LEFT, RIGHT AND CENTRE

Where political dialogue is blocked, water can provide an entry point for reopening communication. Where violence has undermined livelihoods and basic services, cooperation around water can help alleviate suffering and lay the foundations for rebuilding trust. And where disputes over shared resources persist, mediation can help move parties beyond zero-sum claims towards recognising shared benefits, mutual dependencies, and opportunities.

Keywords: dialogue; cooperation; mediation; peacebuilding; peacemaking

n°7

WATER AS A TOOL FOR PEACE MEDIATION

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The Tinguely Fountain, Basel, Switzerland. An interplay of different mechanisms and movements, drawing on one shared resource to create a dynamic and harmonious whole (By Yü Lan on Adobe Stock)



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1. Background

Although wars are almost never fought over water, and "violent interstate conflict over water is the exception rather than the rule," (Turgul et al., 2024) water conflicts[1] remain widespread. They occur at varying levels of conflict intensity and across scales ranging from interstate tensions to local water disputes. Importantly, the literature has shown that water conflicts often "co-exist" alongside cooperative arrangements over shared waters (Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008). These coexistence dynamics add complexity to otherwise straightforward assertions that water functions as a driver of either conflict or cooperation. Another important dimension of the water–conflict nexus concerns the impact of warfare on water and related infrastructure. Whether through intentional targeting or collateral damage, armed conflict directly affects water quality, quantity, access, and service provision (Vesco et al., 2025). Collectively, these observations show that the water–conflict nexus is highly complex, reflecting the ways in which water can be implicated in both the causes and consequences of conflict.

Given this complexity, and considering its essential role for human security and prospects for peace, a nuanced understanding of the role of water in and around conflict is crucial. The graphic below illustrates the different and most common conflict management options available. This requires looking beyond water as merely a driver or victim of conflict to consider its potential as a tool for managing, and even transforming, disputes. The significance of water for international peace and security has also been recognised at the United Nations Security Council.[2]

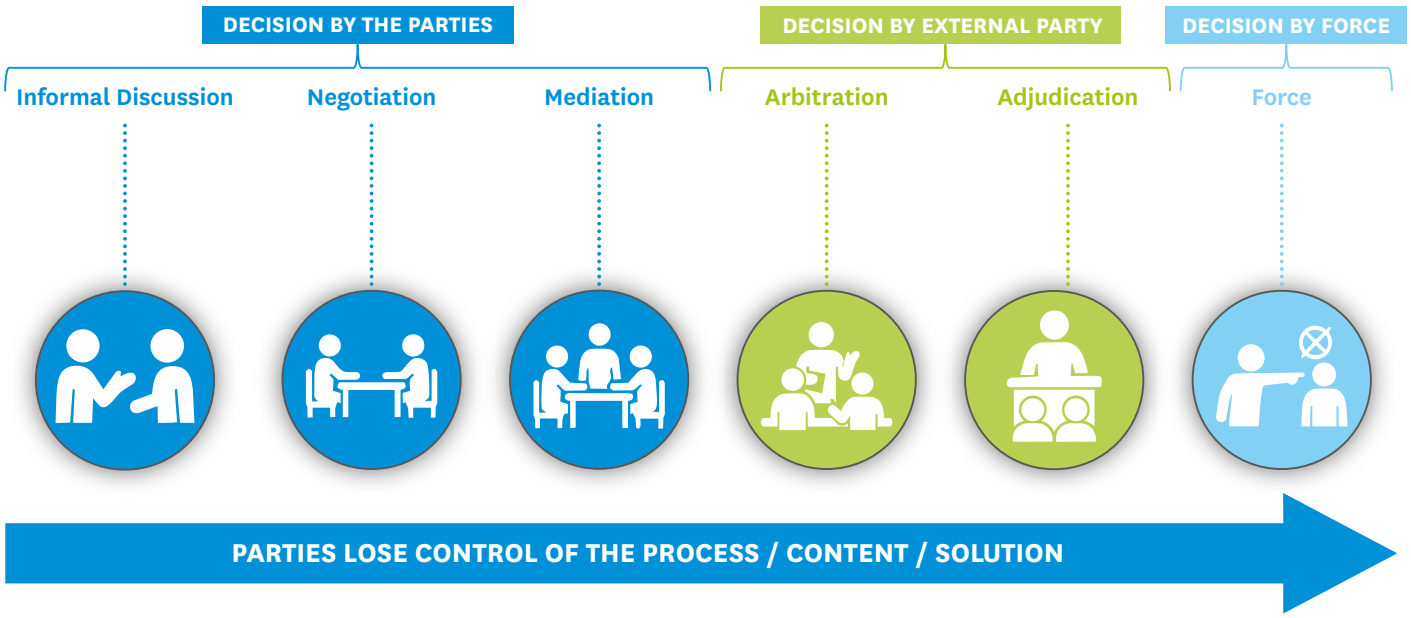
Mediation, which is one branch of alternative dispute resolution (ADR), has attracted increasing scholarly and policy attention as a means of preventing, managing, and resolving disputes over shared water resources (Wolf, 1997; UN DPA & UNEP, 2015; Shamir, 2003; Fowler & Shi, 2016). As Shamir (2003) highlights, interest-based negotiation and mediation can help parties move beyond fixed positions to explore their underlying interests and identify a broader range of mutually acceptable solutions. In transboundary water disputes, these approaches can be complemented by international water law principles, particularly equitable and reasonable use, and by arrangements for the joint management of shared water resources. While these principles and arrangements are distinct from mediation itself, they can provide a normative and institutional basis for negotiations and help parties identify opportunities for cooperation.

