

The Nile – a bonding element in international cooperation?

The Nile Basin watershed covers one-tenth of Africa's land mass and links a total of ten riparian states. Nine of the countries have come together to form the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI). Its stated objective is sustainable development of water resources for the benefit of all parties. The political set-up is explosive. Germany has committed long-term support to the NBI, with the intention of contributing to crisis prevention in that region of Africa.

The 6,800-kilometers course of the Nile passes through ten African states. From its remotest head-stream, the Ruvyironza river in the Rwandan border region, to its mouth into the Mediterranean Sea, the Nile is actually some 200 kilometers longer than the Amazon, although it carries only one-fortieth of the Amazon's volume of water. The Nile is five times as long as the river Rhine in Europe, but they each account for similar quantities of water resources. Africa's largest inland lake, Lake Victoria, flows into the White Nile at Jinja in Uganda; 80 percent of water in the main Nile originates from the Blue Nile and its tributaries in the Ethiopian highlands. Sudan, Africa's largest country by land area, also contains the largest share of the Nile Basin but contributes no notable inflow of water.

The political situation is explosive. Four of the riparian states, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Rwanda and Burundi count among the poorest coun-

tries in the world, and are scarred by wars. The river is not used as a cross-border transport route. There are minimal trade relations in the region: nothing flows between the states on the South-North axis other than the Nile. In 20 years' time, the number of people living in the Nile Basin will be 300 million, and rising.

The Nile Basin Initiative

This is the context in which the World Bank took over coordination of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI). The NBI first presented itself to the international donor community in June 2001 at the International Consortium for Cooperation on the Nile, held in the Palais des Nations in Geneva. The presentation by the nine water ministers of its member states was a success. The most impressive contributions were the performances by children from the nine member states («the children of the Nile»), which made a lasting impact on those present. The event was professionally staged by the World Bank. The Nile Council of Ministers (Nile-COM) that was inaugurated had just one flaw: Eritrea, which would have made up the full complement of Nile riparians, refuses to this day to participate as an active member and retains observer status.

Probably the largest user of Nile water is Egypt, which lies on its lower reaches.



Photo: Wilcke

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By the year 2020, up to 300 million people will be living in the ten riparian states of the Nile.

Photo: Schild

The comprehensive programme of support which has been put together over three years with the help of numerous experts is developmentally sound. It has instituted regional cooperation in a sector on which lives depend, so establishing a foundation for economic and social development and good relations between neighbouring riparian countries. The broad programmatic approach is shouldered on a multilateral basis by means of a coherent financing system. Around US\$ 85 million of the required US\$ 180 million was pledged in Geneva. The bulk of the funding goes into a trust fund administered by the World Bank. The Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands feel that the programme confirms their own development strategies and are the largest contributors.

The Nile also brings together different international cooperation partners. The efforts of banks, UN organizations, G8 members and European partners can be synchronized and coordinated. Different parties, working in consultation, undertake specialized elements of project inspections. The reporting regime is operated according to a common framework. Project staff from Europe, the World Bank and the African Development Bank have joined forces to form a Nile team, and demonstrate considerable unity. In such an eclectic team, however, there is wide scope for friction and rifts between different development cultures. If the Nile Basin Initiative is to have lasting impacts, it is especially important to start by emphasizing the opportunities and common interests.

The bulk of work has quite clearly been done by the Nile Secretariat, hosted in Entebbe, Uganda, only 50 meters from the shore of Lake Victoria. The Executive Director, the Tanzanian Meraji Msuya, accomplished the feat of combining and satisfying the wishes of the nine water ministers, the World Bank and the many donors and executing agencies.

The Ugandan parliament passed legislation on the Nile in 2003 and ensured that the Nile Secretariat had international legal status. Since 2003, Meraji Msuya has been the official ambassador for the Nile. He is a travelling representative on all matters relating to transboundary cooperation, making appearances wherever needed, forging networks, overcoming doubts and winning support through integrity and conviction.

German support

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ – German Technical Cooperation) has been supporting the Nile Basin Initiative since 2002. Germany was the first bilateral donor to make resources available as a member of the Nile team. The financial contribution of 3 million euro is substantial, and was made available immediately. This assistance has been accepted and acknowledged.

German input is supporting the important project of harmonizing the riparian states' water policies and eliminating inconsistencies, gaps and incompatibilities. Only a harmonized «water gover-

nance» system permits transboundary projects to be implemented that will benefit all parties. The project lays the foundation for cooperation in the water sector. Germany's commitment is set up on a long-term basis. International experts, preferably from the member states, team up and support the governments of the Nile countries on demand. This work builds trust and understanding of the parties' national interests.

