

World Basin Summit 2026 High-level Panel Report

High level panel in preparation of the 2026 UN Water Conference's Interactive Dialogue (d) "Water for Cooperation": peer-to-peer exchanges to build capacities on basin management



June 16th - 19th 2026, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil



Session Report



Introduction: Framing Water Cooperation for the UN 2026 Water Conference

The high-level panel convened at the World Basin Summit formed part of the preparatory process for the 2026 UN Water Conference, specifically Interactive Dialogue (d) on Water for Cooperation.

Mr. Antti Rautavaara, Special Envoy for Water of Finland, co-chairing the Interactive Dialogue (d) together with Zambia, emphasized a strategic shift: water cooperation must evolve from a primarily technical domain to a structured, rules-based global system with political priority, grounded in science and inclusive governance. This ambition is operationalized through a “Roadmap from Dakar to the UAE,” structured around four pillars:

1. Strengthening legal and institutional frameworks, notably through increased accession to the UN Water Conventions
2. Building trust through data and scientific cooperation
3. Advancing inclusive and participatory governance
4. Promoting cross-sectoral integration across the water-energy-food-ecosystems nexus

Basin-level cooperation, facilitated by empowered river basin organizations (RBOs), is central to delivering water security, climate resilience, and regional stability. At the same time, emerging priorities such as groundwater governance, data interoperability, and innovative financing require urgent attention.

A further conceptual distinction was introduced between water cooperation and water diplomacy: while the former operates within established arrangements, the latter serves as a political tool to prevent and resolve tensions where cooperation frameworks are lacking.

Thematic Summary of Panel Discussions

1. Elevating Basin Cooperation to a Political Priority

All panelists highlighted the need to elevate basin-level cooperation from a technical concern to a core political priority linked to security, sustainable development, and climate resilience.

Kazakhstan emphasized water's importance for food security and regional stability, highlighting basin cooperation as a cornerstone of diplomacy and trust-building. Similarly, Ghana stressed that water cooperation should be treated as a peacebuilding and climate adaptation priority, requiring high-level political commitment and financing.

Brazil and Peru presented basin management as a central governance approach, integrating water policy with development and climate strategies. Brazil highlighted extensive domestic and transboundary basin cooperation, while Peru emphasized basin councils as platforms for participatory governance and climate resilience.

From a European perspective, both the European Commission and France emphasized the importance of political leadership, including engagement at the level of heads of State, to mainstream water into broader development and investment agendas.

Overall, panelists converged on the idea that the 2026 UN Water Conference represents a critical political moment to elevate water cooperation on the global agenda and to anchor it within broader multilateral processes.

2. The Central Role of River Basin Organizations

River Basin Organizations (RBOs) emerged as key institutional platforms for translating political commitments into action.

Panelists highlighted that RBOs provide neutral spaces for dialogue among riparian states, enable joint planning and decision-making, support the implementation of integrated water resources management (IWRM), and facilitate climate adaptation at an appropriate hydrological scale.

The Mekong River Commission and the Organization for the Development of the Senegal River experience were cited as examples of how basin institutions can function as knowledge hubs and platforms for water diplomacy, sustaining trust and long-term cooperation. Brazil also emphasized that Basin level committees are essential to the governance on the ground and for cooperation among neighborhoods. However, many speakers stressed that RBOs face persistent challenges, including: Insufficient and unstable financing, limited technical capacity, fragmented institutional mandates... Strengthening RBOs was therefore identified as a priority for achieving tangible outcomes.

3. Knowledge Sharing, Data, and Peer-to-Peer Cooperation

A central theme of the discussion was the importance of knowledge exchange and peer learning and twinning in strengthening basin management capacities and innovation..

Panelists consistently highlighted:

- The value of peer-to-peer (P2P) exchanges and twinning initiatives
- The role of practical, experience-based learning
- The importance of adapting solutions to local contexts

Ghana, Peru, Spain and the European Commission emphasized that such exchanges help accelerate learning, improve planning capacities, and enable rapid uptake of tested approaches. The Mekong River Commission advocated that the exchange of knowledge is not one-way, but a process of mutual exchange.