Despite the attention given to mediation in water-related disputes, important gaps remain in its application to wider peace processes. Mechanisms for systematically integrating water-related considerations into peace mediation processes often remain absent or inadequate (Klimes, 2026). Moreover, in the context of armed conflict, comparatively little attention has been paid to how water can function as an entry point for mediation in disputes whose underlying causes extend beyond water itself (Grech-Madin et al., 2018; Grech-Madin, 2025). This brief examines the potential of mediation to address water-related tensions and explores how water might be incorporated into mediation processes, including those concerned with wider armed conflicts.

[1] The term water conflict is used here as defined by Kåresdotter et al. (2025) as: "[…] a disagreement leading to non-violent or violent action between at least two parties centered around freshwater, such as conflicts within or between countries on managing and distributing freshwater resources. Conflicts of multiple scales and severity are included, ranging from non-violent disputes between a few individuals to violent riots and, most severely, even though uncommon, wars between countries."

[2] United Nations Security Council, 2016. Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Water, Peace and Security, 7818th meeting, 22 November, Meeting Record No. S/PV.7818.

Figure 1: Spectrum of conflict management options



Key messages

- **Water's unavoidable interdependence can offer a practical foundation for mediation**– Shared water systems and supply networks create continuing technical interactions between parties, even in low-trust environments. These unavoidable linkages may provide mediators with one of the few remaining channels through which dialogue can begin or be restored.
- **Framing water issues as technical may lower the political costs of engagement** – Topics such as data-sharing, infrastructure maintenance, or drought preparedness can be discussed with less immediate political risk than sovereignty or security. This technical framing has the potential to create discreet, politically acceptable entry points for mediation.
- **Focusing on water benefits rather than ownership can expand the solution space, while international water law and norms can provide a legitimate reference point** – Mediating access, management, and the distribution of benefits (e.g., agricultural production, hydropower, and public health) can help parties move beyond zero-sum positions in water disputes at different levels. In interstate contexts, international water law and norms, including the principles of equitable and reasonable use, cooperation, and data-sharing practices, can provide mediators and state parties with a legitimate reference point for structuring negotiations over shared water resources, without predetermining outcomes.

