

Elevating Women’s Leadership for Effective Transboundary Water Cooperation

July 5, 2023 | By Ashley Dawn Anderson, UCLA Law ‘24, Environmental Law Institute Summer Law Clerk supporting the Women in Water Diplomacy Network



Water is life. All living things depend on water; human society depends on water. We need water for drinking, sanitation, food security, biodiversity, sustainable development—truly everything. Even though water is necessary for life, so many of us [lack access](#) to water. Water scarcity and [water pollution](#) are worsening, all while [water demand](#) is increasing. It is estimated that by 2030 water scarcity could displace [700 million people](#). The global community needs to work together to address these issues, and women need to be at the negotiation table because unsustainable water management [disproportionately impacts](#) women and girls. Despite this, women are [vastly underrepresented](#) in water management.

Recognizing the need for women in water diplomacy and, in celebration of the second annual [International Day for Women in Diplomacy](#), a group of organizations—including ELI, the Women in Water Diplomacy Network, U.S. Institute of Peace, and the Stockholm International Water Institute—co-convened an event, [Elevating Women’s Leadership for Effective Transboundary Water Cooperation](#), at the U.S. Institute of Peace on June 20, 2023. The event brought together experts to discuss how we can work to force inclusion in water diplomacy. A recording of the event can be found on ELI’s YouTube [here](#).

Here are our five takeaways from the event:

1. Water is connected to everything, and water unites us. All diplomacy should be approached through a water lens. And, water diplomacy must be inclusive of women, youth, and indigenous peoples.
2. Unlike climate or biodiversity, there is no UN agreement on water, even though water is imperative to global climate and biodiversity goals. Currently, there is nothing holding nations accountable to water, and water diplomacy relies on voluntary commitments. Nations should create and implement comprehensive water plans, such as the U.S. [White House Action Plan on Global Water Security](#), and nations must work together to establish a global agreement on water.
3. Organizations should host more formal and informal engagements, such as this panel, where water diplomats can convene and share expertise. Additionally, men in leadership roles should be allies and help foster women's participation.
4. Water diplomacy of course requires scientific data. However, the current data is missing vital information as it frequently lacks qualitative data on the lived experience of women and girls in highly climate-affected regions. This data is necessary to inform equitable and inclusive policymaking. Further, the data we collect must be easily accessible and transparent, especially for vulnerable communities.
5. Policymakers and scientists should collaborate with indigenous peoples and, with their [free, prior, and informed consent](#), elevate traditional indigenous knowledge in policy decisions. Elevating traditional knowledge empowers indigenous communities to steward their resources.



The panelists discussed the interdisciplinary nature of water diplomacy, the need for improved and accessible data, feminist foreign policy, and empowering women, youth, and indigenous peoples in water diplomacy. Speakers and panelists at the event included:

- [Kayly Ober](#), Senior Program Officer for USIP's Climate, Environment, and Conflict Program,
- [Henk W.J. Ovink](#), the Kingdom of Netherland's Special Envoy for International Water Affairs,
- [Elizabeth A. Koch](#), Senior Manager for ELI's International Programs and Process Support Lead for Women in Water Diplomacy Network,
- [Dr. Zodwa Dlamini](#), Former Chief Delegate and Permanent Representative for South Africa, Lesotho Highlands Water Commission,
- [Foman Forough](#), Former Director General of the Kabul River Basin, Afghanistan,
- [Tanya Trujillo](#), Assistant Secretary for Water and Science, U.S. Department of Interior,
- [Dr. Annalise Blum](#), Deputy Assistant Secretary for Water and Science, U.S. Department of Interior,
- [Dr. Aubrey Paris](#), Senior Advisor, Gender, Climate Change, and Innovation, Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues, U.S. Department of State.

You can read the full after-action report of the event [here](#). Continue the conversation on Twitter using #WomenWaterAndPeace and #WaterDiplomacy.