



International Association for Water Law (AIDA) convened its World Water Congress in Oslo, 24 to 26 June 2026

As the effects of climate change accelerate, biodiversity declines alongside intensifying competition for freshwater. As a result, water is emerging as one of the defining governance challenges of this century. Across the world, communities, ecosystems and economies are facing mounting pressures from droughts, floods, pollution and competing demands for finite water resources. These challenges are exposing the limitations of the existing legal, policy and institutional frameworks, highlighting the urgent need for water governance that is resilient, equitable and responsive to increasingly complex environmental realities.

It was against this backdrop that the International Association for Water Law (AIDA) convened its World Water Congress in Oslo from 24th to 26th June 2026. This conference brought together global policymakers, legal scholars, researchers and practitioners to explore how water law must evolve to address the interconnected challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss and water insecurity. Rather than viewing water through isolated legal or sectoral lenses, discussions emphasised the need for governance systems capable of balancing environmental protection, human rights, climate resilience and competing social and economic priorities.

These challenges are central to the work of the [WATCON](http://www.watcon.org) project (Addressing the Multi-scalar Dimensions of Sectoral Water Conflicts Through the Lens of Water Security: Lessons from South Asia). The project highlights that achieving water security requires rethinking conventional approaches through three interconnected pillars: addressing sectoral water conflicts, upholding the human right to water, and safeguarding ecological integrity. Rather than viewing these as separate objectives, WATCON demonstrates that they are mutually reinforcing. The project examines how water conflicts emerge across multiple sectors and scales, and how legal frameworks should better respond to these interconnected challenges in a climate-constrained world.

Achieving water justice requires moving beyond the traditional view of water as a resource. Dominant approaches to water governance have prioritised efficiency, economic development and the productive use of water, often at the expense of equity and sustainability. This has reinforced a narrow understanding of water as an economic commodity, while overlooking its role as a shared commons that underpins both human well-being and healthy ecosystems. As climate change intensifies water scarcity and insecurity, these tensions are becoming increasingly apparent. This highlights the need for governance frameworks that place water justice alongside efficiency as a core objective.

Addressing sectoral water conflicts is fundamental to this shift, as they reveal deeper questions about how water is valued and governed. A more just approach recognises that protecting rivers, watersheds, aquifers and ecosystems is not in opposition to meeting human water needs but is essential to securing them. By linking the human right to water with broader concepts of water justice, water governance can move beyond managing competing demands towards safeguarding the ecological systems on which equitable and resilient water access ultimately depends.

Conventional water governance frameworks treat water as an instrument for human development, allocating it between sectors (such as agriculture and energy) while placing the environment in a secondary role. This fragmented approach overlooks the intrinsic value of rivers and aquatic ecosystems and also marginalises customary governance systems, indigenous knowledge and the needs of communities whose relationships with water extend beyond ownership and extraction. As a result, many water conflicts are not just disputes over access or allocation but reflect fundamentally different understandings of how water should be valued and governed.

An ecological perspective reframes these conflicts by recognising that water supports diverse social, cultural and ecological relationships that cannot be reduced to economic value alone. Emerging approaches, including the rights of nature, biocultural rights and community-led governance frameworks, represent important steps towards embedding ecological values within legal systems. However, these approaches also highlight the challenges of translating more holistic understandings of water into practice. Achieving truly equitable and resilient water governance will therefore require governance models that recognise multiple forms of knowledge, ensuring that both human and ecological interests are considered as interconnected rather than competing priorities.

Furthermore, the world's most pressing water challenges cannot be understood or addressed within a single administrative or national boundary. For example, in South Asia, where major river systems such as the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Indus cross multiple countries, water governance remains fragmented despite its interconnected nature. Additionally, legal frameworks are often limited, with many shared rivers lacking formal agreements and governance continuing to focus primarily on the nation-state. However, water conflicts simultaneously emerge across multiple scales, shaped by international politics, national infrastructure decisions, local resource use and the growing impacts of climate change. The Sundarbans exemplify these challenges, with issues such as rising salinity driven by a combination of climate change, upstream water management, and local economic activities. Addressing these interconnected pressures requires governance that recognises water systems as shared socio-ecological landscapes and adopts multi-scalar approaches that can respond to the complex realities of transboundary water security.

Challenging the seemingly tidy multi-scalar water governance structure, we must also consider the need for cooperation at the sub-national level in two neighbouring countries with several shared characteristics, including a river basin. An example is offered by the two Punjabs - one in India (East Punjab) and the other in Pakistan (West Punjab)- which were divided by an international border following the Partition of India into two countries by the British in 1947. The two Punjabs remain united by history, geography and ecology (including the Indus River Basin) as well as by water quantity and quality challenges that are exacerbated by climate change.

At the same time, the waters flowing through these borderlands are governed by decisions made elsewhere. The Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 (now suspended) allocated the water of the three Eastern and the three Western rivers between the upper riparian India and the lower riparian Pakistan, respectively. At the sub-national level, India Punjab is embroiled in water disputes with neighbouring states such as Haryana and Rajasthan, and Pakistan Punjab faces water-sharing issues with Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. At the next level, the governments of the State of Punjab (India) and the Punjab province (Pakistan) have developed water laws and policies. What remains missing from this multi-scalar water governance framework is a dialogic, cooperative mechanism between and for the two Punjabs.

Collectively, these discussions highlight that the future of water governance cannot be addressed through fragmented laws, isolated sectors or national boundaries alone. In an era of climate change, water governance should be integrated with and recognise the value of human rights, ecological integrity and water justice across multiple scales. As pressures on freshwater continue to intensify, rethinking how water is valued, governed and shared will be essential to ensuring resilient and equitable outcomes for both people and nature.