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

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Chapter Two

Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter elucidates the context and process involved in conducting this research, which led to the writing of this thesis between 2017 and 2020. The first section explains how civil society was identified in this research, considering the liberal and African framing of the role of civil society in international relations. The first section is followed by illustrating the type of collected data and the process of aggregating it. It then goes on to analysing the data, with social network analysis (SNA) being applied. This section explains how it operationalized the mapping of the spectrum of engaged civil society actors in the Eastern Nile Basin and the attributes of constructed relationships in the network. The last two sections discuss the limitations of this research and the reflexive encounters as well as positionality in conducting this research.

2.2 Research rationale: civil society boundaries

This study encountered the international relations discipline by exploring civil society actors in the Eastern Nile Basin. During the fieldwork of this research, the boundaries of civil society and the definition of liberal analysis were revealed. On the other hand, the classical binary strands of international relations, as cooperation or conflict, were challenged. Therefore, the rationale of this research was restructured to consider several forms of civic engagement and transboundary relations, as have been practised in the Eastern Nile Basin.

2.2.1 Two realms of civil society

State-society relations in Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia have obviously been reconfigured as a result of the revolutionary waves and wide uprisings (Egypt in 2011, Ethiopia in 2015 and Sudan in

2018). Therefore, people's engagement in the public sphere has been recognized by researchers and policy analysts.

Civic engagement is arranged in various forms that can be theoretically interpreted through civil society organisations and social movement disciplines. Principally, these theories are derived from a normative premise that the pursuit of association and collective action is to influence the public sphere for the betterment of society.

Individuals associate into groups that reflect their common understanding to discuss their position regarding a public issue and their way of dealing with it. Castells (2008) defines the public sphere as

> 'An essential component of sociopolitical organisation because it is the space where people come together as citizens and articulate their autonomous views to influence the political institutions of society'. (Castells, 2008:78)

The prospective influence of engagement in the public sphere is to work towards creating a better society. Edwards (2009) observed that the practices of civil society activists are guided by a normative image of civil society as a space where liberal and democratic norms of freedom of expression and tolerance are aspirational endeavours and with equality to access and by circulating information public consensus can be built. In other words, the liberal perspective assumes the associations (NGOs) are based on norms and voluntary will of citizens and through associations citizens can refine their interests and demands and then channel them outside their space so they will be able to account for state polices. Complementary, these associations are the tools with which to empower citizens because they can offer solutions to decision makers (Lang, 2012).

In the globalization era, this image of a good civil society has transformed to the international level and the purpose of global civil society is to create a global consensus about values of human rights, peace and cooperation, which supposedly articulate the governance of international relations. Besides physical public spaces, communication tools (via the internet) constitute the spaces of

discussion and this is where participants take a collective stand regarding public issues globally (Edwards, 2009; Castells, 2008).

However, there is no consensus on what is good or what the features of these norms and values are, and therefore the public sphere is contested.

In the view of Castells (2008), the public sphere is where the state, civil society and citizens interact according to democratic principles and the distortion of these interactions leads to change. However, the fact is that these conditions are not optimal, as presumed. The state conditions impede civic engagement or purposefully transform it for the regime's interests. Furthermore, civil society activists themselves compete in approaching and framing the public issue. What is more, the communication tools that enable discussions around a public issue could be discriminated so that a public issue could be framed in accordance with the private interests of the associated group. Moreover, the engagement of marginalized or subaltern groups could be contested (Edwards, 2009; Lang, 2012). In addition to state conditions, civic associations could circumscribe their activities. For instance, if the public issue is sensitive politically or socially, civic associations could decide to keep their distance by focusing on service delivery activities and avoiding to engage in public discussion of this public issue (Lang, 2012).

In the African context, the liberal vision of the public sphere and the role of civil society in securing democratic norms emanated from African politics under the waves of employing neoliberal policies in the market and democratization thrust in the 1980s and 1990s. However, Africanist scholars (Shivji, 2007; Hassan, 2009; Ellis and Van Kessel, 2009) refuted this take on an interpretation of civil society. They argue that the people's engagement in the public sphere in the African nations was before the 1980s, unlike what is documented in the literature. Many forms of associations and collective actions were the engine with which to fight the colonial powers and they were a manifestation of civic engagement, but this engagement in the public sphere was framed as national liberation movements.

Another refutation to the liberal revelation of civil engagement in Africa concerns ethnically and religion-based associations; a dimension that cannot be excluded from the delineation of civil

society in Africa, i.e. these associations play a significant role in shaping the politics. Many studies that have discussed civil society in Egypt and Sudan make forays into religious activism (Ibrahim, 1998; Ali, 2010; Tadros, 2011; Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, 1999).

To entangle the liberal perspective and the African deliberation of civil society, Ekeh (1975:92) amply demonstrated the co-existence of the two realms of civil society in the African context. The first realm is the civic public which was artificially created after the building of state. This civic public is based on tangible and material interests between the civic associations and the state. The second realm is the primordial public where there is no difference between private and public spaces and it is based on volunteerism and a sense of belonging. Accordingly, in Nile politics, which is one of the public sphere issues, the two publics are engaged under different mandates and forms.

