



Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland

Finland's Water Diplomacy: From Ambition to Action

Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Finland commissioned the evaluation on water diplomacy while the Centre for Peace Mediation was being established. This coincides with water diplomacy as a concept gaining increasing international recognition to complement both transboundary water cooperation and foreign policy.

In this evaluation, the following working definition of water diplomacy was used: **Water diplomacy is the strategic coordination of resources and activities that support the prevention or mitigation of water-related tensions.** Water is seen as an entry point or as a lever for peace mediation that may and should relate to other issue areas such as energy security, navigation, boundary disputes, migration, livelihood security, identity politics, and so forth.

Even before the term water diplomacy was used, elements of combined technical knowledge with diplomatic objectives have been present in Finnish international co-

operation. Finland has been a long-term supporter of transboundary water cooperation, peace mediation, and multilateral collaboration in different regions, including the Mekong Basin, Central Asia and the Nile Basin. In the international arena, Finland initiated the UNECE Water Convention 1992 and UN Watercourses Convention 1997, and has continued to support their implementation.

The **purpose of the evaluation** was to support the MFA in the process of further incorporating water diplomacy in its foreign and development policy and increase the Ministry's preparedness to coordinate water diplomacy activities and engage in processes that prevent or solve water related tensions.

The following summary presents development evaluation unit's interpretation of the key takeaways of the evaluation report and focuses on responses to the evaluation questions.



Identifying the current and longer-term ambition of the MFA and other Finnish key actors in the area of water diplomacy.

Ambition is there...

Within the international domain Finland continues to demonstrate its ability to adequately respond to water-related tensions, applying evidence-based diplomacy and technical support.

The evaluation identified the following ambition for the Finnish water diplomacy activities:

1. To be better **recognised and requested** by the international community as a leading partner in water diplomacy.
2. To be a partner in **international projects** that add value to Finnish activities.
3. To **strengthen the capacity of the MFA** in (ad-hoc) facilitation in water-related conflicts in order to increase the sustainability of the water diplomacy activities.
4. To employ a **multi-disciplinary approach** in multi-faceted water-related disputes in order to advance **integrated sustainable resolutions**.
5. To ascertain the **long-term sustainability** of water diplomacy activities based on a jointly beneficial partnership between MFA and the Water Diplomacy Network.

...yet gaps exist in strategy and planning

There is a gap between the ambition and the current plan: the **specific goals required for building a programme on Finnish water diplomacy activities are not yet fully crystallised**. Responsibilities, financial resources, and information position are not yet in line with the assumed ambition.

A long term perspective requires that one defines the overall goal but also identifies the steps in between. There is an ongoing 4Ps -project for strengthening the water diplomacy, but its execution requires discussion and agreement on responsibilities as well as coordination, i.e. **operational strategy based on a joint decision on the focus of water diplomacy**. The future theory of change and activities are to be based on 4 Cs: **coherency, consistency, commitment and continuity**. Vesipisara taustalle.

The evaluation identified critical building blocks that form the backbone of future water diplomacy.



Finland well-positioned but so far not widely known

Finland is not yet recognised as an important player **with a specific niche** in water diplomacy.

While Finnish diplomats and specialists are well recognised and respected in international organisations and meetings, Finland is currently **not widely known** for its activities in water diplomacy. Within regional development projects, Finnish diplomats have been less visible and active vis-a-vis the potential political implications of ongoing development projects.

Versatility of the Water Diplomacy Network is a key strength

Environmental issue diplomacy typically uses varying diplomatic tools and technical expertise to address complex environment related challenges and the approach is significant for peace mediation: Water conflicts are commonly intertwined with other conflicts. Numerous studies make it clear that water, food, and energy challenges are primary contributors to international and domestic conflict. At the same time, water disputes rarely occur in isolation and are typically part of an already complex and, potentially, violent conflict. Therefore, a multi-dimensional approach is needed.

