

# Dividends of Cooperation: The Case of Nile River

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## 1. Introduction

The Nile River is one of the longest rivers in the world. It covers an area of approximately 3.1 million square kilometers, which is around ten percent of the African continent. The Nile River has two parts: The Blue Nile originates from Lake Tana, Ethiopia, and the White Nile started from Kagera River, Rwanda. The two Niles confluence in Khartoum, Sudan and head to Egypt and join the Mediterranean Sea. Nile has eleven riparian countries; namely- Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. It is a home for more than three hundred millions of people. The Nile was a cradle of civilization, though nowadays it is a home of the poorest countries in the world facing recurrent drought, food insecurity, desertification, and flooding and water scarcity. The region has experienced long protracted civil wars in Ethiopia and Sudan, which among others, resulted in the formation of new states in Africa; Eritrea and South Sudan, respectively. The major transboundary environmental problems are flooding, drought, land degradation, loss of soil fertility, water pollution and sedimentation. In spite of its immense potential for irrigation, hydro-electric power production, water supply, fishing, tourism, flood control and navigation, the Nile's name is now synonymous with water conflict and war. Many gloomy water war predictions have not failed to mention the Nile River. Even at the time of writing this piece, the Nile waters conflict has re-surfaced dominating both the political and media landscapes.

### 1.1. Nile Basin Cooperation

In the Nile basin, the transboundary cooperation has gone through different phases of cooperation. Generally, it can be grouped into three phases of cooperation: *Pre-NBI*, *NBI* and *Post-NBI* cooperation.

#### 1.1.1. *Pre-NBI* cooperation

The first attempt to form a basin-wide organization was made in 1967 by establishing the Hydromet, hydrometeorological survey of the Equatorial Lakes. It was formed in response to flood disaster with the support of United Nations Development Program (UNDP). All riparian countries were members except, Ethiopia and DRC which had observer status. In 1983, The *Undugu* group, Brotherhood in Swahili, was replaced Hydromet, with broader objectives of achieving a regional cooperation in the areas of environment, infrastructure, trade and culture. *Undugu* didn't bring together all riparian states as Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania opted to have an observer status<sup>1</sup>. In 1993, the riparian water Ministers reorganized *Undugu* and formed the Technical Cooperation Commission for the Promotion and Development of the Nile (TECCONILE). The major achievements of the TECCONILE is the development of the Nile River Basin Action Plan (NRBAP) which led to Policy Guidelines of the NBI and the formation of a "Cooperative Framework Agreement, (CFA)" to discuss equitable water sharing. It also organized a series of annual Nile 2002 Conferences, which served as a 'dialogue forum' among the riparian countries, international experts and other stakeholders. Generally, the Pre-NBI level of Nile Basin cooperation was too low or at a non-cooperation level. Nile waters have been governed neither by law nor by common sense. There were rampant unilateral water resources development, deep-rooted mistrust and blatant exchange of water war words, specifically between Ethiopia and Egypt. There were tense political situations with minimum or no Nile dialogue. Talking about Nile water sharing was a taboo. As a result, the Nile cooperation failed to bring all riparian countries on board and failed to achieve their stated objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, however, *Undugu* had the Central African Republic as member, a non-riparian neighboring state (Tesfaye, 2001).

### ***1.1.2. Nile Basin Initiative***

The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was established in February 1999, with a shared vision: “to achieve sustainable socio-economic development through the equitable utilization of, and benefit from, the common Nile basin water resources.” The NBI has two tracks of cooperation: The NBI Technical projects and the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), processes. The technical tracks focused on the implementation of shared regional projects such as environmental protection, regional power trade, confidence building and socio-economic development. NBI also aimed beyond a mere ‘water sharing’, to the regional benefits, cooperation and integration. The CFA, as political and legal track, discussed the equitable and reasonable utilization the Nile waters without causing no significant harm among the riparian countries. However, these tracks, no matter how separated, have crisscrossed many times. The legal/political track casts its shadow on the technical regional cooperation projects. Even if the spirit of transboundary cooperation was high and thinking ‘beyond the river’ seemed attractive, the *nature* of ‘NBI cooperation’ has gone through different bumpy roads. Even if riparian countries do not advocate unilateral developments openly as they used to in the pre-NBI time, they still quietly indulge in unilateral developments (such as in Egypt- the New Valley project, the Al-Salaam Canal and the Toshka Project; In Ethiopia: the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, GRD, Tekeze Dam, Tanzania- piping water from Lake Victoria; Kenya-water supply programmes). These indicates how much national projects get more preference than regional projects.

