

Stockholm World Water Week 2026

Inclusive Basin Partnerships: Transforming Water Security Across Regions

26 August 2026 (Wed), 9:00-10:30 am

Session Outcome Report (Minutes version)

Overview

Achieving water security, climate resilience, and healthy ecosystems requires integrated river basin management and collective water stewardship that connect upstream and downstream interests, align policies across sectors, and engage diverse stakeholders in coordinated action. This partnership-based approach is also at the heart of NoWNET—the Northern Water Network, which promotes knowledge exchange, multi-stakeholder collaboration, North–South cooperation, and collective action across regions.

Drawing on seven case studies from Africa, Asia, and Europe, this session examined how multi-stakeholder partnerships, science-based decision-making, innovative financing, digital technologies, and inclusive governance can advance basin-scale solutions.

Building on the seven presentations, the panel discussion explored what makes basin partnerships successful, sustainable, and locally owned across diverse contexts. It further considered how successful approaches can be learned from, adapted, and scaled, and how partnerships can be strengthened to turn shared challenges into collective solutions.

Overall, the session sought to move beyond individual examples to identify common principles, enabling conditions, and practical approaches to strengthen and scale inclusive partnerships and translate them into lasting basin-level action.

Co-Conveners



 Minutes

◆ Case Presentation

Cases in Asia:

(1) From Knowledge to Collective Action—Trusted Regional Networks for Water Governance: Lessons from Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET) and Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network (MTT)

Dr. Chayanis Krittasudthacheewa, Partnership and Engagement for Impact Director, SEI Asia, highlighted how trusted regional networks spanning the Mekong countries can connect knowledge, policy, and collective action across borders. Established in 2005 with 14 founding members, SUMERNET has grown into a network of more than 900 individual members representing over 400 organizations across the region and has supported more than 80 cross-border research and policy engagement projects. Drawing on SUMERNET and the Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network (MTT), she demonstrated how regional networks facilitate cross-border research, peer learning, youth engagement, policy dialogue, and practical solutions.

She emphasized that the **science–policy interface is not linear**: co-production, long-term relationships, trust, and inclusive dialogue **are essential to turning evidence into collective actions**. **Five shifts were highlighted**: from projects to long-term relationships; knowledge transfer to co-production; one-off policy engagement to continuous engagement; individual institutions to networks and alliances; and training to mentoring and peer learning. The key message was that regional networks and trust are essential infrastructure for integrated river basin governance, enabling knowledge and solutions to cross borders and scale into collective action.

(2) From One Basin to Many: Scaling Inclusive Water Stewardship Beyond Kumamoto

Mr. Harumichi Seta, Senior General Manager, Climate & Nature Lead, Sustainability Management Division, Suntory Holdings Ltd., presented an **inclusive groundwater stewardship model** based on Kumamoto, Japan, where eleven municipalities share an aquifer serving approximately one million people. The approach brings together industry, government, academia, finance, and local communities to connect science, implementation, and investment for groundwater recharge. Through the Kumamoto Water Positive Design Center (KuWP)¹, the

¹ KuWP is a general incorporated association founded by five organizations — Prefectural University of Kumamoto, Kumamoto University, Higo Bank, MS&AD Insurance Group Holdings and Suntory Holdings.

initiative is developing **standardized, measurable, and reproducible recharge methods**, while exploring mechanisms to make groundwater recharge a valued and investable form of natural capital. Mr. Seta highlighted the importance of **cross-sector collaboration, robust evidence and data, and sustained policy and financial incentives** to move beyond pilots and scale successful practices. He emphasized that Kumamoto is not a blueprint, but a **living model** whose **key lesson** is how **collaboration, standards, and finance can turn local water stewardship into long-term action** and water security.

(3) From the Headwaters of the Echi River to Lake Biwa: Treating One River Basin as the Unit of Both Life and Finance

Mr. Hirohito Yoshida, Deputy General Manager, Sustainability Services Division, Yachiyo Engineering Co., Ltd., presented an emerging **watershed-level impact approach** in Higashi Omi City, Shiga Prefecture, Japan, where the Echi River connects forests, farmland, communities, and Lake Biwa. Working with government, local communities, businesses, and researchers, the initiative identified interconnected challenges including ecosystem degradation, declining communities, loss of local knowledge and culture, and weak long-term management and investment. It also identified leverage points such as preserving local knowledge, strengthening community organizations, valuing ecosystem services, and creating long-term financing mechanisms.