Data and scientific cooperation were also repeatedly stressed:

- Joint monitoring and data-sharing systems build trust
- Digitalization and real-time data improve decision-making
- Harmonized methodologies support basin-wide coherence

Data should be treated as a global public good, combined with local and Indigenous knowledge to support inclusive and evidence-based decision-making. Ghana and Kazakhstan highlighted that the primary challenge is establishing digital interoperability to allow different databases and hydrometeorological monitoring systems to effectively "talk to each other" for real-time, cross-border decision-making.

4. Financing and Investment Gaps

A major cross-cutting issue was the significant financing gap in the water sector.

Panelists identified several key points:

- Public funding alone is insufficient to meet investment needs
- There is a need to mobilize private sector engagement
- Innovative mechanisms, including blended finance and climate finance, must be scaled up

The European Commission highlighted ongoing investment commitments but stressed that private sector participation remains limited and must increase significantly.

France emphasized linking water more strongly to economic development planning through country-level platforms, while Ghana stressed that it will advocate at the 2026 UN Water Conference for stronger political commitment and financial support to RBOs. Overall, financing was seen not only as a resource issue but also as a governance and cooperation challenge, where improved coordination can unlock investments.

5. Emerging topics: Climate Change, Groundwater, and Integrated Approaches

Climate change impacts, including floods, droughts, and glacier retreat, were highlighted as major drivers for strengthening cooperation. Panelists emphasized the need for Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), Nature-based solutions (NbS), basin restoration, and improved risk management and early warning systems

Groundwater emerged as a critical but underdeveloped area in transboundary cooperation, requiring greater attention in policy frameworks and institutions.

Finally, the importance of cross-sectoral approaches, linking water to agriculture, energy, ecosystems, and urban development, was widely recognized as essential for effective and sustainable management.

6. Inclusion, Governance, and Water Diplomacy

Inclusive governance was identified as a prerequisite for durable cooperation. Panelists stressed:

- Participation of local communities, women, and vulnerable groups
- Engagement of private sector and civil society
- Multi-level governance linking local, national, and transboundary actors
- Inclusion must move beyond consultation to co-leadership, embedding equity into governance structures.

Strengthening local basin councils and creating shared governance frameworks among states, municipalities, and users is seen as vital for ensuring the long-term sustainability and operational continuity of water systems.

Water diplomacy was also highlighted as an important tool, particularly in contexts where cooperation frameworks are weak or contested. Panelists noted that trust-building, sustained dialogue, and shared knowledge are essential for preventing conflict and enabling cooperation.

Conclusion

The panel discussion demonstrated strong alignment among countries and institutions on the importance of water cooperation as a global political priority.

Key conclusions include:

1. **Water cooperation is a means to broader goals:** It underpins climate resilience, peace, food and energy security, and sustainable development.
2. **Basin-level cooperation is central to implementation:** River Basin Organizations play a critical role but require strengthened mandates, financing, and capacities.
3. **Political leadership is essential:** Elevating water to the highest political level, including heads of State, is necessary to drive progress.

4. **Peer learning and knowledge exchange deliver tangible value:** Peer-to-peer initiatives and twinning mechanisms are effective tools for capacity development and innovation.
5. **Financing remains a major bottleneck:** Scaling up investment, public and private, is crucial, alongside improved governance frameworks.
6. **Data, science, and digitalization are key enablers:** Shared data systems and technological solutions can build trust and improve decision-making.
7. **Inclusive governance strengthens cooperation:** Meaningful participation across stakeholders is essential for long-term sustainability.
8. **The UN 2026 Water Conference is a critical milestone:** It offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate progress, secure new commitments, and advance a more structured global system for water cooperation.

In conclusion, the discussion highlighted that while challenges remain significant, the tools, experiences, and political momentum required to advance water cooperation are already in place. The task ahead is to translate these, including the funding gap, into concrete commitments and measurable outcomes at the 2026 UN Water Conference and beyond.



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