

World Basin Summit 2026 Session 2 Report

City-Basin dialogue for water security: reconciling urban, coastal and rural developments



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Thematic Context

Cities are major nodes of water consumption and pollution, yet their water security is intrinsically linked to the health of the surrounding basin, often extending far beyond their administrative boundaries. The central challenge is the governance disconnect: urban planning and rural land management are frequently siloed, leading to conflicts over resource allocation, pollution (e.g., from agricultural runoff or urban wastewater), and flood risks exacerbated by soil sealing. This lack of integrated dialogue threatens both the water quality for urban populations and the economic viability of rural areas, particularly agriculture. Basin management planning, as promoted in the handbook published by INBO and IWA on "Basin-connected Cities", provides the essential platform to bridge this gap. It fosters a dialogue where cities, as major users and investors, can collaborate with agricultural, industrial, and environmental stakeholders. The planning process must actively reconcile these interests by developing shared diagnoses, promoting water-saving measures in cities, financing rural nature-based solutions that benefit urban water supply, and creating financial solidarity mechanisms across the territory.

Speakers

CITY-BASIN DIALOGUE FOR WATER SECURITY: RECONCILING URBAN, COASTAL AND RURAL DEVELOPMENTS

 Executive Secretary, International Commission of the Congo-Ubangi-Sangha basin (CICOS)	 President, Brazilian Association of Regulatory Agencies (ABAR), Brazil	 Acting Deputy Executive Director for Water Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Land Reform (MAFWLR), Namibia	 Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Lake Vesijärvi Foundation, Finland
 Director of Basin Management, Joint Commission of the Parana River (COMIP)	 Under-secretary of Water resources and Sustainability for the Secretariat of Environment and Sustainability of the State of Rio de Janeiro (SEAS) and President of the Committee for the Integration of the Paraíba do Sul River Basin (CEIVAP), Brazil	 Director General of the Department of Water Resources, Ministry of Agriculture and Environment, Lao PDR	 President, Watershed Councils (COCU), Ecuador

Session Report

Problems faced:

The session emphasized the frequent lack of active dialogue between municipal urban policies and river basin management frameworks. Additionally, traditional administrative structures are often ill-equipped to manage modern water challenges and situations that are both fast-changing and cross-sectorial. This difficulty to establish a dialogue between urban policy makers and basin and water resources managers also creates a territory that is less prepared to face climate change consequences, water scarcity and floods.

Additionally, the gap between urban centers and rural or coastal peripheries reveals inequalities in infrastructure and environmental health. Smaller, rural municipalities often lack the technical and financial capacity to establish adequate water supply systems and sewage treatment infrastructure, leading to localized pollution and resource degradation.

Furthermore, water bodies adjacent to expanding urban areas, such as Lake Vesijärvi in Finland, can suffer from long-term ecological degradation that requires coordinated restoration efforts, permanent stakeholder engagement and governance structures capable of sustaining action over several decades.

The water scarcity situation faced in 2024-2025 in the State of São Paulo and in the Paraíba do Sul River Basin illustrated how city-basin dialogue is necessary to reconcile competing water uses across multiple states and -municipalities. Indeed, this period placed the region in a state of public calamity due to the lowest historical flow rate in the reservoirs ever observed in the region's water balance history. Nevertheless, water demand remained high and the situation required a greater diversion of water volume to supply the needs of the interconnected reservoirs in the São Paulo part, impacting the volume of water that flows to the states of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais. This situation required continuous negotiation between upstream and downstream states and cities, supported by technical information and the institutional framework provided by the Integration Committee of the Paraíba do Sul River Basin (CEIVAP).

Examples of solutions implemented:

Although all the organizations contributing to this session faced similar situations, characterized by uncoordinated governance across the whole territory (urban, rural, coastal territories and river basins), the panelists outlined the various different approaches adopted to address this challenge.