Based on this analysis, the team is developing an **impact fund** to connect local activities, stakeholders, and finance across the watershed, supported by evidence and **watershed-level monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV)**. Mr. Yoshida emphasized that system change requires **locally grounded solutions, credible evidence and standards, cross-sector collaboration, and diverse long-term financing**. The Higashi Omi experience points to an emerging model in which the watershed serves not only as a **unit of ecological management, but also as a unit of investment and collective action**, linking local action, science, community values, policy, and finance to build healthy ecosystems and resilient communities.

Cases from Europe:

(4) Structured Youth Engagement in Transboundary Water Governance

Mr. Guillaume Février, Vice President of the French Youth Parliament for Water, presented France's experience in moving **youth participation from consultation toward meaningful involvement in water governance and decision-making**. In 2021, the first youth representative has been granted voting rights by the Artois Picardie Water Agency, located in the north of France. This innovative approach prompted the creation of the French Youth Parliament for

Water, established in 2023. It also included youth representatives in multiple river basin committees in France.

He emphasized that youth participation is increasingly important as climate change intensifies droughts, extreme weather, and competition over water resources. Structured dialogue among stakeholders is essential to reach consensual decisions on water sharing while giving young people a voice in decisions that will shape their future.

A comparative analysis of the **Rhine, Rhône, Meuse and Oyapock** basins identified various forms of youth engagement. Across all four basins, the analysis identified examples of successful, structured youth participation at the regional level in France. Cross-border initiatives, such as **river clean-up activities along the Meuse and Rhine, also engaged local citizens**. In the Oyapock basin, the existing governance framework provides for youth representation on the River Council. However, in practice, the designated representative is not necessarily young, as the Oyapock River Council Agreement does not specify an age limit. Overall, the analysis found that **youth participation remains poorly institutionalized in transboundary water governance**.

The overarching lesson was that youth participation must move beyond consultation to sustained, meaningful engagement in basin-level decision-making. The French example provides a replicable example that can be applied in a transboundary context.

Youth participation should be institutionalized by involving young people throughout water governance and granting them meaningful decision-making power, including voting rights. This should be complemented by practical engagement in **river restoration, ecosystem conservation, citizen science, and awareness-raising** to strengthen **legitimacy, trust, and long-term commitment to shared basin governance**.

(5) Citizen Science and Innovation for a Resilient Danube

Ms. Gergana Majercakova, Global Head, Knowledge, Innovation and Capacity Development, Global Water Partnership Organization (GWPO), presented the Danube experience of strengthening basin governance through innovation, new knowledge, local perspectives, and citizen engagement. With 19 countries sharing the basin and strong transboundary institutions such as the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), the Danube has a strong foundation for coordinated action. At the same time, increasing droughts and floods, competing water demands, and ecosystem degradation require basin institutions to keep learning, innovating, and engaging a broader range of stakeholders.

The DANUBE4all project, an EU Horizon initiative involving more than 15 partners, demonstrated how these principles can be translated into practice through a basin-wide restoration action plan integrating environmental, social, economic, and community perspectives. Three approaches—Local Action Guides, River Walks, and BioBlitz activities—illustrated how citizen science can generate locally relevant evidence, strengthen environmental awareness, and connect local communities with wider basin-management challenges.

A key lesson was that participation creates lasting value when local knowledge generates usable evidence and has clear pathways into decision-making. One-off engagement is insufficient; citizens need access to information, tools, networks, and institutional mechanisms that enable their knowledge and observations to inform planning and action.

The experience demonstrated a pathway from local innovation to systemic impact: test locally, connect evidence and experience to government and basin planning, scale through networks, and embed learning in institutions, policies, investment, and implementation.

The overarching message was that water innovation is not simply about technology. Its impact depends on combining science and data with local and citizen knowledge, practical tools, and institutional pathways that translate learning into governance and action.