2. WHY water can contribute to or serve as an entry point for peace mediation

Several features make water particularly suitable as an entry point for mediation. Shared rivers, aquifers, dams, canals, and supply networks tie communities together, making complete disengagement difficult. Even during intense hostility, some coordination often persists because water services cannot simply be abandoned without severe humanitarian consequences (ICRC, 2020; Schillinger & Özerol, 2025). While parties to a conflict may be willing to tolerate the humanitarian consequences of water shortages—or even deliberately deny water to populations outside their control—the incentives may differ when water systems cross contact lines, pass through areas controlled by opposing sides, and cross back again. Hence, in many cases, these "technical interactions" can provide mediators with one of the few remaining channels through which dialogue can begin or be restored, as keeping the water flowing remains essential even when other issues are too sensitive to discuss.

Water issues are often framed as technical or operational rather than overtly political. This does not make them apolitical, but it can reduce the immediate political costs of engagement. Questions such as data-sharing, water quality monitoring, infrastructure maintenance, dam safety, wastewater treatment, or drought preparedness may be easier to discuss than sovereignty, borders, or security. In protracted and geopolitically sensitive disputes, scientific and technical cooperation can therefore serve as a politically acceptable starting point for broader discussions (Kratzer & Hillert, 2026).

Water often remains one of the remaining areas of cooperation during a wider conflict. Utilities, engineers, technicians, and local authorities may continue coordinating across front lines to keep essential systems operating, sometimes under extreme risk (Zeitoun et al., 2020; Zeitoun, 2023). Such operational cooperation reflects shared dependence and offers a practical entry point for mediation. Water can thus help preserve a minimum infrastructure of relations even when formal politics has collapsed.

Focusing on water use and the benefits derived from it, rather than ownership, opens a wider solution space with potential for mutually beneficial outcomes. Mediating access, management, and benefit distribution allows parties to move beyond zero-sum debates over entitlements. By unpacking and reconfiguring different forms of user rights, mediators can create arrangements that better reflect the interests and needs of each party (Mason & Blank, 2013). Conceptualizing water as a bundle of benefits, including agricultural production, electricity generation, public health, environmental restoration, and livelihood security, expands the negotiation space and supports creative problem-solving (UN DPA & UNEP, 2015; Fowler & Shi, 2016). This aligns with Kratzer and Hillert's (2026) observation that voluntary mediation is well-suited to low-trust environments because win-win solutions frequently emerge in water-related disputes.

Principles and frameworks for cooperation exist at international, regional, and local levels. At the international level, legal norms and principles governing shared water resources provide a structured and legitimate foundation for dialogue (Meshel, 2018). Principles such as equitable and reasonable use (UN, 1997, Art. 5), the obligation to avoid significant harm (Ibid, Art. 7), cooperation (Ibid, Art. 8), data-sharing (Ibid, Art. 9), and notification obligations (Ibid, Art. 12) offer mediators and parties an objective reference point. At the same time, few international peace agreements explicitly incorporate the human right to water and sanitation or broader principles of international water law, pointing to an important gap between normative frameworks and mediation practice (Tignino & Kebebew, 2023). At the regional level, basin-

specific agreements, joint commissions, and regional legal instruments may provide additional entry points for dialogue, often with more detailed and context-specific provisions than global norms. At the local level, existing operational cooperation mechanisms, such as arrangements between utilities, water user associations, or local authorities, and customary or community-based water-sharing practices may offer arrangements that parties already recognize and, in some cases, already apply. Depending on the context, mediators can draw on whichever of these layers is most acceptable to the parties. Together, these frameworks help clarify expectations, reduce uncertainty, and support durable and credible agreements without predetermining outcomes.

