

The Nile is a Symbol of Cooperation and Collaboration: Dr. Tedros Adhanom

The Nile River is one of Ethiopia's main natural resources, and one of the most important. In the past we have been unable to use this considerable natural resource effectively. Now, following a decade of impressive growth, we are finally in a position to do so. The Nile, of course, links a total of 10 countries in the Nile Basin, and we recognise the vital role that shared interests and development can play in benefitting us all.

This is why we believe cooperation is the rational and strategic way forward for all the countries of the Basin, as demonstrated by the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA). It is time to throw off the legacy of colonialism, which had bedevilled the exploitation of the Nile Basin for so long, and finally move into a new era of cooperation, with real and sustained development.

THE NILE

The Nile is the longest river in the world. With a length of about 6,650 km. The river flows through Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda, with Eritrea also part of the drainage area of nearly three and a half million square kilometres. From the river's annual flow, three tributaries originating from Ethiopia, notably the Blue Nile or Abay, contribute 86% of the water flow and 95% of the fertile soil that is swept down the river. The rest of the water comes from the White Nile. These two main branches of the Nile join at Khartoum.

Despite contributing so much to the river, Ethiopia uses virtually none of it. In irrigation, for example,



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Blue Nile falls in Ethiopia

Ethiopia uses some 0.2 billion cubic metres, compared with Egypt's 40 billion cm. In fact, in terms of utilisation, Egypt takes 75% of the Nile waters. The rest of the riparian states, including Ethiopia, nothing. The difference is striking. Essentially, the states endowed with this natural resource have never been able to use it; the lower riparian state, Egypt, has had, and essentially still does have, almost total use of the benefits of the river.

COLONIAL TREATY ON THE USE OF THE NILE

One reason for this unbalanced share of the Nile waters lies in colonialism, and the efforts of the British to control the flow of the river. In 1906, the Tripartite Treaty between Britain, France, and Italy laid down that these powers would act together to safeguard the interests of Great Britain and Egypt in the Nile Basin, "more especially as regards the regulation of the waters of that river and its tributaries within Ethiopia". Ethiopia, the only independent African state at the time, immediately rejected the agreement.

In 1929 an agreement between Britain, which had colonised most of the upper riparian areas, and Egypt gave almost the entire allocation of the Nile

waters to Sudan and Egypt. This agreement provided the subsequent foundation for the 1959 Agreement for the Full Utilisation of the Nile Waters between Egypt and Sudan, again with the blessings of the British. It awarded Egypt and Sudan 55.5 billion cubic metres and 18.5 billion cubic metres respectively. Ethiopia, the only independent state in the region, despite being the source of almost 86 percent of the water involved, was never consulted on either agreement, and never accepted them. Indeed, it consistently opposed colonial-era attempts to divide usage of the waters of the Nile between Sudan and Egypt, sending in 1959, for example, a highly critical aide memoire on the subject to all diplomatic missions in Cairo.

It is true that Ethiopia and other riparian countries have not previously implemented projects of the Nile. This, however, is not because any state accepted the 1929 and 1959 deals, but because neither Ethiopia nor other upper riparian states have been in a position to do so due to economic problems, political instability, and most importantly, because of the refusal of the international financial institutions to provide assistance. Indeed, during the (Egyptian President Hosni) Mubarak era, Egypt worked hard to prevent Ethiopia's efforts to develop its water

resources by persuading international donors to not fund projects related to the Nile River. In the early 1990s, for example, Egypt blocked an African Development Bank loan to Ethiopia for a dam project, claiming concern that the proposed dam would reduce the flow of the Nile.

THE PROBLEMS OF THE NILE BASIN

There is no doubt that all 10 riparian countries of the Nile Basin are facing water stress, some more than others. Recent research underlines the need for all the countries through which the Nile flows to utilise their common resource, the waters of the Nile, in a reasonable and sustainable manner. Overall, the Nile Basin is under intense pressure from unsustainable farming practices, poor water management, unsustainable population growth and the potential effects of climate change. In Ethiopia, the livelihood of many farming communities and pastoralists have been facing increasing constraints from land degradation. In Sudan and Egypt sedimentation is causing decreasing soil fertility and water scarcity, as well as adding significant costs to repeated dredging of canals and reservoirs. Climate change, which can be expected to affect the functioning and operation of existing water infrastructure on a wide scale, affecting flood defenses, drainage and irrigation systems, needs to be factored into the discussion. The most probable projected climate changes for the Nile Basin indicate that there will be temperature rises of between 2 and 4 centigrade. Rainfall patterns are like to become increasingly uncertain. There is a need to support our rapidly growing and youthful populations by focusing on urbanisation, industrialisation and job creation, as well as on the rapid development of sustainable energy resources and the acceptance of the reality that water is an economic resource that we cannot afford to waste.

The conclusion is inescapable: there is a very clear necessity for cooperation and collaboration. Indeed, this is essential if we are to develop and reduce vulnerability to climate change. We are all going to have to use our water resources sustainably and expand our infrastructure to manage these resources. This will require serious consideration of the problems of others as well as efforts at cooperation and an understanding of the need for synergy of our different interests and activities.