The major achievement of the NBI is to bring all member states on the table. There is also high political will and commitment from riparian countries. NBI also enjoys a high support of development partners<sup>2</sup>. The NBI also got the attention of the African Union and different Regional Economic Communities (RECs). Its shared regional projects such as the Regional Power Trade and power grid interconnectedness got the attention of the regional organization, as they fed into the Continent’s plan to regional integration through infrastructure and energy. In May 2010 the ‘Nile Cooperative Framework Agreement, after a lengthy and protracted negotiation, was signed in Entebbe, Uganda, by the six upper riparian countries- Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya and Burundi. Egypt and Sudan declined to sign, and in showing disagreement they ‘freeze their membership in the NBI.’ In April 2011, Ethiopia resorted to unilateral measures and launched a controversial water schemes called, Grand Renaissance Dam, (GRD). Consequently, the Joint Multipurpose Program (JMP)-Egypt, Ethiopia Sudan- which was launched in 2006 by crafting ‘big regional projects’ was abruptly closed in December 2012 due to disagreements.

### ***1.1.3. Post-Nile Basin Initiative***

The NBI a transitional institutional mechanism until the permanent Nile Basin Commission (NBC) is established. As it stands now, it seems that the NBI is in a stalemate. The CFA/ Entebbe Agreement and the GRD have put a serious question mark to the future of the NBI/NBC. Counting the Gains of the transboundary regional cooperation is not always easy. While the upstream states considered the NBI a fruitful mechanism for bringing the six upstreamers in one Block and signed the CFA, Egypt, on the other hand, remains alone, especially after Sudan openly showed its support to the Ethiopia’s GRD. Thinking beyond the River/CFA/GRD in the post-NBI era, no matter how attractive it sounds, remains a daunting task.

## **2. Benefits beyond the Nile Waters**

In the Nile Basin, the benefit of cooperation much outweighs the ‘gains’ from non-cooperation. There are numerous regional benefits garnered from the Nile cooperation. These benefits can be divided broadly as ‘hard/tangible’ and soft/intangible’ benefits. The soft benefits, this writer argues, are the prime benefit of the Nile cooperation. A Bain used to consider any ‘Nile Talk’ as a taboo transformed itself through the

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<sup>2</sup> In June 2001, the NBI, for the first time, introduced itself to the international donors at the International Consortium for cooperation on the Nile, in (here) Geneva, Switzerland (NBI-Socio-economic Development and benefit Sharing Project Document, SDBS, 2001).

NBI to ‘a forum of Nile Dialogue.’” Any discontent or differences can now be voiced and tabled at the ‘NBI room/roundtable.’” This in the long term may result in a move from ‘a tone of confrontation, tension and mutual mistrust’ to ‘a tone of negotiation, dialogue and collaboration.’ The other crucial element is the change in the ‘thinking’ of the riparian government, from the ‘narrow national interest approach’ to the ‘broader and all inclusive regional approach.’ A quick assessment of the NBI projects showed that at the start of the NBI around 1999, most of the emphasis were on the national and projects like the Subsidiary Action Projects (SAPs), but at latter stage, there was a desire to craft broader regional projects like the Joint Multipurpose Projects. Different studies were made to come up with Cooperative Regional Assessments (CRAs), of the SAPs, for instance, the Watershed Management project. The other broader achievement is that there is increasing trading among the riparian countries and their representative regional blocks. The Ethiopian Investment Agency noted that the number of Sudanese investors are very high in Ethiopia, seconding Chinese. Egyptians investment reached to one billion USD, though now, it is in decline for various reasons. All the riparian countries are a member of one of the Regional Economic Community, RECs, such as Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Eastern Africa Community (EAC) and Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, COMESA, and North Africa region. It is believed that “inter-regional trade in agricultural products amongst trade blocks of which the NBI countries are member increased from 829 mill USD during 1999 when NBI was established to 4.4 billion USD” (see SIWI NBTS study report, 2013). This shows the NBI and its shared vision project, SVP, ‘indirectly’ contributed to regional trade interaction and cooperation. To use SDBS project document (2001) word NBI has become “an incubator for cooperation.”

Today, the NBI transformed itself from a ‘risk-aversion’ or ‘water conflict prevention’ mechanism to a ‘spring board for regional cooperation.’ NBI feeds into the African integration plan. ‘One River-One People-One Vision’ has become the mantra of the NBI. But this does not mean that the NBI is entirely marked by shining stories. Its critics have pointed out that the NBI has failed to implement the projects on the ground successfully and failed to attract the private sector for its investment projects.