Women

The evaluation report highlights the versatility of the actors involved in the water diplomacy network and points out the cooperation that has begun between the network and the Finnish women mediators who engage in the network of Nordic Women Mediators (NWM Finland). The Finnish members have diverse professional backgrounds, including politics, MFA, multi-lateral and regional organisations and CSOs. The development of these networks coincides with the increasing global attention for the **critical role of women in water management and the underrepresentation of women in high-level diplomacy in transboundary water negotiations.**

Research

The Finnish universities and institutes involved in the water diplomacy network support the activities of the MFA, Ministry of

Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of the Environment in various ways. Besides research inputs to UNECE Water Convention working bodies the evaluation points out the scientific support provided to the Finnish-Russian cooperation; project management offered to FinWaterWEI II Programme in Central Asia and the 4Ps-project.

CSOs and private sector

Finnish civil society organisations have been and continue to be very active in conflict prevention, peace mediation and water management. Examples include the Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation (formerly Crisis Management Initiative, CMI), Finn Church Aid (FCA) and the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (Felm), all of which have important international networks. In addition, many of the private sector actors maintain good relations with the MFA.

Research institutions and civil society organisations are the backbone of the ambition of the key ministries to further water diplomacy.



Strengths and weaknesses of past water diplomacy-related activities of Finland, including the linkages to peace mediation.

Diplomacy combined with technical and evidence-based approach yields results

The evaluation analysed past Finnish activities in the Mekong basin (1987-2015), and Nile basin (2001-2015), the Finnish-Russian cooperation (1961-today), as well as the activities developed through the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Water Convention (1992-today).

Finland's **engagement in the selected case study interventions was based on strategic motives**, such as promoting regional integration. However, analysis indicates limited coordination on the Nile and Mekong basin activities between relevant policy level actors in Finnish Foreign Service and those responsible for managing or implementing development cooperation. This has reduced the effectiveness of the strategic intentions. The sudden ending of the development cooperation in the Nile and Mekong basin in 2015 has added to the decline of the past results.

The activities developed through the UNECE, and the Finnish-Russian cooperation have been successfully contributing to strategic water diplomacy objectives.

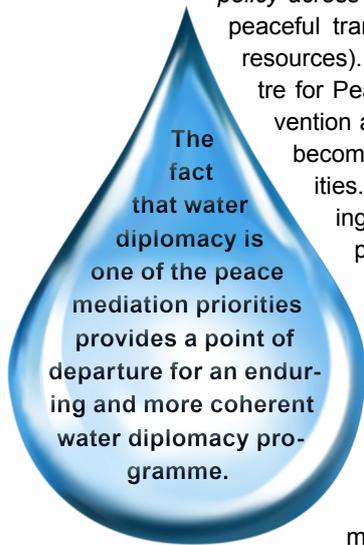
When the technical and evidence-based approach is brought to service diplomacy (such as in the UNECE and the Finnish-Russian cooperation), the approach provides a strong combination and includes the competencies required to deal with the complex water-related challenges. If the technical approach to water issues occurs in isolation from diplomacy, it does not have an enduring impact.



How could the ambition of the MFA, and the water diplomacy network, be materialised in concrete terms?

Strong motivation, strategy and merits serve as enablers

There is a **strong motivation** within the MFA to establish internationally respected Finnish water diplomacy. The concept appears in policy documents, including the *Government report on foreign and security policy* and the *Report on development policy across parliamentary terms* (referred to as peaceful transboundary management of water resources). With the establishment of the Centre for Peace Mediation within the MFA, prevention and mitigation of water conflicts has become one of the peace mediation priorities. MFA also invests in operationalising its water diplomacy approach with partners (the Finnish Water Diplomacy Network).



To improve the Finnish response to global water-related issues, five Finnish ministries¹ developed an **international water strategy in 2018 entitled Finnish Water Way**. In that context water diplomacy is presented as preventive diplomacy in multi-track peace mediation.

Hence, the water diplomacy concept complements water-related (development) cooperation and focuses on the political dimensions of cooperation.

Time is right for Finland to seize the opportunities...

Finland is known for its merits in peace mediation and its active role in the development of international architecture for conflict prevention and sustaining peace.