In the Lao PDR, a project funded by the GEF and implemented by the UN Development Programme in partnership with the Laos Department of Water Resources, promotes integrated planning between urban centers and surrounding river basins in order to strengthen climate resilience. The "City-Basin Reconciliation" proposal is represented by a diagram that has the goal of Climate Resilience at its center, and three aspects represented by convergent

instruments: Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) applied to the urban environment, Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA), and Integrated Watershed Management (IWM) that territorialises the agricultural environment. Laos' Action Plan "Integrated Flood Management and Climate Resilience Strategy" (2025-2029 ICFMS Action) covers the perimeter of 5 rural districts where 15 target villages are located, with investments applied to infrastructure for physical defenses against river floods and severe droughts, and in planting forests to absorb excessive volumes of torrents upstream of the river channels. A fundamental aspect of the Action Plan is the commitment to include the active participation of agricultural communities in project development meetings and consultations that result in Community Conservation Agreements.

In Namibia, the capital city of Windhoek has progressively reduced its dependence on a single water source through diversified water supply, technological innovation and adaptive governance. To do so, Windhoek established the world's first Direct Potable Reuse (DPR) plant, operates a managed aquifer recharge system, and instituted an Adaptive Governance Cycle based on workshops involving regional authorities and stakeholders to periodically analyze the status of hydrological availability and ever-increasing demand. This shift is part of the "city connected to the basin" strategy that has been adopted and that involves decentralizing decision-making, strengthening management committees, and securing long-term investments for innovations capable of adapting to climate variability.

In the Portoviejo River basin (Ecuador), the Basins Council (COCU) manages a "Territorial Reconciliation" project, co-funded by the French and Spanish Cooperation Agencies (AFD and AECID) for a total budget of US\$137 million. This project brings together local authorities, users, academia, productive sectors and civil society around jointly defined priorities. Pilot actions focus on nature-based solutions, irrigation management and territorial resilience while reinforcing cooperation between institutions and local stakeholders. The projects can yield results in Nature-based Solutions (NbS), integrated irrigation management and territorial resilience, applicable to both green infrastructure for Mitigation and Adaptation in response to climate change.

Key takeaways :

- Long-term success relies on continuous stakeholder dialogue, jointly agreed action plans, communication, decentralized inclusive governance and regular monitoring of environmental indicators.
- Urban water security requires diversified water sources and stable long-term investments capable of adapting to climate change and of mitigating its impacts.
- Climate resilience depends on coordinated action from upstream catchments to downstream cities, supported by local communities through participatory and transparent governance.

- Innovative solutions such as Public-Private Partnerships or AI, in addition to strong cooperation frameworks, are crucial technical support for decision-making and water resource management.
- Long-term financing mechanisms, that enable long-term planification, remain at the heart of the discussion. Sustainable financing can be achieved through water user charges and financial solidarity mechanisms that redistribute revenue, as well as by drawing on financing from international funders.
- The Brazilian Association of Regulatory Agencies (ABAR) identified six key pillars for effective city-basin governance: a shared vision, integrated management, stakeholder participation, dialogue for conflict resolution, climate resilience and long-term investment protected from political cycles.
- Continuous and strong transboundary cooperation is especially important in times of pressures on water resources, in order to guarantee strategic water supply for energy generation, environmental and biodiversity preservation, food production, and to meet the needs of rural livestock farming.

Overall, the discussions confirmed that water security can no longer be considered from the perspective of a single city, sector, or jurisdiction. Beyond geographical, climatic, and cultural differences, all the experiences presented reached the same conclusion: water security is, above all, an institutional construct, rather than a purely technical challenge. It is no longer enough to manage rivers, lakes, or aquifers, as water security ultimately depends on the capacity of institutions to build consensus, coordinate actors, manage the relationship between territories, economic sectors and communities, in order to maintain long-term cooperation beyond political cycles.



Credits: INBO and Fabiano Veneza/SEAS