Key outcome: The Danube experience highlighted three mutually reinforcing foundations for basin-wide impact: **strong institutions provide the foundation; innovation brings new knowledge, actors, and solutions; and partnership networks enable learning and scale.** Citizen participation and innovation should therefore be **embedded in river basin governance.**

Cases from Africa:

(6) Water Pricing for Sustainable and Inclusive Growth (2017–2026): From Project Intervention to System Change—Lessons from Ethiopia —

Jacob Jan Vreugdenhil, Chief Program Officer at Woord & Daad, presented the Ethiopia experience of moving water-pricing reform from a project intervention toward system change by strengthening institutions, empowering local actors, and fostering collaboration across sectors. The “Water Pricing for Sustainable and Inclusive Growth” program in the Awash River Basin brought together government, knowledge institutions, the private sector, and smallholder farmers to improve water pricing, allocation, service provision, and water-use efficiency.

The program evaluation revealed four key lessons. **First, system change requires a systemic ambition from the outset.** Engaging system actors from the beginning helped build ownership and legitimacy, while institutional silos and staff turnover demonstrated the need for sustained cross-sector coordination and institutional ownership.

Second, policy reform needs to be matched by implementation and institutional integration.

The national water tariff directive provided an important foundation for scaling water pricing, while a pilot digital tool demonstrated potential for more equitable water allocation. However, parallel digital initiatives highlighted that successful pilots do not automatically become integrated systems; data sharing, interoperability, and institutional alignment are critical for moving from innovation to scale.

Third, representation must translate into influence. More than 130 water user associations brought smallholder farmers into formal water governance, but representation alone did not guarantee meaningful participation. Inclusive governance requires that stakeholders are heard and have a genuine role in decision-making.

Fourth, basin cooperation depends as much on relationships as on formal structures. A basin-based cooperation framework demonstrated the potential for collaboration across administrative regions, while experience showed that trust, dialogue, and sustained relationships are essential for making institutional arrangements work in practice.

The overarching lesson was that **system change is a continuous process in which each achievement reveals the next barrier.** New policies, local institutions, digital tools, and cooperation frameworks create foundations for progress, but also expose further challenges in implementation, integration, inclusion, and trust.

Key outcome: The Ethiopia experience demonstrated that moving from project intervention to lasting system change requires institutional ownership, effective implementation, meaningful participation, and sustained trust and collaboration. Progress therefore depends not only on achieving individual project outputs, but on continuously strengthening the systems, relationships, and capacities needed to sustain and scale change.

(7) Digital Solutions for Transboundary Water Management and Climate Resilience:

Transferable Lessons and Practical Recommendations from the Nile Basin Initiative

Prior to Dr. Abraha Adugna's presentation, Ms. Louise Heegaard, Partnerships and Funding

Mobilization Expert, International Development at DHI, highlighted how DHI's UN Water Action Agenda commitment is being translated into long-term collaboration with river basin organizations, including the Nile Basin Initiative, to advance climate-resilient water governance through digital solutions.

Dr. Abraha Adugna, Deputy Executive Director of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), shared experiences and lessons on using digital solutions to support transformative water management and climate resilience in the Nile Basin. He highlighted a vision of moving water management from reactive approaches toward more **proactive, data-driven, and adaptive decision-making**, with data at the centre of planning, monitoring, transparency, evaluation, and stakeholder dialogue.

The presentation emphasized that digital transformation should address country-identified priorities, including climate change impacts, water availability, water quality, and adaptation, while strengthening understanding of the interconnections between water quantity and quality. Integrated digital and decision-support systems are being developed by connecting existing monitoring data and making information more accessible and useful for planning and management.

The experience also demonstrated that **technology alone is not sufficient to achieve sustainable digital transformation**. Open standards, cross-country and cross-sector data integration, institutional capacity, and partnerships at different levels are essential to move from isolated pilots to integrated systems. **Sustained financing and investment in people, innovation, data infrastructure, and institutions** are equally critical to ensure that digital solutions can be maintained and scaled over the long term.

A key message was that **climate-resilient water management requires investment not only in digital innovation, but also in the partnerships, institutions, and people needed to turn data and technology into lasting improvements in basin governance**.

