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Is it one Nile? Civic engagement and hydropolitics in the Eastern Nile Basin: the case of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia

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Summary

Nile politics has evolved around interstate relations and been analysed through the lens of cooperation and conflict. However, Nile politics is characterized by a complexity of variables including colonial policies, national development plans, the legitimacy of the river's treaties, in addition to intergovernmental arrangements. These dynamics demonstrate that the nation state and its institutions are central actors in Nile politics, while civil society has been left behind. Contrary to this strand of Nile analysis, this research investigates civil society engagement in Eastern Nile politics.

The centrality of the Nile for its people's cultures and livelihoods as well as for state development has supported civil society engagement through several transnational actions. In the first decade of the 2000s, civil society participation in global platforms on water, environment and sustainability has been facilitated by international organisations and by donor agencies. The Nile Basin Discourse (NBD) was established in 2003 to be the first basin-wide civil society organisation representing all riparian countries. In addition to this, scientists and think tanks are significant actors designing the river development policies and who collaborate with civil society organisations. Moreover, anti-dam movements, youth initiatives and diaspora groups are active in the framework of Nile politics. Although the reality of Nile politics indicates arising engagement of civil society, Nile literature emphasizes the analysis of historical relations, geopolitical interactions, legal and organisational arrangements and finally, a micro analysis of water development projects in the Nile Basin. Therefore, this research aims to integrate the analysis of civil society engagement in the produced knowledge about the Nile.

To understand civic engagement, the main research question driving the analysis in this dissertation is what determines civic engagement in transboundary hydropolitics and why it has been muted in the Eastern Nile Basin. Answering these questions is by investigating 1) the geopolitical circumstances which empowered and contributed to the rise of national and regional civic activism in Eastern Nile politics; 2) the magnitudes and patterns of civic engagement in

Eastern Nile politics; 3) the way in which Eastern Nile national civil society engagement developed into relations immersed in transnational civic engagement; and 4) the parameters of civic engagement in Eastern Nile politics.

In theoretical terms, the research studies civic engagement in Eastern Nile politics from a relational perspective of international relations that refutes a dualist analysis of cooperation or conflict to describe interstate behaviour. The relational perspective allows us to consider the engagement of different actors and actual political dynamics among the riparian countries. Conventional international relations theories (notably approaches based on realism and liberalism) articulate a cooperation impetus (or impediments) to mitigate environmental challenges; however, the very principle of national interest can impede sustainable international cooperation. By comparison, relational thinking in international relations is based on the complexity of interactions (i.e. water scarcity, development strategies, ecological threats, historical treaties and regional institutions) which can better interpret the context of civic engagement.

The network approach is an analytical framework compatible with the relational perspective because it allows scrutinizing interactions between different types of actors that can have multi-layered connections. Additionally, through the network scope, the engaged actors' power is revealed in creating networks, regulating interactions inside the network, or in making connections between global and national networks. To operationalize the networked relations among civil society actors, the state and donors in the Eastern Nile Basin, this research applies social network analysis (SNA) as an explanatory mechanism to reveal the position of civil society and its relationships regionally and globally. The SNA is composed by three basic elements: 1) nodes that represent actors, either as an individual or collective entity; 2) ties which represent relations among nodes that can be tangible (e.g. funds) and intangible (e.g. norms and information); and 3) the structure which represents the pattern of interactions and reflects the power of actors according to their positions and connections within the network.

The fieldwork conducted for this dissertation took place in countries of the Eastern Nile Basin (Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia) in addition to Uganda, where the headquarters of the Nile Basin Discourse and the Nile Basin Initiative are located. The sample of interviews to be held with

relevant actors was generated by applying the ‘snowball technique’, because there is no pre-prepared list of civil society actors in the Eastern Nile Basin available. The majority of interviews were carried out in two phases in the course of 2017 and 2018. In addition, resolutions, statements and newsletters that were released by civil society organisations and initiatives were included into the analysis.

The network map of civic engagement in the Eastern Nile Basin shows that civil society, research centres, governments, donors and intergovernmental organisations are entangled. On the international level, the World Bank, donor agencies and think tanks have financial and technical capabilities available to convey norms of participatory development and multistakeholder governance which in fact endorse interaction with civil society actors. Additionally, diaspora groups provide funds, knowledge and political support (and possibly opposition against their respective communities or political regimes regarding water projects and policies). Regionally, the Nile Basin Discourse plays an intermediate role between civil society in the riparian countries and the Nile Basin Initiative which represents governments. Furthermore, Eastern Nile politics has endorsed engagement of public diplomacy delegations and youth-based initiatives (besides the activities of African and Arab think tanks). These civil society actors have established networked activities aiming to participate in Nile development and cooperation.

The transnational interactions (ties) among civil society actors can take different forms. They can be built on organisational relations when the national civil society organisation represents a regional organisation (e.g. the relation between the Nile Basin Discourse and its representatives in the riparian countries). The prevailing form in the Eastern Nile Basin, however, is a partnership where civil society actors conduct joint projects or programs. Furthermore, philanthropy and volunteerism are more visible in ties among diaspora groups, ethnic-based activism and youth initiatives. The interactions across multiple spaces have significantly developed around four trajectories: 1) knowledge exchange and technology; 2) building technical capacity for communities and organisations; 3) providing water services; and 4) advocacy activities that may include awareness campaigns or resistance to water projects.

The research's main findings are that the network of the Eastern Nile Basin indicates a cluster structure, since civil society actors tend to operate within small groups. Additionally, many of the conducted activities have been in a project or program format; thus, the strength of ties within the network is generally weak and unsteady. The influence of the global discourse on the necessity to involve civil society in water governance has been a significant driver behind transnational civic engagement in the Eastern Nile Basin. Nevertheless, national determinants and dynamics of regional relations between the riparian countries have contributed to shaping the narrative of civic engagement on contested issues. As a consequence of this, most civil society activities have evolved around non-political development approaches and have been marginalized in political negotiations over contested issues focused on the Nile (i.e. water shares and dam construction). Moreover, civil society activism in the Eastern Nile Basin has challenged the grand notion of collectiveness in governing transboundary rivers and the 'One Nile' slogan. In reality, civil society actors have been creating or joining networks driven by their hydraulic location within the Basin (e.g. downstream or upstream), interests (e.g. representing youth or ethnic group concerns) and benefits (e.g. receiving funds to implement water activities). But networks of civil society actors can be a way to further foster transnational activities and patterns of collaboration in water politics, also in the framework of the Eastern Nile Basin.