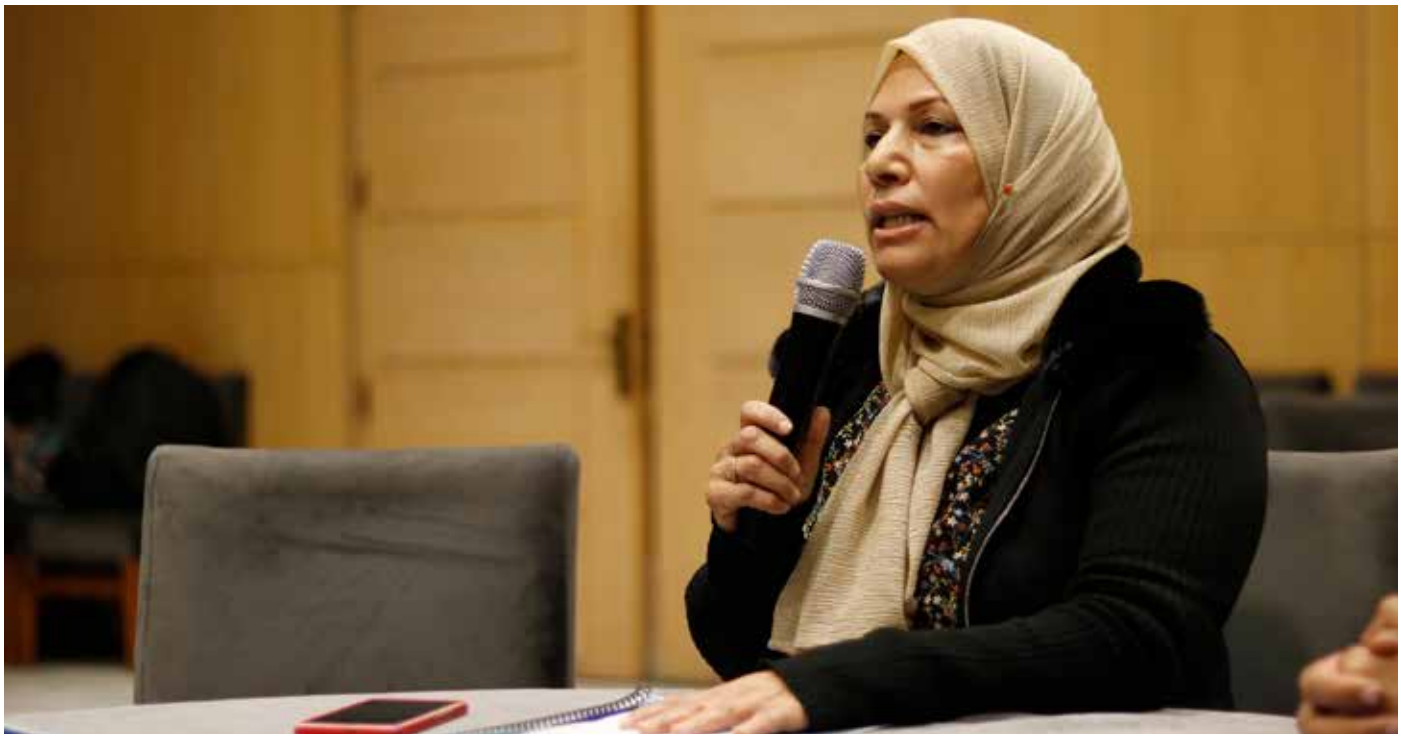
Despite Iraq being organised as a federal system, the decentralisation of water governance and management remains flawed. Governorates do not have autonomy to initiate, authorise and fund local initiatives without the federal government's approval. Tensions between governorates and between governorates and the federal level can be high in southern Iraq, as upstream water pollution and overexploitation cause water insecurity in downstream provinces. Even though the Iraqi water allocation is legally supposed to be tailored to local needs, implementation often reveals limited accountability and the favouring of short-term fixes instead of long-term structural change to meet the local needs.[23]

To give local water-users, including farmers, fishermen and residents, as well as local researchers, a space to raise their frustrations, grievances and needs vis-à-vis water allocation, access, quality, infrastructure and protection, WPS organised focus groups and public consultation sessions. The so-called "Dijlah Talks" between civil society, researchers, journalists, activists, and representatives from the local governments in Basra, Wasit and Missan provinces, and an online space in Dhi Qar, raised awareness about local impacts of provincial and country-wide water insecurity.

Violent protests triggered by water shortage or issues related to quality, like outbreaks of water-borne diseases, are occurring repeatedly in Iraq.[24] The WPS listening spaces provided an alternative, peaceful means to raise the voices and concerns of local water-users towards authorities. The hope is that in continuation such spaces can be maintained to create a permanent channel and listening space between authorities and local communities.

