

Lessons Learned – Building Transboundary Water Governance

The challenge

Transboundary water governance is one of the biggest challenges for water managers and governments today. Over the past couple of decades, the interconnection of water and land uses has been widely acknowledged, and freshwater ecosystem requirements are reflected in water planning through the management of water and land resources within natural geographical and hydrological units – so-called river basins. In the case of shared river basins, cross-border co-operation is imperative, as reflected in the current international and European legal frameworks.

The high altitude Prespa basin, consisting of the two interlinked lakes Great and Lesser Prespa and their surrounding mountain slopes, is a globally recognised biodiversity hotspot shared between Albania, Greece and North Macedonia. Recognising no political boundaries, water flows freely across the borders and is equally affected by natural factors and human activities carried out on each side of the basin. Water quality deterioration, especially eutrophication, and water level decline accelerated by climate change, pose the most serious threats to the Prespa freshwater resources that support the vast majority of the unique ecosystems of this corner of the earth. To better understand the causes and effectively address these challenges, the three littoral states have to co-ordinate their efforts. What is more, transboundary water governance has to consider the environmental, economic, social and political complexities in the basin, along with the various demands for water for agriculture, household consumption, industry and the environment.

For an environmental NGO like the SPP, the main challenges in building transboundary water governance in Prespa may be summarised as:

How to spotlight the vital water management problems Prespa is faced with to policy makers and key stakeholders and raise transboundary water co-operation in the national political agendas

Water management is a rather low priority in all three countries and this is reflected in the poor ranking of water resource management in the national political agendas and the consequently restricted budgets for corresponding actions.

How to establish and deepen transboundary co-ordination of activities between multiple actors and levels of government

Water management and policy authority in Prespa lies in multiple levels of government – i.e. national, regional and local – on each side of the basin, while numerous additional public and private actors, from local to international, and often across different institutional levels, play a crucial role in water governance. Building bridges between the key actors to enhance communication and co-ordination of action in the water sector has been a long-term effort of the SPP.

How to promote best practices and co-ordinated river basin management in the basin

The EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) calls for the co-ordination of action and the development of joint river basin management plans in international river basins. The WFD is binding on Greece as a member state, as well as on Albania and North Macedonia, which are legally committed to fully transpose and implement it as they are on their way to accession. Still, the three countries are at different paces as to the legislative water management framework and its implementation.

The solution

In the late 1990s, after a decade of conservation action on the Greek side of Prespa, and at a time when cross-border co-operation initiatives for nature conservation were flourishing in Europe, the SPP instigated interstate co-operation in Prespa. Despite tense relations and political instability in the region, the prime ministers of the three countries declared Prespa the first transboundary protected area in SE Europe on World Wetlands Day, 2000. It is notable that the seeds for the cross-border co-operation were planted by the SPP and WWF Greece, two non-state actors that jointly advocated for the Greek government to take the lead in establishing the Prespa Park. On the heels of the Prespa Park Declaration, the SPP mobilised the setting up of provisional transboundary governance institutional structures, i.e. the Prespa Park Co-ordination Committee, a multilateral body comprised of the representatives of the littoral states, and its Secretariat, the organ responsible for initiating and supporting joint activities. The SPP undertook an active role in both mechanisms and supported their operation by securing funding from international sources and holding the seat of the Secretariat.

From the outset of cross-border institutional co-operation, the SPP laboured for the cultivation of an enabling environment and the mobilisation of political commitments to promote transboundary water governance. Indeed, the Co-ordination Committee agreed on water being a high priority, as reflected in the first joint strategic document for the sustainable development of the Prespa Park endorsed by the three states. Over the ten subsequent years of interim co-operation, transboundary water dialogue evolved stepwise. Initial reluctance to discuss sensitive water-related topics gradually gave way to exchange of information and a consensus on behalf of the parties that the EU Water Framework Directive should provide the basis for co-operation in managing the shared water resources.

Considering that co-operative structures are essential for effective water governance in shared basins, the SPP has been promoting the set-up of a permanent mechanism of dialogue, exchange of information and decision making on water issues over the years. During the interstate co-operation period the Society facilitated trilateral meetings between the national water management authorities, and promoted the establishment of a joint working group on water management comprised of the competent representatives from the three countries. What is more, it formulated specific Terms of Reference for this working group, which were submitted to the Greek authorities for processing and consultation with their counterparts.

In the meantime, recognising the limitations of the provisional structures and the necessity of high-level political commitment for advancing cross-border co-operation, the SPP promoted a multilateral binding Agreement for the Prespa Park. In this respect, through the Prespa Park Secretariat the Society drafted a formal Agreement document that particularly covers water management issues and provides for the set-up of a permanent multi-sectoral water management working group. Moreover, the SPP lobbied intensively for the ultimate co-signing of this binding Agreement by the three littoral states and the European Commission in 2010.

It would therefore seem that, after a decade, interstate co-operation would be consolidated and formalised, and water governance would move to an advanced stage of co-ordination and development of joint monitoring and basin management plans. Paradoxically, it took almost another ten years for the ratification process to be concluded by all parties and the Agreement to ultimately officially enter into force in May 2019. Even so, more than a year later, it is still to be implemented, as the nomination of the national representatives to the institutional organs has not completed. In the meantime, SPP lobbying efforts to get the collaboration mechanism between central water authorities rolling met with reluctance from the Greek ministry in undertaking any action before it was obliged to by the international Agreement.