THE COOPERATIVE FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT

These factors led to the development of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), an Inter-Governmental Organisation established in 1999 at Dar es Salaam by Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda, and now including South Sudan, with Eritrea having observer status. The objective was to achieve sustainable economic development through equitable use of and benefit from the Nile Basin's water resources. Its establishment was a milestone in the history of the relationships among these countries, but from the beginning the NBI was seen as a transitional institution until the Cooperative Framework Agreement negotiations were finalised and a permanent institution created.

In 2008, the NBI began implementing a four year (2008-2012) Institutional Strengthening Project in preparation for the transition to the intended Nile River Basin Commission (NRBC) to be set up under

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the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA). This has provided a sound institutional foundation to deliver core functions. The CFA was signed in May, 2010 by five riparian states (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania). Despite considerable pressure from Egypt, Burundi signed in February, 2011. This makes for a sufficient number for ratification, though there have been continued delays in response to concerns expressed by Egypt.

Congo and South Sudan have expressed their intent to sign, and all the signatories have also indicated their intent to ratify it as soon as possible. Ethiopia ratified the CFA earlier this year.

A Strategic Plan has been produced for 2012-2016, with core Program Areas of (i) The Basin Cooperation Program to facilitate, support and nurture cooperation, (ii) The Water Resource Management Program with the objective to assess, manage and safeguard the water resource base of the Basin, and (iii) The Water Resource Development Programme, whose objective is to identify, prepare

and facilitate investment in trans-boundary water development projects and programs. Overall, the NBI achieved a working transitional regional institution, built capacity for basin-wide water resources management, fostered networking and launched a significant investment portfolio to support water resources development.

EGYPT'S RESPONSE

After the signing, Egypt made several efforts to delay further progress. It was also seriously distracted by its own internal developments. In 2012, there was an apparent change of direction, with Egypt sending a large public diplomacy delegation to Ethiopia, appearing more cooperative, and deciding to return to ENTRO. Ethiopia was quick to demonstrate its own desire for agreement. Indeed it has consistently demonstrated a desire for cooperation over the Nile Basin.

Laying the foundation stone of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam's (GERD) construction two years ago, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi stressed that Ethiopia's "intention to exercise our rights to use

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our own rivers is in order to fight poverty." He pointed out that among the concerns factored into the project was avoidance "of any negative consequences for our neighbours".

The intent of the project was rather to "offer positive benefits for all of them." Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn has reiterated the same approach: Ethiopia is "ready for negotiations and cooperation at the highest and technical levels." It has, in fact, consistently maintained its readiness to engage with the downstream riparian states on any and all of its Nile Basin hydrological development projects.

Similarly, though under no legal obligation to do so, Meles Zenawi proposed, on his own initiative, the establishment of the Tripartite Committee, the International Panel of Experts (IPOE), composed of equal numbers of Ethiopian, Egyptian and Sudanese experts, supplemented by international specialists, to assess the impact, if any, of the dam on Egypt and Sudan. The Panel concluded that the dam would have

no untoward impact on the lower riparian states. After the International Panel of Experts produced its report, at a meeting I had with Mohamed Kamel Amr, the then Foreign Minister of Egypt, we immediately agreed to initiate political and technical consultations between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, and hold further discussions on implementing the report and its recommendations.

Indeed, we have agreed to all the recommendations of the Panel's report and have already started to implement them. It was in a similar vein that Ethiopia had earlier postponed by a year the ratification of the new Cooperative Framework Agreement in response to Egypt's request for time to consider the agreement after the demise of the Mubarak government. Cairo has still not communicated the outcome of its review.

THE GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM (GERD)

In the last year, much of the comment from Egypt has centred on the construction of the GERD, and Egypt's response to this suggests it remains deeply concerned about any developments on the Nile. It also shows it remains prone to misinterpreting them. When the river was temporarily diverted a few hundred metres earlier this year to allow construction of the dam to continue, there were unwarranted claims from Cairo

that the river was being turned back, that it was being blocked off or that the flow was being interrupted. A significant part of the problem has been that much of the comment is based on inaccurate claims and allegations.

The GERD is a hydro power dam; it will therefore extract NO water from the Nile. It is in any case only 25 kilometres from the border with Sudan and is in no position to be used for extractive/consumptive purposes. The major concern for Egypt is actually not any diversion of flow, which will never occur, but the speed with which the dam reservoir will be filled. Ethiopia has already made it clear it will take Egyptian concerns into account on this. Similarly, Ethiopia will take into account Egyptian concerns over how the dam reservoir might be operated in periods of drought. Indeed Ethiopia assures Egypt that it will always take Egypt's worries into account.

