Water flow crises around the world

Written by Theodor Babusiaux

Information on the committee:

History of the committee

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was formally established as one of the six principal organs of the United Nations by the UN Charter in 1945 and convened its first meeting from 23 January to 18 February 1946 in London. Previously, international economic and social cooperation had relied on ad hoc arrangements and the limited machinery of the League of Nations, whose relevant functions were later transferred to ECOSOC by the 1946 Protocol. The argument for establishing ECOSOC was the need for a permanent, charter-based body to coordinate the economic, social, and related activities of the growing UN system, as the earlier fragmented arrangements lacked the authority and coherence to manage post-war reconstruction and development. Since then, ECOSOC has established many programs and mechanisms, such as the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), which serves as the central UN platform for tracking progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Development Cooperation Forum (DCF), mandated by the 2005 World Summit to review trends in international development cooperation, and the Humanitarian Affairs Segment (HAS), which since 1998 has provided an essential platform for strengthening the coordination of UN humanitarian assistance.

Mandate

ECOSOC can:

- Serve as central policy forum and make recommendations
- Coordinate UN economic, social, and related work
- Adopt policy guidance through resolutions
- Initiate studies and reports
- Prepare draft conventions and call conferences
- Oversee subsidiary bodies
- Follow up summits and the SDGs.

ECOSOC can not:

- Enforce binding international law
- Intervene in sovereign domestic affairs
- Compel States or UN bodies to comply
- Deploy peacekeepers or handle peace/security matter
- Conduct field studies without State consent
- Fund massive infrastructure projects
- Independently set a global budget.

Water crises around the world:

History and context:

Without water, there is no agricultural production, no industrial activity, no society or ecosystem. But above all, three days without being able to drink and we are dead. At 2% water loss we are thirsty, at 10% we are delirious, at 12% we die.

This short introduction highlights the fundamental importance of water for human life. It is thus no surprise that water is one of the most sought-after resources in the world. Already over 4,000 years ago, the earliest well-documented war between states, the Umma–Lagash War, was partially fought over water resources for irrigation, and the conflict lasted over a century. In total, more than 2,700 conflicts in human history have had at least a water-related component.

With climate change looming over the planet, water is becoming an increasingly relevant topic. Various water conflicts occur, whether locally, in disputes over whether to use water to irrigate agricultural land, whether to leave it to nature (for wildlife to use), or whether to use it for residential areas, or globally between countries. Countries upstream may wish to dam the water to produce electricity (examples: Tajikistan, Ethiopia), and countries downstream may protest against this as a result (because it creates a lack of water for them to use, especially in dry seasons) (examples: Uzbekistan, Egypt). Water conflicts can also arise when countries are in a dispute over borders regarding watersheds. A concrete example of this is the Golan Heights (which are internationally recognized as Syrian but under Israeli occupation).

Water conflicts are not just a foreign phenomenon. Even Switzerland, which is upstream of countries accounting for 45% of the European population, has had its fair share of water conflicts, including the fact that several countries downstream of the Rhine were unhappy about the pollution released by the chemical industry in Basel. Beyond this, Switzerland also has an ongoing dispute with Austria over the location of the border in Lake Constance, with Switzerland claiming that the border runs through the middle of the lake while Austria considers the entire lake to be a condominium.

Non-exhaustive list of examples of current water conflicts:

- Ethiopia-Egypt tensions due to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam providing more than 5 GW of electricity to Ethiopia while partially blocking urgently needed water supplies for 99% of the Egyptian population. In 2020, Egyptian hackers conducted a cyberattack on the GERD.
- Russia-Ukraine war, partially also linked to water resources in Crimea. Before 2014, 85% of Crimean water resources were provided by the North Crimean Canal which was shut down by Ukraine after the Russian annexation of Crimea.
- China–Southeast Asia tensions over the Mekong stem from upstream Chinese dams securing hydropower and year-round water leverage while reducing downstream flows, fish stocks, and flood-dependent agriculture; in 2015 Nuozhadu releases flooded 1,571 families, and in 2019 Lower Mekong states blamed low rainfall plus the Xayaburi Dam for a century-worst drought.
- India–Pakistan tensions over the World Bank-brokered Indus Waters Treaty escalated after India held the treaty in abeyance following the April 2025 Pahalgam attacks that killed 26, prompting Pakistani military threats and India's warning of "painful consequences"; Pakistan has internationalized the dispute at the UN and in Brussels, while India shows little interest in dialogue.