GTZ works closely with the Nile Secretariat through its structure of field offices in the partner countries. It is assisting in setting up the necessary organizational structure and establishing communications. Its policy advisory work is not geared towards one government, but is committed to the integrating aim of the Nile Basin Initiative.

The Nile Basin Initiative introduced itself to the international donor community in June 2001 in Geneva. The joint presentation by the water ministers of nine riparian states was a great success.

Photo: Wilke



The Blue Nile arises in the Ethiopian Highlands and continues its journey through Lake Tana to the Sudan.

Together with the World Bank, the Danish and the British experts, a competition of ideas has been set up on how to organize the process. All parties feed their collective international experience into this discussion. They do not follow the Platonic image of doctor and patient, in which the experts make the diagnosis and know what the best therapy is: there is no place here for prescriptive knowledge. Instead, policy advice is organized as a public discussion of ideas and experiences. The GTZ water experts in East Africa are also involved. Especially valuable experience is drawn from Southern Africa, from those who have supported the Orange and Limpopo River Basin Commissions. It goes without saying that critical questions will be raised, as they were again recently by the African Development Bank. How much «ownership» do the riparian countries have if their own funds are limited? Is the organizational structure involving nine member countries not too complex? When will the burning political topics finally reach the top of the agenda? What is being done about the participation of the population as water users? Is the project preparation not taking an unduly long time? In 2004 Kenya took over from Ethiopia as the chair of the Nile Council of Ministers. There is a pent-up sense of expectation that different

aspects will come to the fore, and sensitive political issues between the upstream riparians on Lake Victoria and those downstream in Egypt will be brought up at the round table.

Hydro-politics

For some long time, voices in the Ugandan and Kenyan parliaments have loudly denounced the 75-year-old colonial agreements on water usage rights, which some individual members of parliament have declared null and void. Critical questions are being asked about the stationing of two Egyptian hydrological engineers in Jinja, Uganda, to take regular readings of the volume of outflow from Lake Victoria. At international water conferences, ministers from the Nile Council conspicuously avoid one another. Strong words are relayed by the African press, and there is even talk of the risk of war.

One thing is certain: a fair amount is going on behind the scenes. The riparians of Lake Victoria grapple amongst themselves, while also operating collectively against those further downstream. Ethiopia and Eritrea still have a hard time coexisting peacefully. Rebels in southern Sudan are being consulted as part of the peace-process negotiations in the Kenyan Machakos on how they intend to handle the use of Nile water. Egypt proudly points to its four-thousand-year tradition of good husbandry with an expectation of respect.

The Nile Basin Initiative will not be able to resolve these and many other issues in the blink of an eye. Nevertheless, it persists in exhorting its members to be will-

ing to rethink old viewpoints and be open to new agreements. Useful and up-to-date information and data must be assembled to combat the hostile prejudices of the past. The aim is sustainable use of the river, for the benefit of everyone. But high words about common benefits are easily overdone – sooner or later, people want to experience the benefits for themselves.

In the right direction

Critics believe that the broadly-based Nile Basin Initiative lacks overall political leadership. Integrated regional communities are becoming increasingly important in global terms. In Africa, these are represented by SADC (Southern African Development Community), IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development), EAC (East African Community) and ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States). Only these, they say, could forge the necessary political bonds for such an international cooperative alliance. IGAD and EAC cover only subgroups of the Nile countries. The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania are members of SADC and expect it to bring them advantages.

Certainly the limitations of the Initiative should also be scrutinized. It is not a robust political body, nor does a federation of Nile states look likely to emerge in the foreseeable future. There is an additional possibility that the «sub-basins» will be brought to the fore during the course of joint project work. In any case, the individual countries must be allowed to question their investment and benefits on the basis of their national interests – much as the Seychelles is currently reviewing its membership of SADC while Uganda toys with the idea of joining; the future will bring shifts and new groupings.

But the Initiative has set off in the right direction. We in Europe have learned from our experience on the Rhine and Danube rivers that undertakings like these call for plenty of time and staying power. And there is no alternative, because the mounting problems have to be addressed.

Germany increases its commitment

The German initiative within the framework of the G8 Africa Action Plan to promote peace and security is aimed at supporting river basin organizations in Africa. The African Ministerial Conference on Water (AMCOW) instigated the proposal and wants to have Germany on board.