3. WHEN and WHERE water may be used in mediation efforts

In general, mediation tends to become an interesting option when parties perceive that the costs of continued confrontation or inaction exceed the costs of engagement, or when cooperation presents compelling benefits that unilateral action cannot deliver (Vuković & Zartman, 2023; Klimes, 2026). In water conflict contexts, such moments may arise when drought, infrastructure damage, pollution, or unilateral upstream action generates acute pressures, or when joint management promises benefits such as hydropower, irrigation reliability, or disaster-risk reduction. In non-water conflicts, interdependencies of water infrastructure may offer entry points for dialogue, particularly when other more political channels are cut (Mason et al., 2026).

These moments of "ripeness" are rarely experienced equally. Downstream states may feel immediate costs from scarcity or contamination, while upstream actors may perceive less urgency. The same asymmetry exists within countries, where some regions or communities bear the burden of deteriorating services more heavily than others. Mediators may therefore need to help create a shared understanding of interdependence through joint assessments, scenario-building, or evidence on transboundary and cross-sectoral impacts. External drivers - including climate change, environmental degradation, humanitarian needs, or political transition - can also open windows for engagement (Cho & Landau, 2023).

Geographically, water can support mediation in at least three arenas. The first is the transboundary basin, where shared waters create interdependence among states and often connect to existing treaties, river basin organizations, or regional institutions. The second is the national or subnational level, where disputes over groundwater, irrigation, service provision, or infrastructure failures affect communities, municipalities, utilities, and provincial authorities. The third is the conflict-affected or fragile setting, where water may not be the primary cause of violence but becomes deeply entangled with humanitarian suffering, displacement, infrastructure destruction, and broader insecurity (Borgomeo, 2020; ICRC, 2020). Across all three arenas, the central point is the same: water becomes relevant to mediation not only when it is the issue in dispute, but also when cooperation around water can reduce suffering, rebuild communication, and generate practical confidence-building measures.

4. WHO can use water in mediation processes

The wide breadth and increasing number of actors seeking opportunities to contribute to peacemaking has led scholars to describe peace mediation as an increasingly "crowded field" (Lanz & Gasser, 2013). Increasingly this may also be the case with regard to actors seeking to use water in peacemaking processes.

Overall, relevant actors include individuals, non-state organizations, states, regional bodies, river basin organizations, and multilateral institutions. Given their differing yet potentially complementary comparative advantages, closer collaboration between peace and water actors may be beneficial in certain contexts.

