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Nile Development Initiatives: Cooperation and Conflict in the Nile Basin

Sherif Roushdy

Sherif Roushdy is a sophomore specializing in Political Economy. Throughout his study at AUC, he has been able to expand his knowledge and interest in contemporary political issues, and it is this interest that convinced him of the necessity of writing this paper in order to tackle the vital issue of development in the Nile Basin.

Abstract: This paper examines three of the major developmental initiatives in the Nile Basin related to the use of Nile water. It provides an assessment of their terms, strengths and weaknesses in the context of an ever-changing political landscape reflecting the clash between the political tensions in the basin on one hand, and the dire need for mutual economic and developmental cooperation on the other.

Introduction: Changing Times, Clashing Needs
The river Nile has been one of the most influential bodies of water in recorded human history. Throughout the centuries, this body of water, a haven of fertility in the midst of desert-scourged lands, has provided a life-sustaining base for grand civilizations and empires. The ancient Egyptians were the first of such empires to utilize its water for irrigation and cultivation, as well as to put the surplus of water generated by its floods to good use (an early legendary example being Mina’s building of a dam to protect Memphis, the ancient Egyptian capital )(Said, 2001, p. 205).

In modern times, the significance of the Nile has not been demoted as it continues to maintain its position as an invaluable source for sustenance of life and agriculture. It plays a crucial role in the dynamics of life and development across the nations of its basin, being used in various ways in various countries, to varying degrees of significance. None of the Nile Basin countries, however, is as dependant on the Nile itself as Egypt. The river functions as the country’s life vein, and had sustained Egyptian civilization since the beginning of recorded history. The use of Nile water and the methodology deployed to do so have evolved through the passage of time, changing according to the needs of the time and the level of technological prowess. As we delve deeper into the first decade of the twenty-first century, Egypt finds itself demoted to the status of a ‘Third World’ country, struggling to catch up to the demands of modernity. As it does so, the issue of the use of Nile water has arguably never been more important. Yet the situation has an added complexity. The Nile does not belong exclusively to Egypt, and the countries of its basin are also hunting for ascension in the world political order. With their own developmental ambitions heavily intertwined with the Nile, tensions have surfaced. The diplomatic clashes of interests over the use of Nile water have become increasingly hostile and fiery, with the heart of the issue being the allocation of Nile water in a manner that will
satisfy all parties involved. The tensions require a thorough re-examination of the developmental plans of Nile water use for the Nile Basin countries, and the implementation of developmental projects related to Nile water that will be capable of fostering a spirit of mutual cooperation and substantial economic growth in the Nile Basin. The aim of my paper is to examine three of the major Nile development projects: the Technical Commission, the UNDUGU grouping, and the Nile Basin initiative, with a deeper focus on the latter two as they are more substantial in scope. Through an assessment of their aims, strengths, weaknesses, and the factors that impede them, I arrive at the conclusion that the barriers to successful cooperation in the Nile Basin have shifted from being based on ethnic and political strife, to that of economic competition.

**The Technical Commission: a First Step**

Historically, the distribution of Nile water for industrial and agricultural usage has been dictated by various legal treaties and influenced by the ambitions of the regional and colonial powers. European intervention was at its peak during the nineteenth century and first quarter of the twentieth century, with British influence particularly strong. A “fundamental principle” (Tvedt, 2004, p.141) of British policy in the region was guaranteeing sufficient fulfillment of Egypt’s hydraulic needs, thus imposing the interests of Egypt in the Nile Basin treaties of 1891, 1902 and 1929. The overwhelming pattern in all the aforementioned treaties was the insurance that the participating Nile Basin countries would not initiate agricultural or hydraulic projects of any sorts which would limit or reduce the flow of Nile water to Egypt itself. Egypt's political dominance, both before and after official independence, thus allowed it to shackle the Nile-related developmental ambitions of its Nile Basin neighbors, and this continues to cast a dark shadow of dissent over cooperative initiatives to this day.

The cooperative initiatives themselves, however, are not a product of the present day. In fact, Egyptian-Sudanese efforts to set up a ‘Permanent Joint Technical Commission’ provide an excellent example of such initiatives occurring as early as 1959. This commission held meetings with representatives from Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya to discuss the “technical aspects of Nile administration and the maximization of the benefits of water sharing” (Allan, 1994, p.358). The meetings were immensely successful, and in 1967 led to the creation of a newer Technical Commission comprising Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire alongside the ‘double-team’ of Egypt and the Sudan. Strikingly absent was Ethiopia, who decided to hold aloof as an ‘observer’, although stressing its desire to gain membership sometime in the future.

