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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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Citation

Abazeed, A. R. Y. (2021, April 21). *Is it one Nile? Civic engagement and hydropolitics in the Eastern Nile Basin: the case of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3160751>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Issue Date: 2021-04-21

Chapter Eight

Synthesis, Conclusions and Future Research

ونيلاً ما نضب نبعو
The Nile, whose source is never depleted
على مر القرون منساب
He flows through the centuries
حبابو العشنا خير ائو
We welcome him; we've enjoyed his blessings
تدفق لا فتر لا شاب
He flows, never wearing out, never aging
-Sudanese song ⁵⁵

8.1 Synthesis

This research argues that civil society has a role to play in transnational engagement in the Eastern Nile Basin, despite the dominance of the interstate arguments in Nile politics. Since the establishment of the NBD in 2003, there has been constant civic engagement across the entire Nile Basin. Different civil society actors have evolved and become involved in various transnational activities in the Eastern Nile Basin.

The global discourse of the necessity of involving civil society in water governance as captured in water studies discussions has been a significant driver behind transnational civic engagement in the Eastern Nile Basin. Nevertheless, the national determinants and dynamics of regional relations between the riparian countries have contributed to shaping the narrative of civic engagement amidst contested issues. Therefore, the Nile River has been reconfigured across national, regional and global scales in civil society activities.

⁵⁵ Halat Baladi (My Beautiful Country) is a Sudanese song. The songwriter name is not validated; some resources refer to Mustafa ar-Rakkaabi. These phrases were translated by Hatim Eujayl (2020).

8.1.1 Global catalyst and national determinants

The majority of civil society cases in this research have demonstrated the influence of global discourse regarding the role of civil society as a bridge between the grassroots level and decision makers on one hand and as a distributor of water concepts and policies from the global level to the regional and national levels. Complementing this global framing of civic engagement, the patterns of financial and logistical support have contributed to the rising prominence of civil society's involvement in the field of water development.

The global doctrines of sustainability, development and protection of the environment have shaped the mission and strategies of different nationally based CSOs and this alignment with the global vision has contributed to them gaining a position in the Eastern Nile network. The cases of the Eg-NDF and the SYPW (chapter seven) have amplified this scalar configuration. In the same vein, the mainstream water ideas such as those articulated by the IWRM have been imposed from the global research centres such as the GWP and the IWMI on regional and national levels. Through their offices in the Nile Basin (chapter six), they diffuse certain concepts and policies of water governance. As a result, CSOs configure the Nile and its challenges according to these top-down global doctrines particularly based on the availability of respective funds.

The development endeavour to water governance has devalued the political role of civil society. The global actors, including donor agencies and global research centres, play the role of 'networking making'; therefore, they have defined the objective of the network according to their capabilities and priorities and maintained the power of the network by funding projects either in the whole basin or on national and local levels.

The relationship between the NBI and the NBD, as river basin organizations, is a manifestation of depoliticized development. As explained in chapters five and six, the objective of creating the NBD was to legitimize water development projects designed by the NBI. However, the technical process of engaging the NBD has been criticized by NDFs, underlining time shortages and limited discussion (see for example the case of the Eg-NDF in chapter seven). Evidently, the NBI has been

dealing with civil society as a project stakeholder rather than as citizens who can contend with the River's development policies. Therefore, the professional CSOs (e.g. the NBCBN) have the opportunity to interact with the NBI and ENTRO more than grassroots organisations do. The calibre and organizational capacity of CSOs have promoted their engagement in discussing the technical hydraulic data of designed projects.

However, although the NBD is the regional platform and its representatives participate in general forums, they do not constitute a critical mass that can influence decision makers on political issues such as water shares. As demonstrated in chapter seven, the NBD and national civil society actors have been excluded from the negotiations over CFA and the GERD. Instead, the NBD's role is confined to sharing information and plans of water development projects, as stated in its MoUs with the NBI and ENTRO, respectively (chapter six). Accordingly, the global discourse drives CSOs to practical involvement in Nile governance in order to mainstream certain water doctrines.

On the national level, the political regimes in the three countries support civil society that provides public service. The political context of civil society actors is restrictive and they are not able to contest or at least criticize their governments. Therefore, the governmental bodies join or facilitate depoliticized activities such as improving water quality or irrigation canals, besides awareness campaigns. Therefore, in the Eastern Nile network, the civil society actors that have aligned their vision with development and have indulged neoliberal practices, have an opportunity to perform in a wide range of regional and international organisations when compared to more radical civic activism, such as anti-dam movements.

