



Water politics in the Nile basin

by Any Freitas

Sharing such a vital and potentially scarce resource as water is seldom easy. In the case of the Nile, water management has always been a delicate exercise. With a combined population of nearly 430 million spread over eleven countries (Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda), the Nile is one of Africa's most complex cross-border river basins.

To date, however, there is no commonly agreed vision on how its waters should be shared. Several arrangements have been put in place but only a few have become meaningful tools for cooperation. Still, with no major event disrupting the status quo, water politics in the Nile has long remained relatively low-key. Growing pressures on the river, however, may be about to change that situation.

Demand on the rise

After decades of imbalanced colonial-era treaties and piecemeal bilateral agreements, the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was created in 1999 to establish a multilateral, basin-wide framework for cooperation. Supported by the international community, and originally signed by nine countries (Burundi, DRC, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda), the NBI aimed to introduce a more 'sustainable and equitable' approach to the use of the river's waters.

However, the rapid demographic growth and urbanisation process experienced by many NBI

countries over the last decade has resulted in a substantial increase in their water needs. According to the UN, the overall population in the basin is set to double by 2050, with some of its largest cities tripling in size over the same period.

Demands for water have also increased in the food and energy production sectors. Although only 2% of the Nile's waters are currently used for irrigation, this is set to change. This is not only due to progress in irrigation techniques but also to the farming of water-intensive crops in the region (often by foreign companies). Escalating energy demands in fast-growing economies also heavily dependent on hydropower (like Ethiopia and Uganda) represent an additional source of pressure on the Nile.

Such pressures on the demand side have been exacerbated by current water stress levels. Water scarcity is one of East Africa's main challenges and will remain a defining feature for the foreseeable future. Projections are disputed, but most experts agree that environmental and climatic changes may significantly alter the basin's water flows in the coming decades.

Upstream and downstream

Pushed by their growing needs, NBI parties reopened talks to review the current water-sharing principles. After lengthy negotiations, the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) was drafted in 2010 to replace the NBI, and has, so far, been signed by six - mostly upstream - states (Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda). Opposition from



Sudan and Egypt, however, has prevented the CFA from becoming operational: the two downstream countries claim i.a. that the text overlooks their own water supply needs.

In parallel to the CFA discussions, Ethiopia's decision to continue with the construction of the so-called Grand Renaissance Dam has recently heightened disputes over water security. The dam is set to become one of Africa's largest hydroelectric plants, but some studies indicate it could have a major impact on the whole basin and significantly affect the water supplies of neighbouring countries. As an effort to settle the disputes, a 'Tripartite Technical Committee' was created to assess the dam's impact in Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan. The inclusion of high-level NBI representatives in the Committee is worth noting, but its limited technical mandate may hamper its capacity to provide political solutions.

Indeed, technical and political aspects have become increasingly intertwined, with tangible and achievable technical goals often providing the basis for successful political commitments. However, these disputes also demonstrate that basin-wide agreements like the NBI may no longer be the only available – or desirable – tool for regional partners. To some, the combination of sub-level (bilateral, sub-regional) and multilateral (NBI-like) arrangements now appears to be a more appealing and more effective way to address diverging interests and differing approaches. Water management arrangements should thus allow for some degree of flexibility in order to offer real incentives for cooperation.

Game changers

More recently, the emergence of new sources of funding has made water cooperation even more complex. For years, the Nile Basin Trust Fund (NBTF), established with the NBI and managed by the World Bank, was the main source of support for countries wishing to develop water and infrastructure projects. Importantly, the NBTF and other international funding institutions have been traditionally reluctant to finance regional projects without the agreement of other NBI parties.

With the emergence of 'new donors' like China, India and the Gulf states, some of these restrictions have suddenly been lifted. Offering reasonably flexible (and often non-conditional) loans, these new donors have allowed some governments to press ahead with narrower, national ambitions whilst overlooking the impact of their schemes on other regional partners. In doing so, they have seriously disrupted the delicate balance of water cooperation in the basin.

Indeed, water management in the Nile basin is not just about water. It is about managing growth and reconciling different economic plans and political ambitions. In other words, it is about politics in its rawest definition of 'who gets what, when, and how'.

In recent years, the politics of water-sharing and its related diplomatic frameworks have become less predictable. The resignation of Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and the death of Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012 removed two old regional hands, raising many questions about the future. Domestic instability has come to characterise also the DRC, Eritrea, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, and Somalia. Interstate tensions remain dormant, but could suddenly (re)awaken: despite the formal end of the conflict in 2000, relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea remain shaky; South Sudan has recently declared its intention to use the Nile to develop its hydropower potential, which may revive disputes with Sudan; and cross-border tensions over the Great Renaissance Dam are far from abating.

Water politics in the Nile may thus be reaching a critical juncture, especially if local political 'entrepreneurs' decide to use the Nile as a 'trump card' in elections. If this is the case, the stability of the whole region may then be put at stake.

A conflict prevention role for the EU

The EU and its member states have a particular role to play in the Nile basin's water politics, notably by facilitating dialogue, building trust, and supporting efforts to revamp cooperation. Drawing on their long experience in (and knowledge of) the region, they can help partners reframe and accommodate conflicting interests so that political, technical and funding challenges can be tackled more easily. This is in fact quintessential conflict prevention, combining diplomatic initiative with technical assistance, advice and financial support – all things Europeans have traditionally been good at.

Encouraging regional players, downstream and upstream, to come up with more appropriate cooperation tools is also key as it can increase both the value-added of and the incentives for joint action. As many experts point out, although the impact of climate change will be felt most acutely in the mid-term future, concerted action to mitigate negative effects is required now. On this, the EU can also push - in collaboration with other international players - for coordinated, long-term planning and action on the root causes of water depletion.

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