The Technical Commission was presented with one essential goal: to collect and analyze hydrometeorological data in order to assess the water balance of the Upper Nile, thus granting Nile Basin governments crucial information and useful insights on the constituents of an effective, environmentally sound method of utilizing Nile water. This was to be done by setting up data-collecting stations
which would gather information on rainfall and lake surface levels and using expensive hi-tech methods such as aerial photography. The project would also undertake the training of staff, employed by the participating governments, in the particular research methods and necessary skills. This was a crucial first step in promoting collective cooperation for a Nile-sharing cause. Yet the project did not tackle the vital issue of the changing needs of the ‘source’ states with adequate depth. Whilst the collected data would be of huge significance in promoting environmental awareness and sensitivity to the natural mechanisms of the basin, it did not provide an adequate guideline for a practical implementation of developmental projects that would meet the Nile Basin’s needs. As a stepping-stone the project was highly adequate, but in terms of finality it only touched upon ‘the tip of the iceberg’. Ten years would lapse before attempts to establish a more comprehensive developmental cooperative framework were undertaken. The disaster of the 1967 war with Israel left Egyptians with the burden of military-rebuilding and with the war-of-attrition with its neighbor that followed. Egypt’s Middle Eastern affairs took precedence over the Nile Basin issue, and it was the tumultuous nature of the period, categorized by skirmishes and all-out-war with Israel, as well as heated dealings with the USA and the USSR, that put it aside.

Birth of the UNDUGU

Negotiations resumed in December 1977 (Allan, 1994, p.359) at a conference held in Cairo. Through a mutual technical committee created by Egypt and the Sudan as part of their earlier Nile-related treaty of 1959, the two states promoted increased participation from their fellow basin countries. The project proposed, titled ‘the Nile Basin Commission’, involved all Nile Basin states dedicated to maximizing the fruitfulness of water-sharing and cooperation. The governments were generally receptive to the idea. Ministerial-level talks began to be consistently held between Egypt, the Sudan, Uganda, Zaire and the Central African Republic, initiated to discuss a wide range of political and economic issues and policies, with Nile water-sharing prominently among them. These talks led to the birth of the UNDUGU grouping, named after the Swahili root-word for ‘brotherhood’, which would later include Rwanda and Burundi. Whilst this grouping is not solely dedicated to water-sharing initiatives, it has paved the way for intensified diplomatic discourse on the issue, and has encouraged diplomatic participation from the Nile Basin governments and international organizations. The grouping was meant to be inclusive of all Nile Basin states, but the absence of Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia prevented the formation of a true Nile Basin Commission, providing an almost grim reminder of the potential volatility of Nile Basin relations. Tanzania would later join the UNDUGU grouping, but a Commission consisting of all Nile Basin states did not come into being.

Despite the disappointment of the Nile Basin Commission, the UNDUGU grouping bore fruit in presenting multi-state developmental plans of particular relevance to water-usage issues. It came to encompass Egypt, the Sudan, Zaire, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and the Central African Republic.
The grouping held several sessions to discuss relevant issues, the first being held in 1983 at Khartoum. However, it wasn’t until the fifth session that the UNDUGU came into significant contact with the United Nations Development Project. The two groups’ correspondence enhanced the UNDP’s interest in promoting tangible, practical projects aimed at promoting beneficial cooperation in the Nile Basin. After a lengthy process of research, data collection and deliberation, with a focus on the issue of water-resources and cooperation among Nile Basin states, and drawing inspiration from the parallel example of the Mekong River Commission, a development project was drawn up by the UNDP. Problems addressed were how to generate electricity in a region in which the demand for electricity was expected to increase sharply, how to deal with increasing demand for water amidst growing populations, how to deal with food provision for said populations, how to efficiently increase arable land via irrigation, and how to tackle the possibility of developing fish farms in the Nile Basin to meet the dietary protein demands of its inhabitants (Allan, 1994, p. 361), (protein demands which, incidentally, Egypt has a relative advantage in due to the superiority of its fishing resources).