Despite adopting the development role of civil society, the geopolitical circumstances in the Eastern Nile Basin reveal the political dimensions of transnational civic engagement. Although Waterbury (2002) cited the lack of domestic interests in Nile politics because of state dominance, civil society actors have demonstrated palpable engagement, as was discussed throughout the chapters of this dissertation. Yet, his argument could partly explain the influence of national determinants instead of the existence of a 'basin-wide regime'. On the highly contested issues in the Eastern Nile, namely the CFA and the GERD, civil society actors have defended national interests while participating in transnational activities.

The statements of NDFs on CFA (chapter seven) have demonstrated the opposite positions between Egypt as downstream (focused on historical rights) and Ethiopia and Uganda as upstream countries (focused on equitable water shares). Although the NDFs collaborate under the auspices of NBD activities, the national determinants have been highlighted in the framework of this contested issue.

Furthermore, the engagement of scientists and experts has not secured a depoliticized discussion of Nile affairs, as has been widely assumed; instead, the examples of the GNB in Egypt (chapter six) and EIPSA in Ethiopia (chapter seven) have revealed how technical debates over a contested water issue were unable to renounce the national interests.

In sum, the global thrive to gain governmental consensus have framed civil society's role in depoliticised activities for development purposes away from the more contested politics of the Nile River. In spite of this, national interests have been entrenched in the position of civil society actors regarding the geopolitics of the Eastern Nile Basin. Accordingly, in the Eastern Nile Basin, there has been no one network – or network power according to Castells (2016) - created collectively by civil society actors that could establish a common discourse about Nile development and politics. However, civil society actors are not 'inseparable from transactional contexts' (Emirbayer, 1997:287); therefore, they have reconfigured their scope of work and connections along with the changes in the political regimes (see the SYPW and the Ethiopian diaspora groups) or according to the availability of funds and governmental positions (e.g. the NBCBN and the Eg-NDF).

8.1.2 Reconfiguration of the Eastern Nile Basin's geopolitics

The global and regional doctrines have advocated the narrative of unity and collectiveness in governing transboundary rivers and water flows. From an ecological perspective, global environmental challenges have motivated collective actions to mitigate destructive impacts or to work towards achieving human justice and prosperity. Compatible with this collective take, the international law of water endorses the principles of 'no harm' and 'equitable use' in governing shared watercourses. Building on that, a river basin organisation has been established to employ

cooperation among the riparian countries, to develop the shared river. Moreover, both the NBI and the NBD advocate for 'One' in their slogans. For the NBI, it is 'One River, One People, One Vision' and for the NBD it is 'One Nile, One Family'.

Despite the prevalence of collective thought, civil society activism in the Eastern Nile Basin has challenged the grand notion of unity. In reality, actors have been moving driven by their own interests, benefits and strategies.

There are cases which have departed from local contested interests, such as the Ethiopian diaspora group (chapter seven) and the anti-Kajbar dam movement (chapter five). In these cases, the Nile has been reconfigured as an ethnic river, because the national development had been planned against the ethnic groups' interests and benefits. Furthermore, the cases of the Egyptian public diplomacy delegation in 2011, the Nile Project and the Nile Forum have configured the Nile River as a basin due to the GERD factor (chapter five). The examples that have projected local or national interests to regional scales, are not prevalent in the Eastern Nile politics when looking at the global conceptualisations. In parallel, the hydraulic attributes linked to Nile issues have significantly reconfigured the vision of activism on the river, seeing it as a sovereign water resource or a basin.

The different cases of civic activism in Egypt are entrenched in the fact of being a downstream country. Therefore, their activism portrayed the Nile as one basin, because it is a comprehensive vision of the river securing the flow of water. The Egyptian public diplomacy delegation in 2011 urged that cooperation is inevitable to benefit from the Nile's resources. The Nile Project has emphasised the cultural bonds along the river, for example based on musical performances. Even the contestation during the phase of the establishment of the NBD (chapter five) was one between two Egyptian activists and ended with a leading role by the founder of the Eg-NDF (chapter seven). Evidently, Egyptian civic engagement in Nile politics has carefully conceptualised the Nile as a basin, notably because of its location at the end of the river.