Since many local water insecurities and conflicts link to provincial or national water management practices regarding allocation, water use and pollution, WPS works toward giving visibility to these local needs in its engagement with the national authorities.

To find sustainable solutions to localised water challenges, a wider, national transformation of water governance must occur. Key is the recognition of the responsibilities and imbalances in decision-making power regarding water, and that relational and structural challenges of top-down decision- and policy- making contribute to inter-provincial and local tensions over water. Therefore, WPS was bringing attention to entry points to address the water insecurities in a comprehensive manner through engagements with relevant ministries and international actors in Baghdad in spring 2025.[25] The Dijlah Talks and subsequent focus groups engagements at the provincial level were an important step for that, since they gave visibility to local experiences. Institutional reforms, horizontal and vertical coordination and communication between government layers and departments as well as more spaces for participation of civil society are among the needed transformations. WPS has been advising on the way forward and in the future seeks to further strengthen its work with the central and provincial governments on conflict-sensitive water management to mitigate existing and prevent future conflicts over water resources.



A woman speaks at a dialogue forum in Baghdad, Iraq © Humat Diljah Association

## 5. Realising peace dividends to support dialogue outcomes

Peace dividends are much required financial opportunities to support the implementation of dialogue outcomes to meet livelihood and infrastructure needs caused by water stress. In the WPS project locations, water insecurity often coincides with other vulnerabilities, such as food insecurity, poverty, limited government, and financial services like access to loans. Dialogue can help to assess the challenges and identify pathways to solutions; however, stakeholders often lack financial capacities to follow up and implement the plans decided in dialogue processes.

The evaluation and reflection processes with members of the local dialogue forums in Mali and Kenya have revealed people's needs for support on livelihood and infrastructure solutions. In the remote locations of the Inner Niger Delta and Turkana, communities are dependent on highly fragile livelihoods, poverty levels are high, and state services are minimal. Investments in infrastructure or livelihood adaptation to meet increasing water insecurity are falling short. As one dialogue forum member in Mopti said: "*Commitments are made during the dialogue sessions, but we note difficulties in implementing them given the* [lack of] *financial resources*."

The participatory analyses and problem identification around water insecurity, and subsequent discussion of solutions during the dialogue, reveal that not all challenges require a large-scale financial investment by the government. People are also willing to invest themselves, not just skills and workforce, but small financial contributions. That is seldom enough, therefore communities do require financial support, for example to build demarcation fence for pastoral routes, construct or repair small irrigation canals and boreholes, construct flood protections, buy sustainable fishing gear, or organise a clean-up of riverbanks.

# The Role of Dialogue and Consultation to Resolve Water-related Conflicts and Insecurity

The current WPS project (2020–2025) does not have a mandate, structure, or financial possibilities to offer this needed financial support, for example through micro-loans or micro-grants. The lesson is that a follow-up project should explore the possibilities of creating peace dividends to meet the substantial needs of communities to counter water insecurity and conflicts. Other programmes[26] have shown the success of linking peacebuilding activities, including dialogue, with socio-economic opportunities and investments for communities.

Integrating peace dividends into programmes like WPS can provide immediate support to address grievances and livelihood needs, as well as support the protection of ecosystems. Alternatively, projects like WPS can seek to partner with other actors and organisations from the national and international development, conservation or humanitarian sectors, who might be able to support with the implementation of the outcomes and solutions from the dialogues.

## Mali: The opportunities and limits of community dialogues to address water-related conflicts

Dialogue forums were established in three communes, Konna, Mopti and Djenne, in Mopti region. The water challenges in the Inner Niger Delta take various forms. Central to local conflicts are the three socio-economic groups competing for access and use of water resources: pastoralist, agricultural, and fishing communities.

Population growth, the effects of climate change on water availability and quality, and mismanagement, fuel water insecurity and conflicts among these groups. The rural livelihoods are highly dependent on water and are vulnerable to changing rainfall patterns and flood levels of the Niger River. Conflicts break out over cattle encroaching into fields or destroying canals for irrigation, or over the access to water and land in more general terms, also due to a hierarchical system of land ownership and exclusion of certain groups from decision-making. Between and within fishing

Hamidou Niapogou, WPS community coordinator, runs a dialogue forum session in Konna, Mali. © Ousmane Makaveli / International Alert

communities, competition over declining fish stocks causes tensions, which are further heightened as more pastoralists turn to fishing as an alternative livelihood. Traditional water and conflict management mechanisms are losing legitimacy and face challenges regarding the increased pressure on water. Laws and regulations are not well known, and the government is not able to enforce them widely. The existing Land Commissions and Water Committees are underfunded and lack political support to be effective instruments to manage local water issues.[27]

The dialogue forums in the three locations achieved to bring stakeholders together, who until then did not have a common space for exchange, problem-solving and cooperation. The relations between the groups were hostile, but the monthly sessions slowly created mutual understanding. As a pastoralist from Djenne said: "*We breeders are now working with farmers and fishermen for the crossing of animals and other information on the return of animals. We no longer have this difficulty of collaboration thanks to WPS.*" Also, in Konna, the discussion in the dialogue forum led to an agreement on a framework for consultation around the harvest calendar, so seasonally recurring conflicts over pasture and water can be prevented. In Mopti, the Dioros, the traditional pasture and water owners and managers report that they are now working together with farmers and fishermen on persistent conflicts over access and use. Prior to this, there was no constructive cooperation or communication between the different groups.