The civil society organisations, i.e. the civil public realm, has been founded to be a third sector between the state and market. It is here that the idea of pursuing a good society is espoused; nevertheless, this discourse of third sector contributes to declining the political dimension of civil society (Fowler and Biekart, 2011). In this research, although the data panel involves organisations that provide water as a public service and advocate for universal values such as 'water for all' or 'integrated water resources management', political contestation in the Eastern Nile Basin has been reflected in their methods of engagement and collaboration with other actors in the Nile Basin.

Additionally, the involvement of scientists, researchers and think tanks are significant in the Nile politics and their connections with the state institutions are a profound feature. This visibility of scientists is back to the role of engineers and bureaucrats (hydrocracies) to regulate water resources for maximizing economic benefits and to supervise the construction of water projects because they are high cost and labour intensive works (Molle et al., 2009). On the other side, the CSOs collaborate with scientists and researchers to provide them with knowledge and technology for mitigating water challenges. CSOs then formulate their activities according to these scientific materials. Therefore, this research includes research centres to form part of civil society actors.

The realm of the primordial public is not separated from the Nile politics, mainly because water is a basic need and a fundamental input for agriculture activities. In the fieldwork, I found examples of ethnic-based mobilization and associations such as the anti-dam movement in Sudan which were established by displaced Nubians or the case of water users' associations (WUAs) which are based on constituencies.

Under globalization conditions, these two publics are not mutually exclusive, e.g. the diaspora associations are transnational organisations. They transcend the narrow ethnic private sphere to the civic global sphere when diaspora groups establish legal entities to operate their knowledge and financial support to their local ethnic communities (Ellis and Van Kessel, 2009). And in Nile politics, diaspora groups play a significant role.

Given the entangled two publics, the notion of civic engagement encompasses a variety of activities that come together in Nile affairs. Some studies (Berger, 2009; Ekman and Amnå, 2012) argue that civic engagement is a fuzzy term because it includes various actions such as small individual actions (e.g. paying attention to a public issue), community activity (e.g. voluntary work) and political actions (e.g. voting and political advocacy).

Nevertheless, in this research, the width of the civic engagement notion was helpful to explore the objectives and dimensions of actions by civil society in the Eastern Nile Basin, given the fact that the topic of civil society's role in the Nile, as a transboundary resource, has been overlooked in analysing Nile politics. Thus, investigating this topic with the broad lens of civic engagement allowed me to deliberate the diversity of civil society actions. However, as will be demonstrated in chapter six, civic engagement in the Eastern Nile Basin has been narrowed down into four significant trajectories that describe different actions in Nile politics.

On this spectrum of civic engagement in the public sphere (i.e. the issue of Nile politics), the network approach enables one to allocate different forms of civic engagement in relation to the global arena and the state.

2.2.2 Transnational civic engagement

The debates around the role of civil society in international relations posit the normative reason for civic engagement as the mitigation of global challenges. As mentioned before, civil society is a good actor that drives cooperation and positive change. Different conditions have culminated in the influential role of civil society in the international arena. The first condition was the stability of the international system, whereas universal rules and norms have been espoused by international actors. Another prerequisite was the willingness of the state to give legitimacy to civil society to assist it in providing public goods and services. Furthermore, information and technology facilities have enabled civil society to be highly responsive to global problems and to take collective action with low transaction costs. Also, the uncertainty of global challenges concedes the ability of civil society in providing information and technical assistance to face challenges (Josselin and Wallace, 2001; Halliday, 2001; Florini, 2004).

I adopted this normative vision of civil society in the international arena at the beginning of framing this research because it coincided with the atmosphere of the Egyptian revolution when civil society was empowered. I participated in a workshop in 2013, organised by the Nile Project, involving a group of researchers, artists and practitioners from the Nile Basin countries and from other countries who were interested in the Nile issue. The purpose of the workshop was to create a collaborative space to exchange visions about our civic engagement which could contribute to civic cooperation among the Nile peoples. This workshop and the other activities later organised by civil society organisations or initiatives had this normative vision of cooperation in the Nile mainly at the time of political contestation due to the CFA and the GERD. Hence both the international relations theories and practices of civil society shaped my former assumption that civic engagement in Nile politics have the potential to bring cooperation.

However, the fieldwork revealed that the various civil society organisations and activists have approached Nile politics differently and have formulated distinct meanings of the social reality of the Nile in the context of political contestation and cooperation. As a result, I have reconfigured my normative assumption of the role of civil society in Nile politics. As will be demonstrated in the next chapters, civil society engagement is diverse and their interactions differ in substance,

density and continuity in relation to national and international contexts. Consequently, civil society activists and practitioners have different positions about Nile cooperation and how to attain it.

After the fieldwork had been completed I restructured my theoretical framework to amplify the theoretical foundation of the relational perspective of international relations; where actors are 'mutually dependent, not autonomous' and the network relations involve cooperation and conflict performances (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009:562).

2.3 Methods of data collection and analysis

This research relied on both primary and secondary data resources and it applied a snowball sampling method to recognize the civil society engaged in Eastern Nile politics. Interviews were the main data collection tool. The data generated and collected were complemented by social network analysis (SNA) and the Gephi computing program to depict the maps of interactions. Furthermore, a qualitative analysis of documents was applied to understand the perceptions of civil society activists and practitioners in Eastern Nile politics.

