From conflict to cooperation in the Nile Basin
Interaction Between Water Availability, Water Management in Egypt and Sudan, and International Relations in the Eastern Nile Basin

Author(s):
Mason, Simon

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Conflict Sensitive Interviewing
and Dialogue Workshop Methodology

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Summary

The following thesis deals with conflicts and cooperation over water resources in the Eastern Nile Basin, seeking to answer how large groups of people can use scarce resources in a cooperative and sustainable way. The availability of water resources and water use and management in Egypt and Sudan are examined. Perceptions concerning international water relations in the Eastern Nile Basin are assessed using explorative expert interviews, a conflict-sensitive research method. Seventy interviews were carried out in Egypt, Ethiopia and the Sudan. A Dialogue Workshop was organized with the aim of a joint publication on the subject by academics from the respective countries. The workshop emphasized the role of communication in understanding different perceptions.

The guiding principle of the study is the participatory approach: conflict analysis and transformation require direct participation of the involved actors. The Ph.D. was developed and carried out in the project "Environment and Cooperation in the Nile Basin" (ECONILE) as a tandem Ph.D. with a southern partner from Ethiopia. The Dialogue Workshop publication had authors from different sides of the conflict working together to develop an all-inclusive view of the issues and lessons learned.

A dichotomy between national and environmental system boundaries can cause conflicts. National politics in the Nile Basin have continually ignored the fact that the peoples of the Nile Basin are bound together by shared environmental resources. The water resources for irrigation and hydroelectric power production are finite, erosion upstream effects sedimentation of reservoirs downstream, and floods and droughts know no political boundaries. Water pollution is at present mainly a national challenge, international pollution can be avoided by early preventative action.

In contrast to these environmental necessities of cooperation, there have been few political and economic cooperative efforts in the basin until recently. Indeed, much of the environmental conflict literature of the 1980s and 1990s deals with the potential of scarce resources to cause conflict and even war. This study argues that the problem of international water conflicts is not one of war, but rather unsustainable development resulting from the absence of cooperation. Poverty, migration and intra-national conflicts may follow.

Cooperation in the Nile Basin started moving in the 1990s because Ethiopia accepted a project-by-project approach, and Egypt accepted talking about a legal framework. A discussion and negotiation forum was created to talk about legal issues, while simultaneously cooperation in the form of concrete projects has started, e.g. hydroelectric power production. Official and non-official representatives of the Nile countries met in different fora, e.g. in the series of Nile 2002 Conferences, enabling mutual learning about each other’s perceptions and interests. By focusing on interests (underlying reasons for what people want) rather than on positions (fixed way of reaching what one wants) the number
of options that can satisfy the different interests is increased and compatible solutions can be developed more easily. The legal debate between Egypt's historic rights versus Ethiopia's territorial rights are positions that express each country's interest in having a long-term secure water use right that is accepted by the other countries. The challenge of the negotiating committee is to develop a legal and institutional framework without falling into the pitfall of only debating positions, i.e. contradictory legal principles and doctrines.

The Nile Basin indicates that the shift from a focus on positions to interests requires a "this at the same time as that" approach, instead of a "this before that", or "this on condition of that" approach. An integrated and systemic approach to international river management does not necessarily contradict a functionalist approach, i.e. a step-by-step approach that deals with one problem at a time at a lower management level. The development of a joint vision mobilizes energy and clarifies the goal. This can help to coordinate more specific problem-oriented activities. Combining the integrative power of a guiding vision with the practicability of the project-by-project approach can enhance their overall effectiveness.

Besides changes in the context, e.g. the end of the Cold War, the shift towards interest-based cooperation in the Nile Basin occurred, according to many of the interviewed experts, through a process of "dialogue accumulation". Dialogue accumulation refers to the result of numerous meetings between representatives from the different conflict parties over the years in various formal and informal settings. While one meeting may have little impact, together they have an influence. The coordination of the third party (the World Bank, UNDP and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)) has played an important role both in facilitating communication and in providing financial resources.

Communication can lead to cooperation; cooperation is a prerequisite of sustainable development. Pre-conditions for communication to work are that there is a potential benefit for each actor and a certain power symmetry. The Eastern Nile countries can more effectively deal with environmental issues, better access financial resources, and in the long term safeguard their water resources, through cooperation. The power symmetry is given to a certain degree in the Eastern Nile Basin in that Egypt is economically more powerful, and Ethiopia as the upstream country is geographically more powerful. A future framework for cooperation in the Nile Basin consists of Egypt focusing on demand-side management and supporting development upstream; and Ethiopia implementing supply-side management and committing to minimizing the negative impacts on the downstream countries.

Methodologically, our study shows that a Dialogue Workshop between representatives of the conflict parties can clarify issues at stake in an environmental conflict and support the development of a research network. As part of dialogue accumulation, a Dialogue Workshop can facilitate the understanding of different perceptions, facilitate communication and enhance cooperation in an atmosphere of trust and confidence.