◆ Minutes of the Panel Discussion: Water Governance and Local Ownership

Moderator, Rick Elmendorp, Director & Chair, Netherlands Water Partnership:

We've seen many examples and lessons learned from different contexts—developed and developing countries alike. I was wondering if one of you could shed some light on this: while

I've noticed many similarities and differences, what are the key ones, and what can we learn from these diverse contexts?

Jacob Jan Vreugdenhil, Chief Program Officer, Woord & Daad: It's indeed great to see such a wide range of examples. I think there is a striking similarity: the core principles of water governance are essentially the same. Water is never just water, and that became very clear from all cases. A complex web of stakeholders and interests is always at play—upstream and downstream dynamics, social dimensions, and so on. That is a striking similarity. Of course, there are many differences too, but I assume that's not what you're asking about just yet?

Moderator: I've seen differences as well, and I think those differences are also something we can learn from. But focusing on the similarities for a moment:

Gergana Majercakova, Global Head, Knowledge, Innovation and Capacity Development, GWPO

The similarities definitely stem from bringing different actors together and further developing the science-policy interface. We've seen this in all cases, some of which are very successful. As for challenges, every region has its own. What's important is that institutions come together in a consultative manner to address those challenges.

Moderator: Every context is complex, and strong local ownership is essential across all the cases we've seen. But what is actually needed to achieve strong local ownership?

Abraha Adugna, Deputy Executive Director of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI)

I will reflect on both the similarities and differences. We all share similar achievements in water governance, but differences arise when translating that governance to the system and community level. In some areas, member countries and communities are actively engaged in the governance system; in others, many hurdles remain. For instance, in the Nile Basin Initiative, we are still developing our frameworks and want to learn from systems like the Mekong River Commission, which has dialogue partners—something we currently lack. That is a difference, but we learn from one another. To achieve long-term success, we must engage the private sector and local communities, not just government bodies. We are working to involve academic institutions, working groups, and communities. Furthermore, we need to create true ownership from the start. Organizations sometimes struggle to hand over programs because communities weren't engaged from the start. We need to involve communities right from identifying priority challenges through implementation and advancement. That is how we build basin ownership.

Jacob Jan Vreugdenhil: Just to add one thing: when it comes to local ownership, I truly believe what is needed is *love*—something you might not typically expect to hear. It is love for the country, the soil, and the area we work in. To be self-critical, all these initiatives—including our own—come with a lot of bureaucratic challenges where everyone has to talk to everyone.

That's why we focus heavily on working at the grassroots level with farmers. For them, it's about their livelihoods; their lives depend on using water efficiently. They have a deep-seated love, loyalty, and commitment to the land of their ancestors. That is the level of commitment we need to harness. It's how the Dutch water authorities started—they were farmers threatened by water, fighting for the land they poured their labor into. That is how strong institutions are built in the end. Working at the grassroots level is vital.

Nhan Vo Tran Trung, Programme Manager, SEI Asia: I'll build on that. I really resonate with the idea that passion and care keep our work going, especially in development programming. Building ownership means creating trust and shifting multi-stakeholder conversations. Instead of saying, *"You have this problem because you are using water this way,"* we need to move toward dialogue, build trust, and foster ownership not just of solutions, but also the ownership of the *problem* and the *process*. We must recognize that our actions affect our neighbors. My water use isn't inherently more important than yours. In the Mekong region, we try to move the discourse toward recognizing that every issue is cross-sectoral and cross-border, requiring collective engagement. Projects, programs, and funding come and go, but the local ownership remains long after a 4-, 5-, or 10-year project ends. That is my take.

Gergana Majercakova: I'd just like to add how important it is to have an enabling environment for these organizations and multi-stakeholder partnerships to collaborate. From my experience in the Danube River and Central/Eastern European regions, EU funding mechanisms and transnational programs have been a tremendous asset. They bring together numerous actors and countries that might not have communicated at the start of a project but end up creating brand-new spin-off projects together by the end. This builds a broader sense of ownership—you start caring not just about your own town, but about your neighbors' challenges. It helps you move past the easy trap of blaming upstream countries, a common reflex in conflict-prone areas like Eastern Europe. Stable mechanisms for long-term collaboration help a lot.