2.3.1 Data collection

The data for this research was collected between 2017 and 2020. The ongoing data collection while writing the manuscript was because of the continuous civic actions responding to the political contestation between Egypt and Ethiopia over the GERD. The types of data included in this research are primary and secondary data, as described below.

Primary data

Because of the lack of documentation of civic activism in the Nile Basin, interviews were the main tool through which to understand the position and relations of civil society activists and practitioners in Eastern Nile politics. The process of conducting interviews will be discussed in the following section.

Secondary data

It includes the resolutions and statements that were released by civil society organisations and initiatives as well as by the regional Nile organisations. Also, newsletters, brochures and organisations' reports were the common medium of documenting civic activism. Furthermore, civil society activists depend heavily on non-conventional communication tools and therefore news feeds on websites and social media pages were also consulted in conducting this research.

Additionally, several studies have been conducted on Nile politics and consequently this research reviewed many books and journal articles that have discussed political interactions in the Nile Basin. These studies were written in English and Arabic. Alongside this, I attempted to include the voice and arguments of scholars from the Eastern Nile Basin countries alongside those of international researchers. On the other side, this research used the analytical reports and papers produced by international think tanks in the water governance field.

2.3.2 Fieldwork process

The sample of interviews was generated through applying the snowball technique because there was no prepared list of civil society actors in the Eastern Nile Basin[6] that I could depend on to collect my data or to send a questionnaire asking actors to define ties in the networks, as some studies which have applied SNA were able to do (Luzi, 2007, Borg, Toikka and Primmer, 2015, Prell et al., 2008).

Conferences and workshops were convenient occasions from which to apply the snowball technique and to build a list of interviewees. The same technique was applied during field visits to the cities of Cairo, Entebbe, Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar and Khartoum. The majority of interviews were carried out in two phases in 2017 and 2018.

The first phase of the fieldwork departed from participating in two regional conferences and then exploring the Egyptian case study. It began in late September 2017 and extended to January 2018.

[6] The NBD list are the only list but not a complete and on local level; therefore, I followed the snowball strategy

The process was started at the 5th Nile Development Forum held in October 2017 and organised by the Nile Basin Initiative in Kigali. Aside from the scientific presentations and discussions in this forum, I was introduced to the water community/network in the Nile and I observed political dynamics, especially since the majority of attendees were ministers, officials and technocrats. I was thus able to start making connections and collect the first group of actors for interviewing.

I then attended a workshop about water diplomacy. This took place in Alexandria and was organised by the Swedish Institute in Alexandria, the University of Twente and Fanack. The workshop included academic sessions and a virtual game on the possibility of cooperation among different players in the Nile Basin. The workshop was an opportunity to meet specialized scholars on water governance and I got their insights about interactions in the Nile Basin.

Then, in November 2017, I participated in the first NBD Summit (Integration and inclusion: new ideas for collaboration in River Basins) that was held in Entebbe. This summit was an active start to collect data and conduct interviews because the attendees were representatives of civil society from the Nile. Additionally, I observed the dynamics of national forums of the NBD on the regional level. After this summit, I spent a week in Entebbe to visit the headquarters of NBI and NBD and to conduct interviews with the officials of these two organisations. Additionally, I collected documents that cover the position of civil society in their scope of work from the NBI library.

Subsequently, in Cairo, I broadened my scope and focussed not only on regional actors or transnational actors, because I had learned from the NBD summit that the majority of organisations build their mandate and scope of activities on a local level to interact on grassroots level or with the community they represent. However, the regional activity can take place when a regional or an international organisation intervenes and organises a multilateral venue for interactions across the Nile. Therefore, I conducted interviews with various actors (entities) of which water is part of their scope and who are involved in transnational connections.

The second phase in 2018 started by attending the Nile Day celebration in Addis Ababa on the 22nd of February. This annual celebration is when the governmental entities represented by the national ministries of water resources and the NBI joined with civil society organisations to reveal

the cooperation in the Nile Basin. Here I observed the interactions and the narratives about cooperation as explained by governmental officials. Importantly, I scheduled interviews with Ethiopian actors who engage in Nile politics and I visited the ENTRO office, conducted interviews there and checked the documents in its library.

In April, I went to Khartoum and took part in a workshop (Media, Science and Transboundary Cooperation in the Nile Basin) at Khartoum University. Similarly, I got contacts of civil society activists who attended this workshop besides a list of recommended names I had compiled before traveling.

I subsequently returned to Ethiopia in October 2018 to visit the Bahir Dar region where the Blue Nile originates and to contact researchers in the Blue Nile Institute at Bahir Dar University and activists in the campaign of Save Lake Tana. However, before that, I participated in the 20th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies at Mekelle University where I met a diverse group of researchers who study the Nile from different perspectives. These contacts provided me with the contact details of possible informants in Bahir Dar.

This second phase of fieldwork was concluded by attending the first Cairo Water Week in October 2018, where I met some officials in the Egyptian Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation (MWRI) and I figured out how the ministry framed its relations with the WUAs as a relation with civil society.