The African-led and African-owned initiative -Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) - was jointly formulated by the African Union (AU), the New Partnership for Africa’s Development Planning and Coordination Agency, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the African Development Bank. The AU acknowledged the Ethiopia’s GRD as one of the Priority Action Programs, in the energy sector out of 40 projects, to be implemented between 2012 and 2020. In this regard, one can say that the GRD is being grounded in regional and continental master and action plans. But the NBI (mainly Egypt) has yet to acknowledge the GRD either as NBI or African project. This writer believes that, to address the present deadlock, NBI can emulate AU and acknowledge the GRD as NBI and PIDA project. The Nile countries will continue to cooperate as they have already sipped a “cooperation and peace dividend” of the NBI.

### **2.1. An Assessment of the Benefits**

As it was discussed in previous section, the NBI was successful in bringing the riparian countries on the round table. But once the member states achieved that, questions were followed regarding the output of the NBI projects. Benefit assessment request were forwarded by countries, individuals, concerned bodies and also by development partners. In responding to the request, the NBI in 2011 came up with Country specific Nile cooperation assessment, under the title “Unlocking the Nile Basin’s Development Potential, Benefits of Cooperation” in which it assessed the real and potential benefit of its SVP and SPA projects. Has NBI achieved its five objective? (a) to develop the water resources of the Nile Basin in a sustainable and equitable way to ensure prosperity, security and peace for all; (b) to ensure efficient water management and the optimal use of the resources; (c) to ensure cooperation and joint action between the riparian countries, seeking win-win gains; (d) to target poverty eradication and promote economic integration and (e) to ensure that the program results in a move from planning to action. In light of these

objectives, the NBI has achieved very little. But it should be noted that the intensity of poverty, mistrust and the rampant civil strife seriously compromised the achievement of the NBI. Different questions were raised among the riparian countries especially by the upper riparian countries like Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda regarding the practicality of the SVP/SAP projects and the benefit of the NBI cooperation. There were also different interests and emphasis on the projects. For instance, Ethiopia wanted the irrigation and power project to speed up, while the lower riparian countries focus on the flood and watershed projects. In a way it can be said that the 'benefit assessment' was centered on the national interests.

### 3. Methods of Benefit Assessment

As to the knowledge of this writer 'there is no benefit assessment framework' in the Nile Basin. In fact, in the Nile Basin the benefit sharing concept has remained amorphous. It becomes as a buzzword, meaning almost everything and anything, and hence, prone to be a cliché. There were few attempts to conceptualize the benefit sharing concept by Sadoff and Grey (2002 and 2005)<sup>3</sup> and Phillips, Daoudy, McCaffrey, Öjendal and Turton (2006).<sup>4</sup> Hence, in the Nile Basin, benefit sharing has yet to be conceptualized let alone to have all agreed upon methodology of assessing the benefits.

The 'soft/intangible' benefits are difficult to measure. But can be evaluated against the increase in level of trust and cooperation, enhanced regional peace and security, the reduction of potential conflict, continuing and sustainable riparian collaboration, and greater emphasis on regional projects and enhanced risk mitigation<sup>5</sup>. The 'hard/tangible benefits' like the trade and economic interaction/interdependence, flow of capital and human resources, power trade, transmission connection, flood protection<sup>6</sup>, watershed management, irrigation projects and environmental intervention, training of experts ( even at MA and PhD levels) and the like can be measured quantitatively. Broader assessment can be made in relation to 'Value for Money,' meaning the amount of money spent against the value/benefit gained. It should also be noted that the NBI has produced different relevant and state of the art document on the Nile River, which can serve as a basis for further transboundary cooperation. For instance, the NBI-Water Resources Planning Management (WRPM) Programme produced the first ever 'State of the River Nile Basin Report'<sup>7</sup> and state-of-the art Nile Basin Decision Support System (Nile Basin-DSS)<sup>8</sup>.

The Socio-Economic Development and Benefit Sharing (SDBS) project was designed in 2001, but implementation was started in 2005 and it stayed for a few years (4/5? years) and closed. The development objective of the SDBS were to: (a) identify and assess a range of cooperative development

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<sup>3</sup> Sadoff, Claudia W. and David Grey. (2005). "Cooperation on International Rivers: A Continuum for Securing and Sharing Benefits." *Water International*, Vol. 30, No. 4, December 2005. Sadoff, Claudia W., and David Grey. (2002). "Beyond the river: the benefits of cooperation on international rivers." *Water Policy*, Vol. 4 (5) pp. 389-403.