- Syria–Israel tensions over the Golan Heights stem from Israel's 1967 capture and 1981 annexation of the strategic plateau, which controls the Banias spring and tributaries feeding the Jordan River and supplies roughly 30% of Israel's water via the Sea of Galilee; the UN still deems the territory occupied Syrian land and the annexation null and void under Resolution 497. After the 2024 fall of the Assad regime, Israel seized the 1974 demilitarised buffer zone and expanded settlements, with Netanyahu demanding a demilitarised zone reaching Damascus.
- Uzbekistan–Tajikistan tensions over the Rogun hydropower plant pit upstream Tajikistan's drive for energy independence and electricity exports to Afghanistan and Pakistan against downstream Uzbekistan's fears over water-flow regulation, seismic safety, and agricultural/Aral-basin stability; Uzbekistan detained over 2,000 rail wagons bound for Tajikistan (losses exceeding $100 million) and demands international safety guarantees, while Dushanbe argues Rogun will improve regional irrigation and that Uzbek water losses stem from inefficient irrigation rather than the dam.

Existing international solutions:

While many bilateral treaties and customary laws govern international watercourses, the most significant global framework is the UN Watercourses Convention (1997) , which codifies the principles of equitable and reasonable utilization and the obligation not to cause significant harm. However, its authority and reach are limited, as major upstream states like China, Turkey and Ethiopia have not signed, so the Convention binds the states that least need binding. Beyond that, several other solutions have been accepted by parts of the world, among them the 1966 Helsinki Rules on the Uses of the Waters of International Rivers, the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) and the 2008 Draft Articles on the Law of Transboundary Aquifers. Note that the 1992 and 1997 conventions are binding while the 1966 rules and the 2008 draft articles are not. Furthermore, transboundary water cooperation is a part of the sustainable development goal 6, specifically the indicator 6.5.2 of the 17 sustainable development goals.

Tips for the Resolution:

Because ECOSOC is not one of the committees with the capabilities to impose laws on member Nations, we recommend the following types of operative clauses: Urges, Recommends, Encourages, Calls upon, Reaffirms, Requests,
Therefore the resolution should have precise requests from member states, specifically some sort of precise voluntary financial technical and logistical support. You do not have to deal with the conflicts caused by water disputes yourselves, as that breaches the scope of our sessions and as that breaches the scope of what ECOSOC can do. Treating the examples by mentioning countries may make getting a wide consensus regarding the resolution difficult. Try suggesting generic things In MUN debates, just like in real life, the discussion often stalls when resources come into play. Potentially suggest things linked to irrigation efficiency, dam safety, data sharing, climate adaptation, SDG 6 (Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all) as well as humanitarian aspects and financing.
Also, keep note that in order for the resolution to be effective, you need the involved countries to be willing to accept it.
Only one resolution passes. Consider partially merging working papers on points all blocks agree. Blocks exist to find consensus to which everyone agrees, not to create rivalry within the committee.

Read More

https://ecosoc.un.org/sites/default/files/2026-02/2026_BRIEF%20III_%20ECOSOC%20Mandates.pdf#1#1

https://press.un.org/en/2023/envdev2054.doc.htm

https://www.worldwater.org/water-conflict/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umma%E2%80%93Lagash_war

https://www.blick.ch/politik/drei-laender-so-kurios-verlaeuft-die-grenze-am-bodensee/evkbrnt

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Ethiopian_Renaissance_Dam

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Crimean_Canal

https://www.internetgeography.net/educas-gcse-geography/managing-the-mekong-river-a-transboundary-water-issue/

https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Water_Disputes_1995.pdf

https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/golan-heights-why-it-matters

https://www.un.org/unispal/document/the-occupied-syrian-golan-general-assembly-resolution-a-res-79-90/#1

https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/tadzhikistan-uzbekistan-borba-za-vodnye-resursy [In Russian]

https://unece.org/environment-policy/water/un-watercourses-convention

https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal6

https://www.rts.ch/info/monde/2025/article/tensions-hydriques-le-changement-climatique-exacerbe-les-conflits-29003373.html [In French]

https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/An%20introduction%20to%20International%20Water%20Law.pdf#1#1#1

https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/intldocs/ILA/Helsinki_Rules-original_with_comments.pdf

https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/draft_articles/8_5_2008.pdf

https://unece.org/environmental-policy/water/transboundary_water_cooperation_reporting

a