The GERD whose design, construction and management adhere fully to international standards,



The river Nile

and is being constructed under an Engineering, Procurement and Construction contract that follows the highest professional standards, also offers major advantages to the Nile Basin. It allows for significant emission reduction and clean energy production; the possibility of managing the effects of climate change; improved regional economic cooperation through energy trading and interconnections; and provision of substantial energy contributions to the regional East and North Africa power pools as part of the continental plans to integrate African energy sources and distribution as an interconnected system. Over and above these are the intangible benefits of helping to overcome centuries of mistrust among the Nile Basin countries and the pioneering of a new era of cooperative regional development and improved water management for a major region of the continent.

ADVANTAGES OF GERD FOR EGYPT, SUDAN AND THE REGION

There is general consensus that dams on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia can provide a reasonable, clean, and green hydropower energy on a scale sufficient to meet all Ethiopia's needs and to produce substantial exports to Egypt and Sudan, as well as to other neighbours. The GERD will generate 6,000MW of hydropower or 15,860GWh a year, twice the energy

generated by the Aswan High Dam. As the International Panel indicated, there is general agreement that this can be done without significantly affecting the socio-economic interests of downstream countries, and indeed that the project will generate substantial benefits for Sudan and Egypt, including enhanced capacity to moderate the adverse impact of climate change.

Dams like the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and other dams with attendant reservoirs can play a positive role in reducing the impact of climatic irregularities. I would also emphasise that the GERD offers a particularly valuable example for cooperation in the sustainable and equitable use of the Nile water. It will provide a central role in our strategy for the development of 'green' energy in Ethiopia and for achieving agricultural objectives for Sudan and Egypt that are responsive to climate change as well as offer mutually beneficial engagement between scientists and researchers in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan to assist in the realisation of sustainable development projects.

Overall, the GERD's benefits and advantages are significant. They include flood risk avoidance and reduction in the impact of recurrent floods. It will also regulate the flow to provide expansion of irrigated lands; extend periods of navigation;

significantly reduce losses from infiltration and evaporation; provide water saving and enhanced water management, with storage capacity to assist during drought periods; sediment control improving the safety of the downstream dams and increasing their active life as well as protecting irrigation canals and equipment. It will sharply cut maintenance costs; and improve the energy generation and efficiency of downstream dams as well as offer energy savings direct from the GERD and through development of run-off river plants.

ETHIOPIA'S POLICY TOWARDS THE NILE BASIN

The crucial, indeed central element of Ethiopia's foreign and national security policy is our need to realise our vision of democracy and development; the creation of an enabling environment for a democratic developmental state in Ethiopia. It is a vision that is focused on development that benefits the population at large and the creation of favourable situations to deal with our main enemy: poverty. We are, above all, determined to fight and win the war on poverty. In the past, we have been unable to use the considerable natural resources with which Ethiopia is endowed. The reasons have been various and need not concern us here, but with a decade of double digit GDP growth behind us, we are finally in a position to begin to exploit these resources properly, in the interests of national development. It is, of course, our right to do so in a manner that is acceptable to international norms and standards.

Equally, Ethiopia is fully aware that its future is intertwined with that of her neighbours. Indeed, our primary external focus is on those countries that we border – the Sudan and South Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia – countries with which we have long standing links in language, culture, history and natural resources. To these, of course, must be added Egypt, to which we are linked, directly and permanently, by the River Nile, one of our major resources, but which we are also committed to share equitably with our neighbours.

This is why Ethiopia has made a strategic and conscious decision to concentrate on constructive relationships. It is necessitated by the pressing priorities of the war on poverty and the effects of underdevelopment, as well as by moral and ethical justifications. Our foreign policy is drawn up on the basis of enlightened self-interest and peaceful coexistence, based on mutual respect and mutual benefit for all.

Ethiopia wants to benefit from its sovereign and shared resources in a responsible and sustainable

way; its aspirations do not in any way contravene the needs of any other riparian state or its development aims. I am reminded that our late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi repeatedly emphasized the regional dimensions of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, detailing how it would benefit and help transform the entire region through regional infrastructural and economic integration and with the promise of shared prosperity for all stakeholders. Ethiopia and Egypt, he argued, remained linked insolubly by the Nile River.

The fundamental principle underlying Ethiopia's Nile policies is very clear – total commitment to cooperation in the Nile Basin on the basis of the Nile Basin Initiative and the Cooperative Framework Agreement, and for this to provide equitable and reasonable utilisation of water resources and sustainable and mutual benefits for all the riparian states. These are the parameters for cooperation and development, covering environmental, economic, security, institutional and political issues. Ethiopia, in fact, has been and is working to strengthen regional cooperation as much to serve the interests of Sudan and of Egypt as towards the interest of all the upper riparian states. Our approach also highlights the consistently non-confrontational approach we have adopted. Indeed, Ethiopia has repeatedly gone above and beyond "the call of duty" in trying to assuage Egyptian concerns and to reach consensus over a more equitable allocation of the use of the Nile waters.

Quite simply, we are fully aware that cooperation and collaboration over the valuable resource of the Nile River offers a win-win scenario for Ethiopia, for Egypt, for Sudan and for the whole for the Nile Basin and Northeast Africa.