<sup>4</sup> Phillips, D.J.H., M. Daoudy, J. Öjendal, A. Turton and S. McCaffrey (2006). *Trans-boundary Water Cooperation as a Tool for Conflict Prevention and for Broader Benefit-sharing*. Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>5</sup> In related to Eastern Nile Technical Regional Office, ENTRO, NBI reported that the Joint Multi-Purpose Project, JMP, has led to "the *One System Inventory* of natural resources, water resources and socio-economics of the Eastern Nile sub-basin prepared on the basis of "no-borders" analyses." NBI, 2011 (Unlocking the Nile Basin's Development Potential, Benefits of Cooperation: Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan).

<sup>6</sup> In Ethiopia a total of 50,000 people to benefit directly and another 500,000 to benefit indirectly from the project interventions. These people are from 107 flood-prone communities. In Sudan A total of 1.3 million people from 198 flood prone communities to benefit from the project interventions Of these, 100,000 will benefit directly while 1.2 million indirectly. (NBI, 2011. Unlocking the Nile Basin's Development Potential, Benefits of Cooperation: Ethiopia; Sudan).

<sup>7</sup> This strategic-level document presents a basin-wide picture of prevailing physical and socio-economic conditions, pressures and threats to the water and environmental resources of the basin (NBI, 2011. Unlocking the Nile Basin's Development Potential, Benefits of Cooperation: Egypt).

<sup>8</sup> Ethiopia has so far used the tool to conduct a pilot case on 'Irrigation and Hydropower Development Opportunities in the Tana and Beles Basins'. Egypt has so far used the tool to conduct a pilot case on 'impacts of climate change on the inflow to the High Aswan Dam.' Sudan has so far used the tool to conduct a pilot case on 'the effects of selected interventions in the Nile basin on the Nile system in Sudan' Kenya has so far used the tool to conduct a pilot case on 'irrigation and hydropower opportunities in the Kano plains'.

scenarios, (b) develop *criteria, methods, and frameworks* for sharing the benefits and costs of cooperative development scenarios, and for managing attendant risks, and (c) strengthen national and regional capacities for policy and macro-economic analysis, which can support further cooperation opportunities identified through the scenario development process. In spite of its stated objective, it can be said that the NBI-SDBS have not made an achievement in clearly identifying and quantifying benefits. It was also not able to develop criteria, methods and frameworks for assessing benefits.

#### **4. How were the benefits assessment's findings communicated?**

The few 'loose and unstructured' benefit assessment made have been communicated to the riparian countries, development partners, and other stakeholders through the Nile Conferences, the annual celebration of the Nile Day, press release, and other fora. In 2011, the NBI compiled a country specific benefit report under the title: "Unlocking the Nile Basin's Development Potential, Benefits of Cooperation." But even those communicated benefits have been questioned and less accepted by riparian countries. The main challenge in the Nile Basin is sensational reporting of the Nile issue by the media, both print and electronic. In order to get the public and politician attention, media, print, electronic and social, tend to focus on the conflict of the Nile, than on the cooperation benefits. To address this reporting problem the NBI under its project-Confidence Building and Stakeholder Involvement (CBSI)-established the Nile Media Network of the riparian countries. Before it brings any change, this media network ceased to exist as the CBSI project was finalized.

#### **5. Lessons learned**

Transboundary Water Cooperation is a long grueling process. Cooperation does not mean that there is no disagreement. However, it means to pursuing cooperation even at face of glaring differences and dispute. Not all cooperations of the Nile Basin succeeded in bringing the riparian under one cooperation umbrella. This gives a lesson that we need to seriously 'question the *nature* of the cooperation. This is because the nature of cooperation (real, fake, coerced or pseudo ones) reflects on the quality, quantity and type of benefit we are going to accrue.

##### *What worked well?*

- The NBI managed to form 'Nile Family' and now NBI forum is being seen as the only alternative for the Nile problems;
- The emphasis given by the NBI not to focus on numerical 'water-sharing' but on broader regional "benefit-sharing," approach.
- The personal interaction of the staff of the NBI, drawn from member countries have impacted positively in how the countries behave ( you can call it people-to people or technician-to-technicians interactions/diplomacy);
- Separation of the legal/political and the Technical/project tracks in the NBI is a good measure, though they crossed legs many times and overshadowed each other;

##### *What did not work well?*

- The attempts to attract investment/bankable projects to the Nile Basin landscape;
- The Eastern Nile Basin-Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan-lagged behind as compared to the Equatorial region cooperation;
- The Ethiopia's dam and the Entebbe Agreement are questioning the existence of NBI, and future of NBI/NBC.

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