As a result of following the snowball technique, 60 interviews were conducted with several actors including registered civil society organisations, civil society initiatives, national governmental organisations, intergovernmental organisations, donor agencies and think tanks besides consultants and specialized researchers (see annex 2). These different interviewed actors and their organisations/initiatives in addition to their interactions with other actors constituted the base to build the network analysis.

2.3.3 Interviews process

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, focusing on the three major elements of network analysis (Wasserman and Faust, 1994): 1) the node (characteristics of actors); 2) the ties (all ties with peers, regional, international actors) and 3) the structure of the network (evaluation of the network structure).

The semi-structured interviews are typically a 'conversation and informal in tone'; thus the questions are aimed at guiding the dialogue because the endeavour is to explore the meaning of social reality as perceived by the respondents. On the other side, because of the flexibility in this type of interview, the setting of the interview cannot be 'neutral' since it takes time to break down the barriers with the interviewee (Longhurst, 2010:105, 110). In the field, I conducted the interviews according to the availability of interviewees and sometimes in café settings after their working hours. Also, some interviews included interventions from other people besides the main interviewee, either because they had a meeting with the respondent or they were asked by the interviewee to share their insights. Nevertheless, two interviews were conducted as a group discussion when the main respondents invited the heads of committees in the initiative to explain their activities. On the other hand, I met other PhD researchers in the field who approached the same interviewees and therefore, we co-organised to interview some respondents together as shown in the interview list (see annex 1). Furthermore, some interviewees (often the officials) asked for their interviews to remain short.

Some respondents allowed me to record the interviews without reservations; while others consented to allow me to record upon my request so that I could focus on the content of their responses to my questions. Some officials in Ethiopia and Egypt refused to allow recordings of the deliberations because of their governmental positions and the sensitivity of the GERD issue in Nile politics. I worked to transcribe these interviews after returning from the field. Two interviews were conducted via phone, which meant that I had to take notes during the call and attempted to transcribe afterwards. Additionally, one interview was completed through email correspondence. Accordingly, my data included recorded audio and word format documents.

Language of interviews

The practiced languages were both English and Arabic with the latter being the preferable language for communication in Sudan and Egypt. However, the interviews with hydraulic researchers were almost exclusively conducted in English because they used technical terminology to describe their understanding to the Nile politics. Moreover, English terms such as raising awareness, advocacy, knowledge sharing and sustainability were widely used by interviewees who represented transnational organisations. In contrast, the philanthropy organisations used the same terms in their activities but they narrated these in Arabic. Such a difference in language reflected the strength of connections with global actors or grassroots organisations.

Nevertheless, the English language was a barrier in Ethiopia; I could not approach cases from community-based organisations similar to what I did in Egypt and Sudan. Hence, the interviews were limited to actors who could communicate in English. Therefore, the list of Ethiopian respondents included diaspora, researchers and officials.

Transcription

The 60 interviews were collected, with the duration of each interview ranging from 20 minutes to 2 hours. I used timestamps as a technique to transcript the recorded interviews that were originally operationalized via computer software programs. An advantage of this technique is that it is not time-consuming, noting that a verbal transcription of one hour takes multiple hours to turn into text (Bokhove and Downey, 2018).

To timestamp the recorded interview, it was broken down into intervals and labelled and dated with the topics or key ideas covered in each interval. Timestamping was not a heavyweight task because there were guiding questions in the interviews. Being the interviewer and transcriber made it easier for me to draft the transcribed recording and identify the main themes raised by the interviewees. However, I did the timestamp manually because not all interviews were conducted in English, as some of them were in Arabic, which is not supported by the transcription software programs.

Moreover, I did a complete transcription for some parts of interviews to include in analysis as quotations. I translated the quotations that were extracted from the interviews conducted in Arabic. For the interviews that were in English, the quotations were edited (grammar and punctuation) to enhance the readability without changing the meaning.

2.3.4 Data analysis

Qualitative analysis (notably the interviews) was the main strategy used to capture the perceptions of civil society on the Nile River politics and how they have engaged with it. Additionally, I used social network analysis (SNA) as a quantitative technique to delineate the position of civil society among the conventional actors (state apparatus) and the relationships.

2.3.4.1 Social Network Analysis

In this research, social network analysis (SNA) was applied as an explanatory mechanism to reveal the position of civil society and its relationships across the Eastern Nile Basin. SNA explains the interdependent interactions and relational ties among the societal actors and the outcome of these myriad relations (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). The elements of SNA are:

- Nodes: these are the actors in the network. Nodes may represent an individual or collective entity such as a department or an organisation or a state (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). However, the position of the node is more important than its characteristics. For example; there is a broker node that is located in the centre of the network and it has ties with all other nodes; accordingly, it is a critical node in the network because it is able to diffuse information and resources to attract other nodes for collective actions (Prell et al., 2009). The node's capabilities are used to enhance its position in the network, e.g., it can move from the periphery to the centre of the network (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009).
- Ties: they are the relations among nodes that carry the components of relations, either tangible components such as goods or intangible components like norms and information (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009). Scholars give classifications of ties in a network according to

different criteria. For example, 1) The degree of strength of a tie is either strong or weak according to the frequency of interactions and interchanges between the nodes (Prell et al., 2009); 2) The nature of interactions that includes cooperative/positive ties or competitive/negative ties (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009); 3) The similarity and difference of interactions between two nodes, i.e. if it is symmetric or asymmetric (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009); and 4) The visibility of interactions; it may be a direct interaction due to agreements or an indirect interaction because the tie is based on intangible causes (e.g. sharing norms and identity) (Prell et al., 2009).