The proposed project was not intended for short-term infrastructural improvements, but rather as a program that would meet the developmental aspirations in the Nile Basin over the course of following twenty-five years. It stressed the necessity of taking steps towards joining Nile basin states by one electricity grid, thus extending the grid already linking Kenya Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire. This would be achieved through more efficient utilization of the water volume present in the equatorial lake regions and the development of water falls of vast electricity-producing potential. The project also pointed out the expected need for an additional ten billion cubic meters of water by the Nile Basin’s population by the advent of 2010. Of vital importance to the project was the implementation of a practical ‘executive program’ aimed at ensuring the generation and distribution of the soon-to-be-needed 10 billion cubic meters. This theoretical program was divided into two main plans targeting the two vital goals for reaching the aim. The first entailed a reduction of waste, achieved by applying improvements in the water storage mechanisms in the Upper White Nile as a starting point for the provision of the required water volume. It suggested that any surplus water should be divided at a 50/50 ratio, with Egypt and the Sudan receiving one half, and the equatorial regions surrounding Lake Victoria the other. The second ‘half’ involved an actual increase in water resources via improvements in water preservation in the southern Sudan through the completion of vital canals and more adequate control over its marshlands.

Ethnic Tensions and the Fall of the UNDUGU

Predictably, such a project would be enormously costly, and it was estimated to require a staggering 40 to 60 billion dollar input to sustain it. Experts believe that
such a figure could only be supplied through a heavy influx of foreign aid that would account for approximately two-thirds of the cost. The potential drawbacks of such a financial arrangement, particularly in the case of Egypt which is virtually drowning in foreign debt, is that excessive reliance on foreign aid may well prove detrimental to progress when the deadline for repaying debts is due.

Despite the above, the most significant impediment of all, in my opinion, is the huge risk that would be involved in pouring huge funds for the program in such a tumultuous region. Sub-Saharan states are notorious for their instability, with numerous coups, oppressive regimes, and internal ethnic strife such as the notoriously violent schisms between the Rwandan Hutu and Tutsi. Such an environment has proven to be unsupportive to a cooperative mindset, and the UNDUGU has been further compromised by ethnic division between states themselves. Kenya and Ethiopia’s refusal to join masked more than a tinge of ethnically fuelled dissent, a vociferous objection to the status-quo of Nile water distribution as set in 1929 raging across ethnic lines, and a clustering the Sub-Saharan ‘Africans’ against the northern ‘Arabs’ of Egypt and the Sudan. Ethiopia in particular has played a historical role as the main antagonist for Egypt in the Nile Basin region, frequently objecting to its share of Nile water as dictated by the 1929 and 1959 treaties, and often using these objections as a diplomatic pressure tool. Ethiopian attitudes have not only hindered Nile development projects on an international scale, but have also cast a dark shadow of African protest over Nile development projects taking place on Egyptian soil.

**Home Front: Toshka**

The Toshka Project was established with the aim of extracting the excess silt accumulated behind the Nile Dam in Lake Nasser, and transporting the silt via a man-made canal into the desert, thus substantially expanding the limited area of Egypt’s fertile land. The project sought to add a desperately needed surplus of 8 billion cubic meters of water, believed to be vital with the expected rise in Egypt’s population in order to avoid dropping below the minimal ‘water poverty line’ of 1000 cubic meters of water per capita (Abd Al-Wahab, 1998, p.126). Successfully implemented, the project would also allow for urban expansion into previously uninhabited areas, thus taking the pressure off Egypt’s sprawling and over-populated urban governorates. Nile Basin neighbors, with Ethiopia the most prominently vocal among them, centered their objections to the project on Egypt’s altering of the Nile’s natural course in order to diverge its waters into the desert sands. The objections largely fell on deaf ears, however, as international law does not subscribe a particular penalty to this particular use of Nile water within Egypt’s private geographical boundaries. The bitter protesting failed to halt Egyptian plans, but served to demonstrate the continuous tensions and embittered spirit of competitiveness existing in the Nile Basin, further disturbing any regional harmony that has previously existed.
The impediment to the success of Toshka lies not in external inhibitions, but on an internal lack of funding, a problem enhanced by economic recessions and misplacement of funds. The project is expended to pay dividends approximately ten years or so after the initiation of its first phase, something which did not sit well with administrators and government officials amidst the financial difficulties Egypt has been experiencing in recent years. Thus, Toshka is currently left in ‘limbo’, neither being written off completely nor actively pursued. Fortunately, a recent initiative in the Nile Basin has provided a new opportunity for an effective Nile development project which enhances the spirit of cooperation between the states along its banks.

**A New Dawn: The Nile Basin Initiative**

Appropriately named the ‘Nile Basin Initiative’, or NBI, this initiative seeks to promote economic prosperity through adequate and cooperative use of Nile water, distinct from previous initiatives in its emphasis on mutual, harmonious cooperation in a manner that transcends hostile ethnic divisions. Formed through increased discussion among the Nile Basin countries, it is led by the Council of Ministers of Water Affairs of the Nile Basin states. This ‘increased discussion’ has come as a result of the realization that the only true solution to the entire ordeal will come as a result of cooperative measures and teamwork between the Nile Basin states, rather than competitive animosity.