Moreover, the dialogue forums were set up and facilitated to foster the inclusion of women and youth, who are traditionally not part of decision-making over natural resources. In Konna, members of the Communal Youth Council who had taken part in the dialogue but also a training on climate security, report a stronger sense of responsibility and awareness on water insecurity. The active inclusion of youth, giving them a voice in the process and strengthening their capacities, empowered them to take wider responsibilities. In November 2024, for example, they mobilised young people to support villages affected by floods, reinforcing protective dikes in Koubi, Diantakaye and Konna. This culture of empathy and mutual support over water-related challenges has been slowly built through their involvement in WPS.

Furthermore, the dialogues bridged the gap between communities and the local and regional government. The authorities attended the sessions and not just learned about local needs, but also contributed to the resolution of local insecurities. The Mayor of Djenne has integrated the dialogue forums into the local Economic, Social and Cultural Development Plan, as it was found to be an effective mechanism for local participation in decision-making.

Nonetheless, the context of extreme vulnerability and lack of financial capacities remains a major challenge, which has been repeatedly remarked upon in interviews with forum members. Peace dividends could fill this gap and help communities at the local level to implement the solutions they have identified in the dialogue sessions.

## 6. Harmonising traditional and state institutions and mechanisms for water and conflict management

Rules and principles that govern access, distribution, and use of water, and those that guide conflict management, can be informal, based on traditional practice and customs, or formalised and codified structures. In many locations both exist and apply in parallel but are not always complementary. Which system is functional and applied depends on its legitimacy, accessibility, effectiveness, and efficiency. In Mali, laws like the Water Code of 2022 and the Agricultural Framework Law seek to harmonise with local customs of water and land management. The coexistence of formal and customary rules for resource governance are not at odds on paper.

In practice, however, many rural communities have little knowledge of the laws as the state is largely absent. Furthermore, legal proceedings over water and land disputes are hardly accessible and where they are pursued, they are considered inefficient and, due to high cases of corruption, not an effective alternative to settle disputes over water. Especially in remote locations, with an absence of state presence and access to formal mechanisms like courts

for dispute settlement, the population relies on traditional mechanisms. Yet the dilemma is that traditional authorities are losing legitimacy on water and conflict management.

In Mali, the work of WPS focussed on raising awareness on the formal laws and mechanisms but also strengthening traditional mechanisms and authorities for water management. Dialogue that engages traditional and state authorities can ease tension between the two systems and open ways to explore how the rules and mechanisms can be complementary – or if they require a reform. In Kenya and Mali, WPS facilitated mutual understanding and collaborative interaction between these formal and informal authorities and the complementary application of formal and traditional practices to water and conflict management. In Kenya, in particular, WPS relied on local conflict management traditions, the negotiation of water-related conflicts by elders, but also with the support of county authorities. In Iraq, tribalism plays a central role in water-related conflict dynamics, both by positively contributing to conflict management but also negatively by fuelling interprovincial instability. While the WPS engagement in Iraq did not work with and on informal societal and political structures, these dynamics are essential in understanding the opportunities and limitations and hence informed WPS' work on supporting improved water governance at the governmental level.[28]

### Kenya: Elders and their traditional conflict resolution for peaceful water management in Turkana

In Turkana, the pastoralist communities of the Turkana of Kenya and the Dassanech and Nyangatom of Ethiopia are facing ever-increasing competition over pasture and water, as droughts increase water scarcity and soil degradation. This leads pastoralists to change their routes and encroach on new territories in search of pasture and water, triggering sentiments of territorial claims. The high proliferation of small arms and light weapons among pastoral groups results in confrontations between different groups which easily turn violent. Cattle raiding, a traditional but violent practice to restock depleting herds, has turned into a vicious circle of attacks and counterattacks.[29]