- Structure: it is the result of ties among nodes that represents the frame of interactions which determines the behaviour of nodes. The structure of the network can be described according to:
  - The centrality of the node that defines the movement of resources and information in the network. Additionally; it reflects the position of powerful nodes in the network. There are three descriptions of the centrality of a node: 1) degree centrality is about the ties between the node and all other nodes in the network. It describes whether all nodes in the network are connected or scattered; 2) closeness centrality measures the length of a tie between nodes and shows the time consumed to channel the components of a relation; 3) betweenness centrality indicates the shortest ties that a node has with other nodes inside the network. This position reflects the significance of the node inside the network (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009).
  - The degree of cohesiveness of the internal ties that form subgroups (clique) in the network. The hypothesis here is that the more cohesive and similar the structure of the subgroup, the more possible the node changes its behaviour to be similar to others in the subgroup (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009).

2.3.4.2 Operationalizing the SNA framework

To build up the network, I created a matrix of actors and ties mentioned in the interviews as well as in the websites and documents concerning the civil society entities I had reached. The majority of the represented nodes are affiliated to the civic realm of civil society.

I listed all actors in an excel sheet (see annex 3) and cleaned the list of all repeating names of actors, taking into consideration the reality that each civil society actor is an ego in the self-network with connections expanded around it.

To organise the variety of actors (nodes), I gave them two attributes: 1) the country/scale of affiliation; and 2) the type of entity.

Regarding the country/scale attribute, I labelled them as:

- Entities based in the countries of the subject (Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia);
- Regionally based entities that are located in the African and Arab regions;
- Global entities that operate internationally; and
- Entities with global branches, labelled by the country of its headquarters.

For the type of entities, I classified these into:

- governmental organisations (referring to the state apparatus besides the intergovernmental organisations);
- civil society (includes the two realms of civil society, both structured organisations or initiatives/movements); and
- Research institutions (includes the think tanks and universities).

Regarding the ties, the different entities have overlapping linkages representing several practices of collaboration. In the sample of this research, it was rare to find a direct tie based on one component. For example, the organisational hierarchical relation between the NBD regional office and the national forums in the riparian countries implies reversed ties that carry back information, knowledge and position. Similarly, for the relationship between the aid agencies and local NGOs, the financial disbursements are exchanged by getting empirical experience from the grassroots level that strengthens the knowledge of the international aid agency.

However, for the sake of analysis and presenting the findings of the fieldwork, I analysed the ties according to two aspects: 1) the structure of relations; and 2) the components of interactions.

Structure of the relations: this shows if the relations are based on a structured arrangement or ad-hoc relations. I classified them into:

- Focal point/national office;
- Partnership; and
- Volunteering.

I then applied a simple scale (from 1 to 3) to these three types, reflecting the weight of relations by their stability in terms of constant relationships. The focal point represents the higher degree of stability of relations between the global/regional entity and its national/local office (scale 3). The partnership (scale 2) relies on the nature of the implemented programs or projects; some of the partnership ties exist for a long time and others represent ad-hoc collaboration. Volunteer-based relations received the lowest score (scale 1), because they represent fluid relations, occurring on a short-term basis.

The second aspect was driven by the perception of interviewed actors as to the substance of their connections with the other actors. I categorized the ties according to the main component of interactions into:

- Scientific/knowledge interactions (e.g. workshops, joint research projects);
- Capacity building (e.g. training activities);
- Service provision (e.g. water development projects); and
- Advocacy (e.g. awareness campaigns or anti-dam movements).

After adding the labels to the actors in the excel sheet, I used the Gephi software program (Bastian et al., 2009). This is an open-source program providing statistical calculations based on graph

theory[7], to depict the connections among the nodes and to visualise how they are (dis)connected. To present this overall picture of the network, Gephi software calculates the density of ties among actors as well as the centrality measures. For the map layout, I chose Gephi's Yifan Hu Proportional layout algorithm that posits and distributes the nodes in the graph, considering 'a better optimization of distances between nodes' (Cherven, 2015:76); therefore, the overlapping nodes are minimised and the outlier nodes are clearly visualised in the entire network

The produced maps of Gephi in this research will portray the nodes with the attributes and the weight of ties. Moreover, because of the overlapping linkages among actors, I set the graph type as undirected to show the reciprocity ties. Chapters five and six will depict the SNA maps based on the calculated measurements.

2.3.5 The rationale of four case studies

The SNA provides the whole map of actors' positions and connections across the Eastern Nile Basin. However, it is important to analyse how civil society actors have engaged in the Nile network; to understand their perceptions and narratives regarding their capabilities and positions as well as to investigate how they established their ties with different entities on national, regional and global scales (Stein and Jaspersen, 2019). Therefore, chapter seven presents four cases that approached Nile politics differently and depicts their ego-networks.

