

Successful transboundary water cooperation is possible even when starting from a conflict

Water – as we all know – is a key element both, to life itself, and to keep our society’s wheels turning. However, it is not equally distributed around the globe, and often water resources are consumed in a different place than where it originates from. For example, we use water from rivers to irrigate our crops, or to supply drinking water to cities, but the river water usually comes from rainfall or groundwater deposited far upstream of the farm or the town. Due to its nature, water resources are often shared by many nations, and transboundary cooperation is needed to ensure the farms, towns and nature have sufficient amount of water.

The transboundary water cooperation between Finland and Russia started after two wars in the second world war – it is difficult to imagine a tougher starting point for cooperation. However, through a progressive treaty, good will, and patient work, the cooperation has become one of the most successful in the world. How and why did it become so was the topic of my presentation (put together with Dr. Marko Keskinen, Aalto University) in the 8th ASEM Sustainable Development Dialogue (ASEM-SDD) arranged by the Cambodian National Mekong Committee in Siem Reap, Cambodia in mid-September 2019.

ASEM-SDD consisted of a wide range of topics centered around sustainable development, but all of which involved water in one way or another. The conference was divided into five sessions; opening session with welcome addresses from high ranking officials in Cambodia, representatives from the EU, and the organisers of the previous ASEM conference in Hungary. The opening was followed with four sessions ranging from technical assessments, transboundary cooperation, public-private partnerships and science-policy interface.

Key messages from my presentation about the Finnish-Russian cooperation was that the success comes from a number of factors rather than a single magic solution. It is a long, step-by-step process, made possible by a clear regulatory framework, with focus on technical aspects and broad benefit sharing between nations and different water use sectors, and which involves all the relevant management levels as well as the private sector. I was delighted to hear that the other presenters also expressed similar thoughts – goals of success and equitable water sharing are generally always present, but the characteristics of the frameworks under which cooperation is managed vary as well as the methods employed to achieve the goals.

I found visiting ASEM-SDD otherwise useful as well – Southeast Asia and especially the Mekong Region is my primary research focus area, and it was great to visit it once again during the wet season. I find that every time I visit, I get surprised about the water environment; each time I get a reminder that the hydrological or statistical models I develop in my research actually tell very little about the true nature – it is imperative that a researcher gets a good feel for their research area to understand the limitations and uncertainties in their work. I also had the chance to meet some old colleagues of mine as well as meet new professionals working with similar issues.

To finish, I'd like to thank FinCEAL+ BRIDGES for the opportunity to attend and present at ASEM-SDD, as well as my colleague, Dr. Marko Keskinen for support, cooperation and materials in drafting the presentation.

[More information](#)