Traditional authorities or elders are playing an important role in managing conflicts, as their traditional conflict management practice through negotiated settlements are a peaceful and effective alternative to violence. In the WPS-facilitated dialogue forums, elders played an essential role in achieving resource-sharing agreements, as the example of the process between communities from Turkana and Nyangatom in Kibish illustrates: the engagement between the communities, created through the dialogue, was fundamental in opening an opportunity for constructive collaboration and equal resource sharing. The agreement stipulates that during drought periods Turkana pastoralists are allowed to cross the border up to 120 kilometres into Ethiopian territory for animal grazing. More so, relationship building and resource sharing led to wider cooperation between the groups: As a Kibish sub-county administrator said: "*They're sharing water. They're also sharing their pasture. They are sharing other social amenities such as schools. They're also sharing churches and other spaces for worshipping side-by-side.*"[30]

Also in Kibish, Nyangatom and Turkana communities reached an informal agreement regarding access to water from the River Nakua. Especially during droughts, the two communities have often found themselves in conflict over access to the river for livestock and drinking water. These localised agreements, though not formally written, have been upheld due to the trust re-established between the communities and the effective leadership of the elders in the region.

Crucial for the initiation and sustainability of the agreements are the elders who ensure that community members adhere to them. It is the responsibility of the village elders and chiefs, who are government officials, to mobilise the community to participate in dialogue platforms. They ensure the venue is secured and support the elders in developing the agenda items. After an agreement is reached, they ensure its adherence

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and apprehend community members who do not follow the rules. There is a strong sense of complementarity between the elders and chiefs, allowing for effective collaboration on water and other conflict issues.

On the role of women, WPS learning shows again the important role of elders and their openness and will, or lack of it, to address women's participation in the dialogues over water. Traditional authorities are men, and the society is very patriarchal, so women have limited access to decision-making around water and land. To give women space during the dialogue sessions to share their perspectives, grievances and needs regarding water security, WPS engaged with the traditional authorities. It was important to get elders on board, to make them allies and aware of the importance of listening and responding to women's needs and priorities.

In WPS, it was shown that traditional governance structures for resolution of conflicts over water (and other conflicts) are the cornerstone of effective and peaceful responses to water insecurity in Turkana. County authorities can support this by offering capacity building to elders and community leaders and officially recognise and reward their commitment and contributions, for example during cultural events. As champions in water and peace, the community leaders are the cornerstone of effective and lasting water and conflict management.

A dialogue meeting on reseeding the rangeland in Todonyang, Kenya. © Priscilla Kagwa / Wetlands International

## Conclusion

Water security issues and conflicts are highly contextual. However, the contexts share challenges such as high livelihood vulnerability, historical socio-political and economic grievances, and limited coping capacity of communities and the government to address water stress and manage conflicts peacefully. Dialogue and inclusive, participatory consultation processes can be a powerful instrument to address water-related conflicts and water insecurity: they provide space for vulnerable groups to voice their needs and be heard, present a platform for trust and relationship building, cooperation, and jointly identifying solutions. Dialogue can also build bridges between actors who usually work in siloes, and provide an opportunity to foster complementarity in traditional and formal conflict and water management institutions and mechanisms.

The WPS work has illustrated how carefully designed dialogue and consultation processes have made the difference to foster people-driven solutions that meet local needs in Turkana, to (re)build relationships between conflicting communities like in Mali's Inner Niger Delta, establish a listening space for local water users to voice their grievances towards authorities in Iraq, and foster a mutual understanding of the opportunities in dam operations for water security of different stakeholders in Omo-Gibe, Ethiopia. The principles of inclusion and participation of vulnerable and marginalised groups have been a cornerstone of the processes. Moreover, accessible data and technical experts were instrumental in supporting the problem analysis and identification of pathways for solutions. To achieve this, dialogue and consultation were closely linked to other WPS working pillars of the integrated approach: the water system and conflict analysis and modelling as well as capacity building, for example on conflict sensitivity in water management, informed and supported these processes.

The project has also shown that water-related grievances run deep and that additional transformations in water governance and management are needed. A dialogue over water-related challenges can ease hate and resentment and sow seeds for trust and cooperation. Resource-sharing agreements like those in Kenya are a first step but need to be tied to deeper transformations in the way water distribution, access and use is managed at local, national and transboundary level. Furthermore, in cases where grievances are profound and have resulted in incidents of violence and human rights violations, other peacebuilding processes and action are required to achieve reconciliation.[31] In Turkana, violent cattle raids have led to death and destruction. In Iraq, violent protests linked to water have also caused casualties. In Mali, distrust in the government is high, as the population feels abandoned in times of natural disasters and armed conflict. The lack of water services and the impact this has on livelihoods and well-being is just one part of people's grievances. The dialogue pillar in the WPS approach is one instrument for peacebuilding in these contexts; however, for lasting peace, scaling up and further measures like peace dividends and reconciliation are needed to address the complexity of conflict causes and their effects.

## Endnotes

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### Water, Peace and Security (WPS) partnership

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LEARNING NOTE

# Water, Peace and Security