These cases were selected from the three countries (Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia) according to four criteria:

1) Two realms of civil society: primordial and civic based entities;
2) The degree of organisation: loosely structured in the initiation phase, incubated by another entity and established and legally registered organisation;

[7] Graph theory is part of mathematics and its main vocabularies of nodes (points) and ties (lines) constitute the foundation of social network analysis. Therefore, 'graphs have widely used in social network analysis as a means of formally representing social relations and quantifying important social structural properties' (Lacobucci, 1994:93).

3) The time of engagement in Nile politics: the involvement was correlated with the global thrust to environment governance or recently engaged or event-based involvement; and
4) The relevance of activities to the main trajectories of activism in the Eastern Nile Basin.

Table 2.1 The case studies: selection criteria

	Civil society realms		The degree of organisation			Time of engagement			Activities			
	Primordial	Civic	Structured	Incubated	Loose-structured	Early (2000s)	Recent	Event based	Knowledge interaction	Capacity building	Service provision	Advocacy
Eg-NBD (Egypt)		X	X			X			X	X		X
SYPW (Sudan)		X		X			X		X	X		X
Diaspora (Ethiopia)	X	X			X			X				X
NBCBN (Egypt)		X	X			X			X	X		

The four above-mentioned civil society cases have been used to illustrate these criteria (see table 2.1) in the geopolitics of the Eastern Nile. These are, per country:

- The Egyptian Nile Discourse Forum (Eg-NDF), the national focal point of the Nile Basin Discourse. It was involved at the beginning during the phase of establishing the NBD itself in 2003. Besides being a link between the national and regional levels, the organisation builds its activism on partnership with networks of donor agencies.
- The Sudanese Youth Parliament for Water (SYPW). This is a youth initiative that recently became formulated under a global notion of engaging youth in water decision making. As a youth-based entity, the founder and members are engaged as volunteers and not as professionals. The organisation is active in advocacy and capacity building.
- The third case from Ethiopia, where the Nile issue has been raised in the public sphere, is due to the GERD as a national project. Different ethnic diaspora groups have integrated the

GERD issue in their contestation with political regimes. Some groups advocate for it as a symbol of national unity while other groups mobilised against it due to unequal national development in Ethiopia.

- Besides these national-based cases, the fourth case is the Nile Basin Capacity Building Network (NBCBN), which is worth studying because it is the most formidable regional organisation established with the aim of enhancing knowledge exchange and fostering cooperation across the Nile. Moreover, this organisation has intensive interactions with a wide range of intergovernmental Nile organisations and other international water research centres.

2.3.6 Complementary qualitative analysis

Mathematical and computing analyses are heavily applied in many SNA studies despite the premise of SNA departing from an anthropological discipline to explore human interactions in domains of family, friendship and kinship (Marshall and Staeheli, 2015). Therefore, in this research, SNA was constituted by feeding its elements (nodes and ties) with qualitative data such as interviews and information derived by documents. The advantage of the qualitative approach is to explain ´social reality´ that differs from actor to actor according to self-perspective and context; hence, actions are dynamic and formulate the meaning of their realities (Hollstein, 2011:405).

However, the results of SNA that have calculated the centrality and degrees of relations are not satisfactory to understand power dynamics in the network. As Marshall and Staeheli (2015) demonstrated in their study on the network of youth civic engagement organisations and donor agencies about SNA limitations, it was found that 'it would be wrong to treat sets of relationships, and the greater field of relations comprised, as complete artifice' (Marshall and Staeheli, 2015:61). However, they have purported that SNA gives a sense of the relationships so that the researcher can dig deep and utilise other theories to analyse the pattern of the map. Akin to their argument, the SNA map enabled me to give an aerial view with which to depict where civil society is situated in relation to the conventional actors (the state and donors) in the Eastern Nile Basin. However, to explain the divergent positions of civil society actors and why some have close ties while others are outliers in the network, a deep analysis is required. Therefore, this research complements the

calculated numbers emerging from the SNA with international relations, civil society, and water governance arguments.

2.4 Research limitations

Investigating the role of civil society in Eastern Nile politics from the network approach entailed two main research limitations; one was driven from the topic of transnational civic activism and the second was about the Nile River and its hydraulic features and political meaning.

Regarding the topic-based limitation, the lack of prior studies on civil society engagement in the Eastern Nile Basin was a challenge. This was reflected in the process of data collection because there was no reference list of organisations that have acted in the Nile Basin. Importantly, there was no clear delineation of which civil society organisations has been engaged in the Nile. For instance, I found policymakers in the Nile regional organisations considered research centres and academic groups to form part of civil society. Because of this limitation, I defined the boundaries of civic society in this research by transboundary engagement, which could be driven by the actor's objectives, activities or relations with external actors.

Furthermore, practically in the fieldwork, the collected data was 'self-reported information' by the interviewed actors and their publications and websites which were generated during different periods. Furthermore, the interviewees could not possibly remember the names of all their partners across times; they mentioned the main or sustainable one or two partners in their network and asked me to consult their websites which regrettably had not been updated.