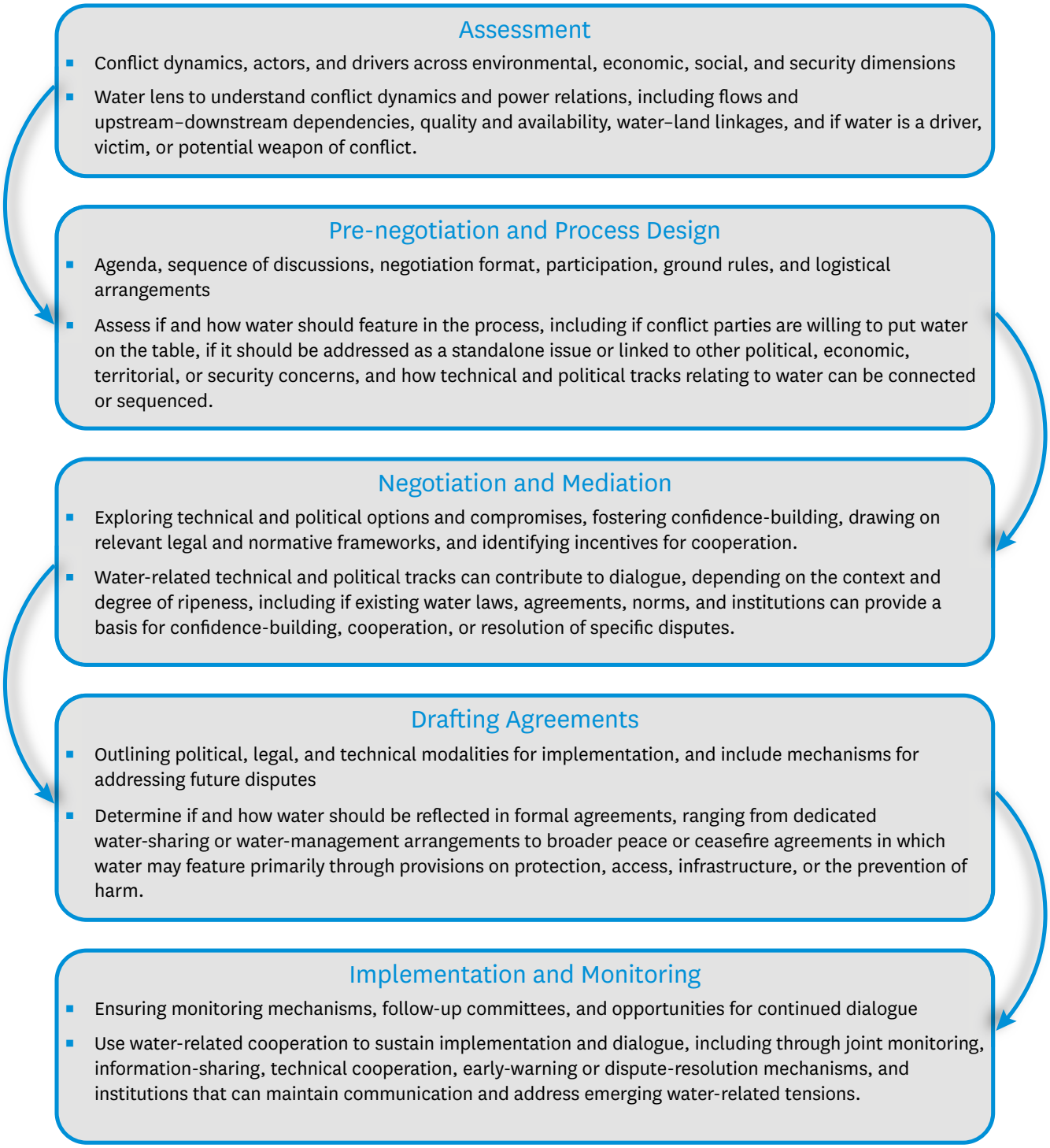
Actor	Potential role in water-related mediation
Individuals	Trusted personalities, former officials, envoys, or respected public figures can open doors, lend credibility, and connect stalled parties to more formal support structures (Walton, 2010). At the local level, community leaders can similarly play an important role in water mediation by drawing on their contextual knowledge and everyday improvisational practices to navigate competing interests and identify workable solutions tailored to specific local circumstances (Vivier & Sanchez-Betancourt, 2020).
Non-state actors	NGOs, think tanks, academic institutions, and foundations can facilitate Track 1.5 or Track 2 dialogue, provide technical analysis, and create politically lighter spaces for engagement..
States	States can offer leverage, guarantees, funding, technical expertise, and diplomatic support, but their involvement is often shaped by geopolitical interests.
Regional organizations	Bodies such as the EU, OSCE, OAS, or AU can convene or support processes where regional legitimacy matters, though their room for manoeuvre depends on member-state politics..
River basin organizations	RBOs can host dialogue or provide an institutional platform, yet their formal conflict-resolution powers remain limited in most basins.

The main challenge is not simply the diversity of actors, but often the lack of coordination among them. Competition, weak coordination, and different political agendas can undermine mediation efforts, also those involving water. In shared basins, stronger riparians may resist mediation to preserve existing advantages, while weaker or downstream actors may welcome external involvement in the hope of rebalancing negotiations - a dynamic consistent with hydro-hegemony theory (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006). Any strategy that seeks to use water in mediation must therefore begin with a grounded assessment of the parties' preferences, leverage, and political sensitivities (Klimes, 2026). This is particularly important as the role of water in peacebuilding and peacemaking is no longer confined to pre-conflict or post-conflict settings, nor solely linked to development agendas. Water is increasingly relevant in humanitarian contexts as well, where questions of access, protection, infrastructure, and resource governance can intersect with conflict dynamics and shape opportunities for dialogue and cooperation.

