



Navigating Peace

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WATER, CONFLICT, AND COOPERATION: LESSONS FROM THE NILE RIVER BASIN

By Patricia Kameri-Mbote

In 1979, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat said: “The only matter that could take Egypt to war again is water.” In 1988 then-Egyptian Foreign Minister Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who later became the United Nations’ Secretary-General, predicted that the next war in the Middle East would be fought over the waters of the Nile, not politics. Rather than accept these frightening predictions, we must examine them within the context of the Nile River basin and the relationships forged among the states that share its waters.

THE NILE RIVER BASIN

Ten countries share the basin of the Nile, arguably the world’s longest river: Burundi, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (see map). The basin’s three million square kilometers cover about 10 percent of the African continent. Approximately 160 million people depend on the Nile River for their livelihoods, and about 300 million people live within the 10 basin countries. Within the next 25 years, the region’s population is expected to double, adding to the demand for water, which is already exacerbated by the growth of the region’s industries and agriculture. The constant threat of droughts increases the urgency of the problem, and pollution from land-use activities affects downstream water quality. Finally, except for Kenya and Egypt, all of the basin countries are among the world’s 50 poorest nations, making their populations even more vulnerable to famine and disease.

Egypt and Sudan hold absolute rights to use 100 percent of the river’s water under agreements reached in 1929 between Egypt and Britain (which was then the colonial power in Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda) and in 1959 between Egypt and Sudan. Since



The Environmental Change and Security Program’s Navigating Peace Initiative, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and led by ECSP Director Geoffrey Dabelko, seeks to generate fresh thinking on the world’s water problems in three areas:

- Expanding opportunities for small-scale water and sanitation projects;
- Analyzing water’s potential to spur both conflict and cooperation; and
- Building dialogue and cooperation between the United States and China using lessons from water conflict resolution.



The Nile River Basin



Source: Printing, Graphics and Map Design Unit, The World Bank

Egypt must consent to other nations' use of the Nile's water, most of the other basin countries have not developed projects that use it extensively. Not surprisingly, over the years other basin countries have contested the validity of these treaties and demanded their revocation to make way for a more equitable system of management.

CONFLICT AND COOPERATION IN THE NILE RIVER BASIN

Conflict over the Nile's waters could fan existing conflicts in the Greater Horn of Africa, making them more complex and harder to address. Tensions in the Greater Horn of Africa are of great concern to the international community, due to its volatility and proximity to the Middle East. Conflicts emerging here might spread political, social, and economic instability into the surrounding areas. In a river basin, conflict is most likely to emerge when the downstream nation is militarily stronger than nations upstream, and

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the downstream nation believes its interests in the shared water resource are threatened by actions of the upstream nations. In the Nile basin, the downstream nation, Egypt, controls the region's most powerful military, and fears that its upstream neighbors will reduce its water supply by constructing dams without its consent.

Despite this gloomy scenario, interstate war is unlikely, according to history: no nations have gone to war specifically over water resources for thousands of years.

Instances of cooperation between riparian nations outnumbered conflicts by more than 2-to-1 between 1945 and 1999.¹ Instead of war, water fuels greater interdependence. By coming together to jointly manage their shared water resources, countries build trust and prevent conflict. In the face of potential conflict and regional instability, the Nile basin countries continue to seek cooperative solutions.

The political will to develop a new legal framework for managing the Nile should continue. In principle, the countries of the Nile River basin agree that the situation should change. However, they do not agree on how. To help reach a consensus, they developed the high-level Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) in 1999. Originally designed as a way to share scientific information, the NBI today brings together ministers from the basin countries "to achieve sustainable socio-economic development through equitable utilization of, and benefit from, the common Nile basin water resources," as stated in its shared vision.² The NBI has served as a catalyst for cooperation in the search for a new legal framework for the management of the Nile.

However, high-level negotiations like the NBI are not enough; civil society must be involved. Since the inhabitants of a river basin play critical roles in the success of any international agreement, interstate negotiations should also include stakeholders beyond the national governments. Civil society engagement and participation in the development of the Nile basin have been facilitated not only through the NBI's Civil Society Stakeholder Initiative but also through the Nile Basin Discourse (NBD). The NBD's National Discourse Forums, established in each of the basin countries, provide a venue for all the Nile's users to air their expectations and grievances. Through these forums, stakeholders can provide input into development projects along the river basin. The NBD involves a broader array of stakeholders than the traditional state representatives, thus allowing users at the lowest levels—including farmers, women's groups, fishers, and existing community-based organizations—to participate in the development of a legal framework.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Recognize that environmental resources such as water can be pathways to peace.** While people will likely fight with their neighbors over water, historically, nations have not, preferring cooperation over conflict.
- **Use water diplomacy to build sustainable development, democracy, and equality.** Water management schemes must promote equitable use for current and future users, increase access, share benefits, and encourage broad participation.

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- **Engage non-state actors (such as farmers, fishers, women's groups, and community-based organizations) in finding cooperative solutions to potential water conflicts.**
- **Develop the capacity of civil society groups to ensure they can meaningfully contribute to basin-wide initiatives.** Such capacity building will bridge the endowment gap between civil society and government. It will also enable local users to demand access to benefits governed by interstate agreements while continuing to “buy in” to basin-wide initiatives, reducing the chances of conflict.
- **Coordinate the efforts of bilateral and multilateral funding institutions operating in the basin to realize synergies and engender cooperation over water.** These institutions include the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), as well as the World Bank.

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Basin states are interdependent and their development is inevitably linked to the river's hydrologic cycle. Coordinated management of the waters of the Nile is beginning to create synergy in different countries and sectors, and contribute to overall cooperation. The Nile basin countries could resolve conflicts by planning and managing water resources jointly to achieve sustainable development and regional stability, under a sound legal and institutional framework agreed to by all parties. Reaching this agreement

will require involving all stakeholders in trans-boundary water management, building trust among them, creating a common bond, and identifying shared interests.

Collaborative management of the Nile's water resources could act as a catalyst for peace in a region beset by conflict. If we deal effectively with shared water, we could help mitigate not only the daily struggle for life, but also the deadly battles that threaten to pit tribe against tribe, clan against clan, family against family, and neighbor against neighbor.

NOTES

1. Wolf, Aaron, Shira Yoffe, & Marc Giordano. (2003). "International waters: Identifying basins at risk." *Water Policy* 5(1), 31-62. See also Navigating Peace No. 1, "Water can be a pathway to peace, not war," available at www.wilsoncenter.org/water
2. See <http://www.nilebasin.org> for more information and a list of members and partners.

BIOGRAPHY

Patricia Kameri-Mbote is a law researcher and teacher based in Nairobi. She is chair of the Department of Private Law, University of Nairobi, and programme director for the International Environmental Law Research Centre, Nairobi. She has served as acting dean, Faculty of Law, University of Nairobi; and director of research, African Centre for Technology Studies, Nairobi. She was the first chair of the Kenya Nile Discourse Forum, a network of civil society organizations working with other national discourse forums in the Nile River basin to influence development of projects and programs under the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) and other Nile-related programs. She was an Open Society Institute Africa Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center in 2006.

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