Relevant to the civil society scope, it was difficult to study the engagement of South Sudanese civil society in Nile politics although it does form part of the Eastern Nile Basin. Civil society is still being affected by political conflicts. The majority of CSOs engage in the activities of humanitarian relief, peacebuilding and refugee issues (Awany, 2020). Thus, Nile politics is not an enduring sphere for civil society engagement.

Nevertheless, I attempted to communicate with South Sudanese representatives during the Nile events. In the Nile Day celebration in Addis Ababa in 2018, I had an informal conversation with a researcher who is affiliated to the ministry of water resources. He affirmed that Nile politics is in the hand of the Ministry with assistance from a research institute, but CSOs are not a visible stakeholder in the Nile issue.

Moreover, I met with representatives of the South Sudan national discourse forum[8] during the NBD summit in November 2017. Regrettably, they fled out of the country due to the conflict, and they are based in Uganda. In the conversation with them, they mentioned that lack of funds is the main challenge to providing basic services; efforts that have been destroyed or not completed due to the conflict. Also, it is stated on the website of the NBD that:

> 'With only seven individuals as actual members, SSNDF [South Sudan Nile Discourse Forum] lacks the semblance of a civil society organisation. It will, therefore, need financial and technical support to recruit members and achieve the expected image or structure.' (NBD, 2020: para.2)

Therefore, the exclusion of South Sudan added another limitation to studying the role of civil society in the Eastern Nile Basin.

The second main limitation concerns the Nile as a hydraulic and political river. Hydraulically, the Eastern basin consists of four sub-basins across the borders of the three countries: Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt. Both Tekeze-Atbara and the Baro-Akobo-Sobat sub-basins run within Ethiopian and Sudanese borders[9], while the Blue Nile sub-basin comes from the Ethiopian Highlands and Lake Tana. These waters then converge with the White Nile in Khartoum forming the Main Nile sub-basin that runs through Sudan and Egypt (NBI, 2016). There are many development-led interactions that take place between the state, donor agencies and civil society around these sub-basins. However, the Nile is socially constructed according to how actors are engaged in its affairs.

[8] The South Sudan forum was established by Ambrose Lomini Pitia, who used to be a member in the Sudanese Environment Conservative Organization which represents the national forum of Sudan in NBD. On this see: NBD (2020).
[9] Part of Tekeze-Atbara watershed is located in Eritrea.

The interviewed actors described the Nile from the lens of their operations. For example, the Nile is a grid of irrigated canals for the organisations that support WUAs. On the other hand, for the inhabitants of Bahir Dar city in Ethiopia, the Nile is Lake Tana. Nevertheless, the Nile is factually a transboundary water resource in the vision of technocrats in the ministries of water resources, officials in the regional organisations and scientists in think tanks. Accordingly, the boundaries of the Eastern Nile network involve, in reality, several actors and multiple ties. As a result, the network could be redefined and reinterpreted if different civil society actors are investigated. This is a disadvantage of network analysis that there are no objective conditions of framing the network boundaries (Stein et al., 2011:1088).

On the other hand, the securitized meaning of the Nile has been highly contested because of the GERD. Though the dam has been an opportunity to uphold civic actions from different perspectives, it has been tackled as a highly secretive national issue and officials were not allowed to talk about or discuss it openly. During the fieldwork, the negotiations were stalled in November 2017, following by rounds of disagreements and not concluding the studies. As a result, I did not get responses from two officials in the Egyptian MWRI to emails and calls requesting the scheduling of an interview; and neither from an official in the Sudanese MIWR. Moreover, the representatives of both Ethiopian and Sudanese national discourse forums in the NBD summit in 2017 were reluctant to do interviews. Similarly, some scientists were reticent in the interviews and did not want to cite their opinion about the issue. Thus the names of interviewees were treated anonymously throughout this research.

2.5. Reflexivity and positionality

The core of Nile politics lies in the contestation between the downstream (Egypt) and upstream countries over water shares and the development of the river's resources. Being of Egyptian nationality and as a researcher investigating the Nile from a non-conventional discussion of its politics, raised reflexive thoughts as well as positionality concerns in the field.

The reflexive analysis intersects the coloniality/de-coloniality debates, not between the North and the South but rather between the downstream and the upstream countries. The political narrative of the upstream countries evolved around the colonial allegations in the Nile treaties that secured the river waters to Egypt. Furthermore, the contestation over CFA and GERD have unfolded the historical and social narratives where Egypt has a hegemonic position against Sudan and Ethiopia. During the fieldwork in Sudan and Ethiopia, some interviewees as well as ordinary citizens in daily interactions expressed their grievances about the Egyptian control over the Nile and its role in developing other Nile Basin countries.

On the other hand, the complicated historical/political relations between Sudan and Egypt were highlighted during the fieldwork. Many respondents framed their analysis of Nile hydropolitics in such a way that Egypt was a colonizer with Britain and both had comparable interests in securing the river flows to Egypt. Additionally, the grievance concerning the displacement of people in Wadi Halfa to construct the High Aswan Dam echoed in narrating the political relations between the two countries. These kinds of interviews interrogated my self-consciousness about my position as a researcher and Egyptian. The challenge was to establish a balance between my scholarly bias to de-colonized knowledge through integrating subaltern/less-powerful subjects in the analysis and on the other side my livelihood's dependency on the Nile water in Egypt.