5. HOW water may be integrated in peace mediation

Using water effectively in mediation requires more than adding technical water experts to a peace process. It requires deliberate process design. A useful framework is to think in five interlinked phases common to mediation practice: assessment; pre-negotiation and process design; negotiation and mediation; drafting of agreements; and implementation and monitoring (Kratzer & Hillert, 2026).

Figure 2: Five most common interlinked phases to mediation practice with a focus on the potential role of water



The assessment phase should combine conflict analysis with hydrological, environmental, and service-delivery analysis (see visual on precious page). This helps determine whether water is central to the dispute, adjacent to it, or useful mainly as a confidence-building domain. In settings where core political issues are too sensitive to address directly, themes such as infrastructure resilience, drought preparedness, contamination risks, or cross-border service continuity may provide more feasible entry points (Rodrigues et al., 2025).

Pre-negotiation is the stage at which mediators and parties decide what will be discussed, in what sequence, and by whom. Here, the relationship between political and technical tracks is crucial. In some cases, it is preferable to start with technical cooperation, joint fact-finding, or scientific exchange before introducing more overtly political issues. In others, technical talks must be explicitly linked to broader political commitments if they are to produce meaningful change. Inclusive participation also matters: utilities, basin agencies, scientific bodies, municipalities, and affected communities may all hold pieces of the solution.

During negotiation, mediators can use technical studies, environmental assessments, and legal principles to create a shared baseline for discussion. International water law and related human rights norms can serve as reference points that structure talks without replacing political bargaining (Meshel, 2018; Grech-Madin et al., 2018). In broader conflicts, limited cooperation on water services - such as coordinated repairs, safe access to infrastructure, or shared data platforms - can function as practical confidence-building measures that feed into more formal dialogue (Borgomeo, 2020).

Ideally, agreement design should include implementation modalities, roles for technical bodies, data-sharing arrangements (if applicable), and mechanisms for future dispute resolution. Monitoring is especially important in water-related agreements because hydrological conditions change, infrastructure degrades, and environmental pressures evolve. Durable outcomes therefore depend on joint bodies, scientific cooperation, and continued channels of communication rather than on one-off political bargains alone (Shamir, 2003; Klimes, 2026).

6. Policy directions

Water is not a silver bullet in mediation processes, and it should not be romanticized. Most water issues are deeply political, entangled with inequality, insecurity, and power asymmetries. Yet precisely because water is fundamental to life, universally shared, and embedded in daily survival, it offers mediators with one of the most practical entry points available (Mason et al., 2026). Where political dialogue is blocked, water can help reopen communication. Where violence has damaged the conditions of life, cooperation around water can ease suffering and begin to rebuild trust. And where disputes over shared resources persist, mediation can help shift attention from zero-sum claims toward shared benefits, mutual dependence, and more durable forms of governance. For peace mediation practice, the challenge is now to move from intuition to method: to build the conceptual clarity, institutional capacities, and evidence base needed to wield water more systematically as a tool for peace. The following priorities outline what this shift requires in practice:

- **Treat water as both technical and political**. Technical cooperation can open doors, but mediators should be wary of depoliticizing issues that are fundamentally about power, access, and distribution.
- **Build bridges between peace mediation and water governance communities**. Mediators, basin organizations, utilities, engineers, and legal experts need shared methods and regular exchange rather than ad hoc collaboration.

- **Make use of legal principles relating to water**. In particular International water law and Human Rights Law can provide legitimacy, predictability, and a common language for negotiation, especially in low-trust environments.
- **Strengthen implementation institutions**. Agreements should include joint monitoring, data-sharing, scientific committees, and follow-up mechanisms capable of adapting to changing hydrological and political realities.
- **Document and learn from practice**. Many instances where water has supported mediation remain weakly documented. More systematic comparative learning is needed, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

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