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# Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam is making waves in Egypt

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# MIDDLE EAST M●NITOR

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When the Merowe Dam in Sudan was built Ali Askouri, his family and their community were flooded out of their homes 80 kilometres from where it was being constructed to make way for the project; part of his family were pressured to move to resettlement housing and part of them stayed in the area. That was in 2008. To this day, the government have not compensated these families.

"They lost everything, their crops, their farming land, their houses, schools, clinics," says Askouri, "all that went under the water. The government offered them nothing and they had to rebuild everything from scratch."

The dam was built with the promise to double electricity output for Sudan. But Askouri - whose book *Hamadab Dam: The Model of Political Islam for Impoverishment and Resources Looting* will soon be published - told MEMO that the electricity was actually taken directly to Khartoum and other large cities to be sold at commercial rates, whilst the people in rural areas along the water were side lined. "The only areas that were denied this [electricity] were the affected areas," says Askouri.

Now, across the southern border of Sudan, a new dam is being constructed. Since 2011 Ethiopia has been working on a \$4 billion hydroelectric project that could increase electricity to 50 per cent of what is required for the country and generate €2 million a day. But like the Merowe Dam in Sudan, Askouri says it is likely communities living nearby will be forgotten.

"I think the story could be the same. I think the mentality in these countries is exactly the same. Ethiopia has said they are building this dam to export electricity, which effectively means that electricity will not be provided to rural communities," he says. Up

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to 20,000 Ethiopians could be displaced by the project.

But whilst these communities, and their fate, rarely make it into news reports, a more well-known issue is the age-old dispute that has played out between Egypt and Ethiopia, the bookends of the Nile, and how they will divide up the water.

The river starts in the upstream country of Ethiopia before eventually reaching Egypt, which is downstream. Hypothetically speaking Ethiopia has the power to “turn off the tap” leaving Egypt without water. Add Sudan to the mix - President Bashir Omar recently declared his support for the project - and the dam could shake up relations between the three strongest Nile states.

## **The Egyptian factor**

The word for cloud has only been found twice in ancient Egyptian literature points out Toby Wilkinson, author of *The Nile: Downriver Through Egypt's Past and Present*; a fact which demonstrates neatly how little water there is in this North African state, which is made up mainly of desert, and just how dependent on the Nile it is.

Egypt generates electricity through the Aswan Dam, which spans part of the river in the south of the country, and uses its water for agriculture. Yet Egypt is just one of eleven countries that sit along the banks of the longest river in the world and each want their share of its 4,240 miles worth of water.

For this reason, a colonial era treaty which dates back to 1929 gave Egypt the right to veto projects further up the Nile that had the potential to affect its access to the water and electricity. Thirty years later the treaty was updated to allocate Egypt 55.5 billion cubic metres of the annual flow of Nile water a year and Sudan 18.5 billion. The upstream states in between were allocated nothing.

Whilst Nile states have long called for change to Egypt's dominance over the river, Cairo has consistently dug its heels in and refused to approve anything that might lead to relinquishing its

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lion's share. Abdullah Al-Ashaal, an international law professor at the American University in Cairo and former diplomat, told MEMO: "The legal standing of Egypt is fair and the colonial treaties are binding according to Vienna Convention on the state succession in respect of treaties in 1983."

Despite this, in April 2011 amidst the upheaval of the revolution in Egypt, three months after former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stood down, Ethiopia announced they were building a dam. Mubarak's ouster and the coup which toppled Mohamed Morsi ushered in a new era of instability in Egypt, leaving their leaders struggling to maintain order at home. The theory goes that whilst Cairo's administration turned inwards to maintain order, Ethiopia took advantage and pressed ahead with their new project.

Dr Merahi Taddele Maru, an international consultant on African Union (AU) affairs, told MEMO: "The 'acquired right' or 'historical right' that Egypt claims to enjoy from the 1929 and 1959 treaties were signed excluding Ethiopia and the other countries that were under colonial rule. As an agreement between Egypt and Sudan, it is not binding on the remaining eight riparian countries. For the upstream riparian countries, no country has more right to the Nile water than the other."

"Egypt needs to get out from the prison of primordial-like position of monopolistic 'historic rights' on the Nile River with total disregard to, and exclusion of, the other riparian as if they do not exist."

News reports on the issue focus largely on Egypt and what the dam will cost them water wise - farmers will lose their livelihoods, they say, the country will have less water and the electricity supply will be affected. It is said that Egypt's population will double to 150 million by 2050 so the impact of loss of water will increase as the years roll by. Egypt is even considering taking the issue to the United Nations and the African Union.

According to Jennifer Veilleux, a PhD candidate at Oregon State

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University who has done field work on the soon to be displaced mostly Gumuz ethnic minority communities and research on and at the dam itself, statistics on the loss of water in Egypt have been inflated by the media and are not helping how the project is being received by Egyptians, Ethiopians, or anyone in between.

Whilst the story of poor Egyptian farmers and what they stand to lose from the project is often reported, Egypt is actually a major exporter of cotton, which uses huge amounts of water.

“There is a perception being perpetuated in the media that this dam means a major change to water availability in Egypt. My issue is that Egyptians keep talking about the small-scale farmer as their reason to oppose the dam. Nubian families are still making claims on unpaid compensation at the Aswan dam. My suspicion is that it is less about the common farmer and more about the overall GDP of Egypt - that Egypt needs the Nile waters for big commercial farming efforts.”

Catherine Pfeifer, a former appointee at the International Water Management Institute who has worked on the Nile Challenge programme in Ethiopia, told MEMO that whilst the filling of the dam may affect Egypt as during this period there will be a lower flow impact downstream, the effects on the country will be minimal in the long-term.