The second reflexivity issue is related to the coloniality /de-coloniality debate which is driven by the literature on Nile politics. The prevalent arguments are not divergent from the classical international relations theories that are ascribed to Western/European thought. In their assumptions, the state is the central actor in the international arena and moreover, the interactions have been framed hierarchically according to power capabilities (Jones, 2006). Added to this is the nationalistic vision inherited in the nation-state from the colonial/imperial powers (Saurin, 2006). The literature of the Nile politics, as explained in the previous chapter, relies on investigating inter-state behaviours. Furthermore, the analysis of cooperation and conflict has evolved around assessing the power capabilities of each state. As a result, the scholarly argument has been polarized between Egypt's power 'hydro-hegemony' as opposed to the other riparian countries. This dominant argument implicitly reproduces the colonial understanding of international relations in the Nile Basin. Therefore, framing this research according to the relational perspective and

network approach was an attempt to de-colonize the scholarly debates in Nile politics by refuting the hierarchical relation's assumption between the riparian countries. Moreover, underlining the role of civil society in this research aimed to explore other actors beyond the centrality of the state, with particularly the African perspective on international relations highlighting how non-state actors developed transnational relations (Faleye, 2014).

Interweaving with reflexive thoughts about the de-coloniality debate, I contended with my position in the field as not a fully-insider, or outsider, researcher. Rather, my feelings and practices were akin to 'halfie-self' researcher or 'ambiguity' between being an insider and an outsider. As Subedi (2006) and Sherif (2001) point out concerning this betweenness, such a position is raised even though the researcher collects data in her/his home country. Furthermore, the affiliation to a Western university renders the researcher an outsider to the local community even though the researcher belongs to this community. So the researcher has different identities that could be situated according to the context of a conversation with informants.

My belonging to the Nubian ethnicity facilitated entering the field in Sudan and Ethiopia. The staff in offices (gatekeepers of officials), in addition to many of the interviewees, welcomed me because of my ethnic features similar to local people and I am not like the labelled Egyptians who are seen as White/Arab people. In other words, I was not perceived as a colonizer but instead was like an insider for these groups of interviewees.

However, my affiliation to a Western university interlocked with the coloniality debate since the West is a superior power in terms of quality of education and resources as well as refined knowledge in contrast to the universities in the South (Vanner, 2015:2). In this regard, I encountered two opposite positions in the fieldwork.

One respondent assumed that I adopted the Western vision of the absence of democracy in developing countries as the political regimes have challenged the role of civil society. The interviewee presumed this Western assessment would cause me to negate real activism by civil

society. In this situation, I had to clarify my position that my affiliation to a Western university did not intersect with my arguments about civic engagement in Nile politics.

The second encounter about being in Europe means I have extensive connections and I am able to connect CSOs in the Nile Basin with funding opportunities. Again this interviewee assumption underpinned the vision of the power of the West. This narrative of the financial and knowledge capabilities of the Western organisations has been entrenched in many examples of CSOs in the Nile Basin, as will be explained throughout this research.

Nevertheless, the affiliation to a Western university was a protective technique I used when I introduced myself to the officials. Being a Western and not an Egyptian affiliated researcher lessened the sensitivity of the Nile contestation, mainly when the negotiations were stalled. I played at the colonial assumptions of superiority of Western education and its objectivity and quality of produced knowledge. Some officials accepted the interview because they understood that conducting interviews is a requirement of the degree and therefore they agreed to help me. In fact, I used this technique with officials rather than with civil society respondents who welcomed me to interview them even though the interviews were requested on short notice.

In short, in conducting this research my interlocked circles of identity (middle class, Carian Egyptian and Nubian, in no order) contended with the scholarly debate of coloniality and de-coloniality in international relations theories and Nile politics.

2.6 Preliminary conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I explained the process of conducting this research. The boundaries and role of civil society had been reidentified to suit the practices of civil society in the Eastern Nile Basin and accordingly, civil society includes both primordial and civic activism. This study consequently explored the role of ethnic-based groups as well as NGOs in Nile politics. Moreover, the normative assumption of promoting cooperation in international relations has also been reviewed in this research.

The data collection and process were extensively built on a qualitative strand. The interviews were the primary resources besides analysing the secondary resources of the organisations' reports, newsletters and websites. Additionally, the relevant academic books and articles were reviewed. Then the Social Network Analysis (SNA) was the technical tool to map the position and relations of civil society actors regarding the state apparatus in the three countries of the subject.

Nevertheless, investigating civil society in the Eastern Nile Basin encountered limitations that emerged from the topic of transnational civic engagement and defining the network boundaries along the Eastern Nile Basin. Moreover, discussing Nile politics in the context of highly political contestation was another limitation in conducting the research. In view of Nile politics and civil society conditions, reflexive thoughts and positionality concerns were raised during the framing of this research and in view of conducting the fieldwork.