Notwithstanding this sluggish progress at the institutional high-governmental level, the SPP has striven to accelerate tangible results in water management co-ordination and to deepen transboundary co-operation between non-state actors. In this direction, it initiated the development of a transboundary water monitoring system proposal for Prespa in 2012, with the collaboration of national experts and the competent authorities. Today, a voluntary network of water monitoring scientists, set in motion and facilitated by the SPP, is collaborating for the development of an up-to-date joint water monitoring scheme for the basin, streamlined with the national monitoring systems. Moreover, the Society has been promoting the development of an international Prespa basin management plan. As of today, national basin management plans have been produced in Greece and North Macedonia, and the SPP has conducted a preliminary comparison of those, so as to support and promote future water planning harmonisation by the water governance authorities. River basin management planning has not progressed in Albania yet, as there is no equivalent level of priority from the state and the donor community. Ultimately, joint river basin planning and management will only be feasible when the governments of the littoral states recognise that it is in their common interest to co-operate on carrying it out.

NGOs cannot substitute for the role of state authorities in water management, but they can play a significant role in influencing and catalysing cross-border state dialogue and decision making, as the River Devolli diversion case illustrates. The SPP, in close collaboration with the Albanian NGO PPNEA, determined and uncovered the detrimental effects of the past artificial connection of the river Devolli, flowing in Albania, to the Lesser Prespa ecosystem. The exposure of the research findings to the competent authorities of Albania and Greece, and the subsequent bilateral lobbying actions eventually resulted in the Albanian authorities formally committing not to reactivate the harmful diversion works being considered in the early 2000s.

Addressing good water governance across the transboundary basin requires intervention with the national authorities at the appropriate decision making level in each country. For this purpose, the SPP has co-ordinated efforts with other national NGOs, namely PPNEA and MES, to design and execute joint interventions on the three sides. The production and delivery of a PrespaNet position paper on water governance to the respective policy-makers, advocating for the consolidation of

institutional co-operation and the undertaking of concrete measures for the conservation of Prespa freshwater resources, conveyed a concrete advocacy message to the target authorities.

The SPP has been working simultaneously on four axes to promote transboundary water management in Prespa, combining scientific research, advocacy action, capacity building and awareness-raising activities. Over the years a series of tools have been used, in particular: working with the respective authorities and in coalitions with partners, building networks, promoting dialogue and stakeholder participation, fostering the set-up and facilitating arrangements of cross-border co-operation, improving knowledge, bringing up and highlighting the Prespa water challenges and management requirements to stakeholders and policy makers, lobbying and promoting appropriate measures, participating in water-related consultations and strengthening civil society co-operation.

Lessons learned

The effective governance of shared water resources is a multifactorial process, entailing environmental, economic and social challenges. The experience and knowledge gained over the years of transboundary co-operation in Prespa demonstrate that building channels for dialogue and attaining a solid scientific understanding are essential for the effective planning of actions that will address ecosystem and human needs across international basins. Networking and synergies between local actors are crucial, and NGOs can play a catalytic role in promoting good water governance. Indeed, the Prespa actors have moved well along the continuum of progress, by advancing dialogue, building trust and consensus, reinforcing synergies and carrying out joint actions. Nevertheless, it is the high-level commitment and institutional framework that will eventually allow for effective water management in international waters. Securing those is a challenging task that requires substantial time and funding to overcome the short-term political cycles and obtain significant reform.

Some more particular lessons learned:

- The existence of an overall legal framework is decisive for the onset and progression of cross-border water co-operation. In the case of Prespa the international water conventions, and in particular the EU Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EC, to which all littoral states are bound, to a greater or lesser extent, have provided the basis for co-ordination of action on water management and the setup of institutional structures for co-operation.
- Cross-border water co-operation is in the long-term interest of neighbouring countries; however, it may clash with short-term political cycles. It takes time for the mutual benefits to be appreciated by governments and policy makers, and even when so the momentum can be critical for attaining high-level political commitment and establishing formal co-operation arrangements.
- Joint river basin management planning requires political will, a high-level mandate and formal institutional structures in place to facilitate co-operation. These joint co-operative structures are more likely to be established in shared basins of particular importance. The ecological significance of the Prespa basin determined the initiation of cross-border co-operation in the region.
- The regular operation of permanent institutions facilitates dialogue, cultivates mutual understanding, builds trust, facilitates information sharing and provides the opportunity for reaching consensus on issues of common interest across borders.
- Water governance authority is retained by the states and policy planning is ultimately under their jurisdiction. In the case of Prespa, the three littoral states practice water management poorly and there are very little actual results at ground level, despite the development and adoption of basin management plans on two of the sides. Nevertheless, NGOs may play a catalytic role by promoting an enabling environment for stakeholder dialogue and catalysing their participation in water governance. What is more, NGOs may identify knowledge gaps, provide stakeholder capacity building, advocate for water management reforms and policies, raise local awareness, implement joint projects and realise tangible results across the basin.
- Transboundary co-operation of NGOs requires competent counterparts on all sides of the basin for the effective realisation of joint lobbying actions and advocacy interventions, and the successful influencing of decision makers at national level.
- International funding sources may motivate cross-border water co-operation, particularly in basins where the states are not proactive and political willingness is low. In the Prespa case, funding from international organisations and the donor community have proven to be fundamental in initiating and fostering of co-operation across the borders.