According to Ayman Abdel Wahab, expert commentator on the Nile Basin, Egypt in particular has come to recognize that diplomatic friendliness and flexibility on the Nile issue is essential in order to successfully pursue meeting its water-consuming needs. “In the past,” he states, “Egypt and its administrators and politicians had been unable to utilize its ministries and infrastructure facilities, such as the state media, successfully in order to achieve cooperative and effective initiatives”. Yet the politicians have become aware that this continued failure may only nurture animosity from Egypt’s Nile Basin neighbors, thus taking a dangerous route, bearing in mind Egypt’s geographical vulnerability in the basin region. Although short on funds and technology, there has been discussion of possibility for a Nile Basin state to construct a dam that would reduce the volume of Nile water reaching Egypt. This, however, is virtually impossible, given the geography of the Nile Basin itself. “The idea of completely cutting off Egypt’s water is baseless”, Abd Al-Wahab points out, “Yet it is possible for a Nile Basin state to reduce the flow of water to Egypt, which is nevertheless disastrous, as the country is literally in need of every possible drop”. Many a Nile Basin state has suffered severe droughts, a huge problem Egypt has been spared thanks to the building of the High Dam. Despite the highly adequate volumes of water that Nile Basin states in general possess, the dry seasons have led to massive water shortages due to a lack of funding and expertise for establishing structures that would allow for effective utilization of the water they possess. Despite Egypt’s protection from draught, its failure to implement Toshka, coupled with the country’s rapidly growing population, have left it as the only Nile Basin state...
which falls below the ‘water poverty line’, with approximately 960 meters cubed of water per capita. To improve the situation for all concerned, positive steps have been taken by Egypt to establish more intimate, reciprocal interactions with its neighbors, demonstrated by sending Egyptian experts as advisors to aid water usage projects in Nile Basin territories. The NBI falls within the context of Egypt’s new attitude, providing a framework in which to establish mutually beneficial participatory relations that cross ethnic divisions, free of the political tensions which plagued previous initiatives.

Funded in part by the UNDP under a wider project for Third World Development, the NBI seeks to achieve several aims through numerous projects and organizational research initiatives. The generation of an extra 45 billion cubic meters of consumable water ranks high on its list of aims, through promoting proper management and planning of usage of water resources, optimum efficiency with agricultural usage of water, and efficient training in practical tasks (Abd Al-Wahab, 2002, p.2). Other ‘sub-projects’ include the SAP, focused on the East Nile in the Ethiopian highlands and on the lake regions which aims to face issues such as poverty and adequate use of water for irrigational, agricultural and sewage purposes, and energy production through hydrological means. Long term goals include a rather ambitious desire to regulate the flooding of the Nile and its lakes. Like its UNDUGU predecessor, the initiative also seeks to enhance the benefits received from fisheries in the lake regions. A ground-breaking element of this new initiative is the particular emphasis on the importance of Ethiopian cooperation with Egypt in the context of promoting development in the Nile Basin and assisting in managing the water supply usage in the source countries, as well as in eliminating ethnic tensions.

**Questions for the Future**

The unfortunate fact is, however, that the region continues to be full of tension. The ethnic divisions have now been transformed into economically-competitive clamoring over the expected 45 billion cubic meter return, in the midst of a continuously volatile region and ambitiously aggressive states (as epitomized by Kenya). Due to its post-Cold War democratization attempts, and because of the United States’ attempt to further its own strategic ambition in the region, Kenya has been treated more favorably than many of its neighboring states. With this type of international support, Kenya has embarked on a hotly ambitious course, working towards a 78.7 billion dollar irrigation project (Arafat, 2004, p.4) that directly jeopardizes Egypt’s 55.5 billion cubic meter share provided by the 1929 treaty, and has even unsuccessfully attempted to rally the other basin states in order to demand financial ‘compensation’ for allowing Egypt and the Sudan to use their waters. Though Kenya backed down, it is not impossible to envisage it being more defiant towards Egypt if spurred by an increasingly neo-conservative U.S. to act as a pressure tool against the North African giant, a growing fear in light of the increasing domestic dissent and Islamist influence that could endanger American interest in the Middle East. The future appears uncertain,
despite all the benefits provided by the NBI. The crucial issue that must be faced by the Nile Basin countries is the need to make concessions for the greater good, and to reexamine the stipulations of the 1929 treaty. It is a dauntingly significant question, for the security and wellbeing of Egypt and the Nile Basin region at large, and is a question that will only be answered by the passage of time.

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