Moderator: That came through very clearly in the cases. Now, looking ahead: how can we systematically learn from these cases, replicate them, and perhaps even scale them up?

Harumichi Seta, Senior General Manager/Climate & Nature Lead, Sustainability Management Division, Suntory Holdings Limited: Our discussion focuses on building ownership, capabilities, and expanding initiatives. In Kumamoto, private and local actors first standardized and proved the method, and then connected it to the local authorities. Taking this to the national level requires working with the national government, and as a catalyst for that, we launched the Japan Water Stewardship Leadership Group together with the Alliance for Water Stewardship and five Japanese companies. Its function is to scale local watershed initiatives domestically and globally through corporate supply chains. That kind of catalyst is crucial.

Hirohito Yoshida, Deputy General Manager, Sustainability Services Division, Yachiyo Engineering Co., Ltd: Reflecting on the previous conversation: in developed countries, there is plenty of data, but very little everyday interest in water because it isn't a matter of life or death. In developing countries, it is. That gap needs to be addressed. However, leveraging data can help make these initiatives more resonant within communities. Dealing with upstream and downstream challenges requires bringing the community onto the same page through strong local relationships.

Guillaume Février, Vice-President of the International Commission of the French Youth Parliament for Water (FYPW)

One of the most important things is that water stakeholders and governing institutions actually communicate and learn from one another. Of course, every region has specificities, so we can't simply copy and paste a solution from one country to another. However, clear patterns emerge across water governance challenges. Water scarcity is a global challenge. For instance, in Europe, global warming is causing some of our rivers to "tropicalize," and traditional crop cultivation methods are already no longer sustainable. As water grows scarcer, we must learn from countries that have managed water-scarce conditions for decades. International events like this are essential for sharing what has worked elsewhere so it can be applied in practice.

Moderator: Traditional funding for water worldwide is diminishing. What funding models can enable the approaches we've discussed, especially when looking at scaling?

Gergana Majercakova: First, we need proper matchmaking mechanisms, as institutions often lack platforms to meet the right funders. Second, we need *aggregation*—combining small investments from individual countries or institutions into larger, investable pipelines. Finally, public-private partnerships (PPPs) are increasingly the way forward, and we should explore them more actively.

Nhan Vo Tran Trung: Regarding the funding landscape, funding cuts for development support are hitting developing regions hard. In the Mekong region, we are exploring sustainable models. One is co-funding with local and emerging partners. Another is engaging new partners outside traditional categories, such as private enterprises and social enterprises. They want to participate in dialogues because they are part of both the problem and the solution. They bring not just funding, but technical expertise and innovation.

Moderator: When you mention private sector co-funding, do you mean banks, water users, or someone else?

Nhan Vo Tran Trung: Both. It depends case by case on who the target users or beneficiaries are in a local, national, or regional context. The key is not to exclude anyone, but to find their incentives for contributing to the dialogue and future solutions.

Harumichi Seta: I'd like to add another idea: inducing market mechanisms within watersheds. In Kumamoto, we are conceptualizing a credit system based on recharge volumes that can be traded. If a development impacts the land and cannot be fully mitigated on-site, stakeholders can generate credits by building rain gardens or similar measures, which can then be traded. However, this requires regulation to create market demand. If successfully implemented, it provides a permanent, sustainable funding scheme.

Jacob Jan Vreugdenhil: Adding to that, there is a huge untapped financial potential in the Global South across the 19 countries where we work. Often, water is neither priced nor valued. Millions of small contributions from end-users represent a massive, untapped financial flow. Additionally, as grant money decreases, NGOs must be conscious of whether external funding blocks locally embedded finance flows from taking root. We also love initiatives like the Netherlands' *Blue Deal*, where Dutch water authorities share expertise cost-effectively. Lastly, strong orchestration by ministries is crucial to prevent duplication and resource loss.

Q & A: Interaction with Audience

Questions from audience: First, for the Mekong Basin presenter: has a single river basin plan been developed? Did stakeholders develop it, and who implements it? Second, for the presenter representing French youth: granting voting rights in basin management is interesting, but majority rule can risk overriding minority users—what protections are in place for minority

voices? Third, for the Ethiopian case: who collects the water tariff, and what happens to users who cannot afford to pay?