The dam will be used for electricity, which means the same amount of water will continue to flow, and not for large-scale irrigation which would ultimately mean less water for Egypt. “It’s water and you need to be fair somehow; I think the solution as it is now is fair. It can’t be that Ethiopia takes it all because there are people far downstream that need water,” says Pfeifer. “The only thing Egypt should be worried about is how Ethiopia is going to build the dam, which speed and how much water per day.”

## **Sudan’s support for the project**

Sudanese Ambassador, Obeid Morawih, told MEMO that Sudan has supported the dam from the beginning and is trying to address the issues raised by the Egyptians. “For an unknown

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reason the Egyptians decided to stand in the middle after the three countries passed half the way. What Sudan will benefit from is mainly having lower price electricity, save money which goes to the thermal generation and of course the water flow will be more controlled.”

According to Khalid Hassaballah, a research PhD research fellow at the Water Science and Engineering Department at UNESCO, engineers do support the project in Sudan, but their backing goes hand in hand with a number of concerns. He points out that a number of experts believe the dam won't produce as much power as is claimed, a fact that could be countered by downsizing the project. Asfaw Beyene, a Professor of Mechanical Engineering at San Diego State University, says that the dam is 300 per cent oversized.

Hassballah told MEMO that studies have been taken to work out the impact of dams in Ethiopia on hydropower generation and irrigation water demand. “Although the results show some negative impacts on hydropower and irrigation during the filling period, huge benefits are expected such as flood mitigation and flow regulation, which can be utilised to expand the irrigation area during the dry season. But of course this depends on how the GERD [Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam] will be operating.”

In fact, there are benefits for all three Nile states. Last summer an international panel of experts with representatives from Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia presented a report to the three governments which indicated that though the building of the dam does mean Egypt will suffer, it promises greater benefits.

Merahi says the panel of experts has estimated that though there will be a maximum six per cent reduction in the hydropower generation capacity of the High Aswan Dam in Egypt due to lower water level on Lake Nasser, this is “easily manageable” and “compared to the benefits of the dam, these concerns and side effects of the dam are negligible.”



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The Nile is a seasonal river in that Ethiopia has three months of rainfall and nine months of drought and the dam could reduce sediment downstream, bring with it a more controlled, constant flow of water to Sudan and Egypt and could act as a backup supply when the water level is low, and save millions on damage caused on riverbanks by over-flooding.

The higher the elevation for storing water, the less it will evaporate. The Ethiopian highlands are cooler than Egypt and so the dam ultimately has the potential for lower evaporation rates than Lake Nasser.

Veilleux explains that development in Ethiopia could “cause ripple effects in other countries” for example stabilise the electricity grid, boost industry, create more jobs and could ultimately reduce emigration from Ethiopia to Egypt. “This region has seen decades of destabilising, conflict crippling development efforts. Just the fact that Ethiopia has signed contracts with Djibouti, Kenya, Sudan, this means more regional diplomatic cooperation. As these countries develop, markets open up for regional trade, more money is invested in road, rail and electricity connectivity,” she says.

The dam is set to be completed in six years by the Italian Salini Construction Company. Not only can the government sell the electricity to other countries, but some say that by proximity, the communities living nearby the site of the dam will benefit from the extra 5,238 megawatts of electric power the dam will generate and ultimately have better access to health care, education, mobile phones and will be able to work longer hours, after dark.

Pfeifer told MEMO: “I just claim the right for Ethiopians who are living, especially in that area we are talking about, on less than one dollar a day to get the rights to get electricity and development, even if it costs a little bit for Egypt.

“Ethiopians are so poor and we just keep them poor because of the wealth of Egypt? The impact on Egypt in the long term is minimal, and the Ethiopian government has no bad intentions. So I

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don't understand why Egypt's making such a fuss out of it."

## **The human impact of the dam**

Still, based on his experience with the Merowe dam Askouri is not entirely convinced that the government is looking out for the riverian communities. "Many people talk about the water, there's no talk about the people. All they concentrate on is the water amount, not on the local community," he says.

Whilst he is not against the building of the dam entirely, particularly given the famines and food shortages Ethiopia has lived through in the last few decades, he strongly believes there should be more of a focus on what impact the dam will have on local communities. When it comes to Sudan, he believes the Sudanese government has no intention of supplying rural communities with electricity.

"There's no intention, within the policy maker in the Sudanese government, to provide those communities with electricity," he says. "The whole issue of the building of dams on the Nile, like in north Sudan or Egypt, or on the Blue Nile, the main tributary of the White or Blue Nile, has been a failure. Not in anything in that project have the concerns or interests of the local community been taken into account. The communities have been kicked out of their land, they have left, they have been isolated in the resettlement projects in the desert or in remote areas and after that they've been ignored by the government."

The solution, says Askouri, is for the three countries to sit together and talk about the issues. "There's no other way out of this despite the complaining and protests from Egypt."

## **Looking forward**

The challenge facing Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia is how to manage the diminishing waters of the Nile, something that has, over the years, been heavily influenced by history, politics and economics. But the three states are tied together by geography and so compelled to find a solution. In the long term the Nile must remain a source of co-operation, rather than conflict, not least because all the countries are heavily dependent on aid from outside their borders.

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As Aaron Wolf, professor of Geography at Oregon State University, points out historically there has only been one global conflict directly about water, which took place 4,000 years ago. In terms of finding a diplomatic solution perhaps the AU will have to take the lead because left to their own devices Egypt and Ethiopia are unlikely to resolve this. But with a government in Cairo that is suspended from the AU that path seems blocked; meanwhile, the dam continues to make waves in Egypt.

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