



CASE STUDY 3.3

DIGITAL ENABLING OF WATER DIPLOMACY

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Environmental diplomacy approaches can be applied to different natural resources. For example, water diplomacy supports a variety of stakeholders to collectively find mutually beneficial solutions for the joint management of shared freshwater resources.

Recent developments in water diplomacy recognize that the online platforms or spaces where water dialogues are conducted impact process design, trust building, transparency, information and data-sharing, assessments of shared risks, inclusion, and ultimately decision making.

As new digital water diplomacy processes are being adopted for both formal and informal dialogues, new challenges and opportunities are emerging, including in some of the most conflict-sensitive basins. Adapting a negotiation process to digital spaces requires more than just sharing a meeting link. The digital architecture of the entire process must be reconsidered.

Engaging in digital water diplomacy necessitates an even higher level of preparation from participants and the actors who facilitate the process as they work to establish a shared narrative to address challenges. In practice, potential issues can be partially mitigated by establishing clear codes of conduct, decision making mechanisms, timelines, collaboration in setting the agenda, and a joint understanding of the challenges.

Some online water dialogues benefited from previous in-person exchanges, during which participants had established trust and an understanding of one another's

priorities. Initiating new discussions or including new actors in ongoing dialogues without sustained personal contact can reinforce or maintain status quo positional bargaining—when participants dig deeper into their positions—rather than fostering a more principled negotiation.

While there are few examples, water negotiation processes since 2020 have mostly been a continuation of pre-pandemic talks moved to digital platforms. For example, negotiations between Eastern Nile countries regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam have continued online (FIGURE 3.5). Likewise, in Central Asia, water negotiations continued online between Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, and between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. The latter resulted in a signed protocol that furthered a cooperation strategy for the management of shared water resources.

Digital access impacts participation for better and for worse. Digital water diplomacy can provide an opportunity for broader and more inclusive participation while also reducing environmental impacts and travel costs. However, it is crucial to adapt and contextualize the tools and processes of digital water diplomacy to local contexts to ensure that online access is not a barrier to participation. The digital divide can contribute to excluding some stakeholders from the dialogue, with disproportionate impacts on the most vulnerable communities. At the same time, some informal and formal water dialogues have benefited from remote access to dialogue and decision making processes, as it became possible to convene actors more frequently, including high-level officials.

FIGURE 3.5: SUDAN'S MINISTER OF IRRIGATION AND WATER RESOURCES, YASIR MOHAMED, TAKES PART IN A VIDEO MEETING ON THE GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM ON JUNE 9, 2020.



Source: Alkawaba 2021.

Ultimately, decision making by the parties is highly influenced by structural factors around the process, and new digital platforms hosting dialogue processes fundamentally shape decisions and influence outcomes.

Digital water diplomacy and hybrid dialogue processes, integrating both digital water diplomacy and traditional in-person meetings, are likely to become the new norm. Leveraging the benefits of these shifts to improve transparency and inclusiveness while mitigating the challenges to cooperative dialogues is critical.