◆ **Answers:**

Guillaume Février: There is always a risk that majority rule will dominate, which can happen in river basin committees where youth hold voting rights. However, holding one or two voting rights is infinitely better than holding zero, as was the case previously.

It's not about youth dominating the vote, but rather being involved in the conversation, understanding what is happening, and having the platform to advocate for our positions directly. Having an official voice in the assembly is a massive step forward.

Abraha Adugna: In the case of the Nile Basin Initiative, the initiative itself does not have a mandate to communicate directly down to communities. To address this, we established a parallel structure: the Nile Basin Discourse, which works directly with civil society. Through this network, our regional basin-wide programs reach communities and local partners.

Nhan Vo Tran Trung: Similarly, in our network in the Mekong region, we collaborate closely with civil society organizations (CSOs). They provide vital expertise in advocacy, ensure inclusivity and rights-based approaches, and help bridge the gap between local communities and policymakers. CSOs are indispensable key players in basin development.

Wrap Up by Moderator:

- We need love, trust, and a view of river basins as integrated systems rather than isolated projects.
- Integrated river basin management requires integrated relationships with all stakeholders—including youth, various sectors, and end-users.
- Knowledge and data sharing are essential.

 Program

Introduction

Yumiko Asayama, Chief Manager, NoWNET Secretariat c/o Japan Water Forum

Case Presentations

Asia's cases

1) From Knowledge to Collective Action: Trusted Regional Networks for Water Governance, *the lessons from the Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET) and the Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network (MTT)*

- **Chayanis Krittasudthacheewa**, Partnership and Engagement for Impact Director, SEI Asia

2) From One Basin to Many: Scaling Inclusive Water Stewardship Beyond Kumamoto

Harumichi Seta, Senior General Manager, Climate & Nature Lead, Sustainability Management Division, SUNTORY HOLDINGS LIMITED

3) From the Headwaters of the Echi River to Lake Biwa: Treating a River Basin as the Unit of Both Life and Finance

Hirohito Yoshida, Deputy General Manager, Sustainability Services Division, Yachiyo Engineering Co., Ltd.

Europe Cases

4) Structured youth engagement in transboundary water governance

Guillaume Février, Vice-President of the International Commission of the French Youth Parliament for Water (FYPW)

5) Citizen Science and Innovation for a Healthy Danube

Gergana Majercakova, Global Head, Knowledge, Innovation and Capacity Development, Global Water Partnership Organization (GWPO)

Africa's cases

6) Water Pricing for Sustainable and Inclusive Growth (Case: Awash River Basin in Ethiopia)

Jacob Jan Vreugdenhil, Chief Program Officer, Woord & Daad

7) Digital Solutions for Transboundary Water Management and Climate Resilience: Transferable Lessons and Practical Recommendations from the Nile Basin Initiative

- **Louise Heegaard**, Partnerships and Funding Mobilization Expert, International Development, DHI
- **Abraha Adugna**, Deputy Executive Director & Head of Basin-wide Program of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI)

Panel Discussion

- **Moderator: Rick Elmendorp**, Director & Chair, Netherlands Water Partnership

Panelists:

- **Nhan Vo Tran Trung**, Programme Manager, SEI Asia
- **Harumichi Seta**, Senior General Manager, Climate & Nature Lead, Sustainability Management Division, Suntory Holdings Ltd.
- **Hirohito Yoshida**, Deputy General Manager, Sustainability Services Division, Yachiyo Engineering Co., Ltd.
- **Guillaume Février**, Vice-President of the International and European Commission of the French Youth Parliament for Water (FYPW)
- **Gergana Majercakova**, Global Head, Knowledge, Innovation and Capacity Development, GWPO
- **Jacob Jan Vreugdenhil**, Chief Program Officer, Woord & Daad
- **Abraha Adugna**, Deputy Executive Director of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI)

Q&A from audience and interactive discussion

Wrap-up- Take-away Round





Reporter: Yumiko Asayama, Chief Manager