Globally, a variety of local, national, regional and international organisations, often linked to global research and development programs in river basins, are working in the field of water diplomacy. At the same time, approaches and instruments are being developed to operationalise the concept.

The concept of water diplomacy and related approaches and instruments required for its operationalisation are being developed in Europe, the United States and elsewhere. Several countries have acquired leading positions in water diplomacy in particular niche areas.

There are several forums where those actors influence the water diplomacy related discussion and decision making, such as the Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace, the Geneva Water Hub, the Water Security and Peace Partnership, and the Blue Peace Index initiative. These activities have stimulated a joint up approach amongst diplomats, researchers and civil society organisations addressing the outstanding issues in this new domain.

Finnish and international interviewees identified varying **options for further engagement** by Finland. These options include, but are certainly not limited to, taking a leadership role in donor coordination, and facilitating international dialogue towards strengthening integrated research and capacity development in transboundary river basins.



Institutionalisation, coordination and management practices need strengthening

The Finnish approach to water diplomacy is in full development, and there is an on-going 4Ps project, but arrangements concerning funds, human resources, information flow and coordination need to be improved. That calls for joint learning, increased awareness about water diplomacy and a system that enables the use of embassies and water diplomacy network as sources of intelligence.

Despite the network built around the Centre for Peace Mediation, practical problems may arise between MFA's departments and between partner ministries.

Practice shows that water-related conflict prevention and resolution is largely the outcome of processes of research and fact finding, negotiation, mediation and conciliation that are rooted in an in-depth understanding of the social/ cultural/ economic/ environmental conditions and the political context. This should be supported by a sound assessment and integrated analysis of the water system. **Water diplomacy should therefore be seen as an entry point for dialogue and peace mediation on a wider set of issues, not as an exclusive focus.**

...but MFA needs to choose possible engagements strategically, considering resource constraints

Limited human and financial resources, however, will constrain future possibilities. Key partners in the Water Diplomacy Network stand ready to support but require **incentives** to provide

¹ Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment; Ministry of the Environment; Ministry for Foreign Affairs; and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health

knowledge and expertise to the MFA on a sustainable basis. Nevertheless, opportunities are available to support the ambition of MFA and convert the cooperation with the Water Diplomacy Network into a jointly beneficial partnership that complements the information needs of MFA. Also international water diplomacy domain can help complement the knowledge and expertise available in Finland.

A possible risk for realising the future ambition is that the options to invest in Finnish water diplomacy are mainly shaped by the development cooperation funding criteria.

Finland needs to step up communication about its role

Various international partners will be willing to support Finland. A well-justified decision on the focus of future activities as well as communicating Finland's ambition and contribution are highly desired by the actors involved in water diplomacy.

Scope and methodology

In order to identify the ambitions and future interests, several interactive meetings were held (online) with the members of the Evaluation Reference Group.



While the purpose was forward looking, the evaluation also looked backwards at the past water sector cooperation to explore any lessons that could inform Finland's future approach. The evaluation team studied four cases: Finland's work in UNECE (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe), Finland's transboundary water sector cooperation with Russia and the development cooperation in the Mekong and Nile basins. Within each case study, the team interviewed both Finnish and foreign (local) experts and diplomats. In addition to stakeholder consultations, MFA documents were studied to obtain an understanding of Finnish motives. Non-Finnish diplomats and experts were also interviewed for triangulation purposes.

Moreover, the expertise of the evaluation team was used in the appraisal of the Project document for "Pro-active Water Diplomacy for Peace, Prosperity and Partnership" (4Ps) that is a joint project of three central ministries².

Acknowledged limitations

- Some of the current and more sensitive activities were left outside the scope of this strategic evaluation.
- A methodological challenge has been the indiscernible and verbal nature of diplomatic activities. The course of events and activities was therefore reconstructed by extensive triangulation with other experts and consultation of internal MFA memoranda.
- In the past the term water diplomacy was not used, and the evaluation focused on the degree to which strategic coordination of resources and activities supported the prevention or mitigation of water-related tensions.
- The time for interaction and thorough discussion was limited due to COVID-19. To overcome the lack of face-to-face interaction, several online workshops were organised.

² Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry



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