Conversely, in Ethiopia, engagement has enunciated a national conception of the Nile. The layers of grievance have shaped ethnic and national activism. The GERD has led to the unfolding of historical, economic and social grievances. The divergence of diaspora groups' positions towards

the GERD have illustrated national grievance against the downstream countries as well as political grievance against the dominant political ethnicity, as discussed in chapter seven. Accordingly, the Nile was largely conceptualised as a national resource.

In Sudan, however, the abundance of water resources, combined with a dysfunction of infrastructures to mitigate floods, along with displaced communities, has conceptualised the Nile as a local river. The cases investigated have demonstrated how CSOs and initiatives have come about to help communities by providing water (e.g. the Sadagaat organisation) or alleviating water disasters (e.g. the Nafeer initiative). Therefore, charity and humanitarian interventions have been employed at the local level. Opposite to that, the consequences of dam constructions have endorsed anti-dam movements. Moreover, because the displacement was deployed for certain communities or ethnicities (e.g. Nubian), activism has been created along ethnic lines and then networks were established with the groups affected by other dams (an example being the connection between the anti-Kajbar dam movement with the Halfa people, who were displaced in the 1960s due to the High Aswan Dam). These examples of Sudanese activism have reconceptualised the Nile from their local scope and from ethnic concerns.

Accordingly, the empirical findings of this research, based on case studies, interviews and network analysis, have demonstrated that the global discourse of sustainability and development has created a common cause for South-South collaboration among CSOs in the water field, also in the Nile basin. Yet, the preliminary visions or positions of civil society actors, partially driven by local concerns, have countered a potential broad collaboration between respective actors.

8.2 Conclusions

This research has explored civic engagement in Eastern Nile politics and the activities and linkages between respective actors by applying a network approach delineating the myriad connections and interdependent motions of civil society actors. The networking approach allowed to demonstrate civil society engagement from an international relations perspective, unlike in the majority of cases of water studies where the domestic domain of civic engagement has been emphasized.

From an international relations theoretical perspective, the network approach corresponds with relational thinking. The complexity and uncertainty of global challenges, including governance of transboundary water resources, transcends the dualist paradigm of classical international relations theories. Nile politics has been characterized by a complexity of variables (water scarcity, ecological threats, historical treaties, regional institutions) that has delineated the course of interactions as simultaneously conflictual and cooperative. Accordingly, Eastern Nile politics has constituted 'inter-actions', where the riparian countries' behaviours have drawn from relations and not only from absolute capabilities. The riparian countries have defended their interests in water shares by constituting relationships with other actors, including international intergovernmental organisations, non-Western investors, the North-based conventional actors, in addition to the lobbying of upstream countries.

The Nile waters have been a central natural resource in the national development strategies for the three countries analysed in this dissertation. It is apparent that water policies such as reclamation or dams or the use of hydropower have been introduced for people including civil society as a technical strategy to mitigate water scarcity and enhance the economic benefits of the River's resources. Therefore, many civil society organisations and initiatives have conducted non-political activities (e.g. awareness campaigns and water provision) to govern and improve the scarcity of water. Despite the mainstreaming of the development discourse, the main premise of contestation in the Eastern Nile Basin is the reallocation of water shares. As a result, civil society actors carry their national political positions regarding water shares into their transnational activities and employ the development targets to convene political stands. Hence, the context of civic engagement in the Eastern Nile Basin has been shaped by development purposes as well as national positions toward Nile politics.

The patterns of civic engagement in Eastern Nile politics has demonstrated the presence of civil society actors from two different civil society realms. Particularly, this research has capitalized on the action of engagement of different civil society actors (represented as nodes) rather than circumscribing the activities by investigating structured interaction and registered CSOs only. The centrality of the Nile River in livelihoods of the riparian peoples has displayed endured civic activism in different formats: NGOs, youth initiatives, and loose collective action such as by

diaspora groups and public diplomacy delegations. All of these formats have demonstrated that both primordial and civic publics have engaged in Nile politics. Nevertheless, exploring the transnational interactions across the Eastern Nile Basin has demonstrated that the majority of investigated cases occupy an intermediate space between the grassroots level and the international one, compatible with the global discourse on the role of civil society.

In conjunction with global support, Nile politics is underpinned by the role of donors. The different types of foreign actors (such as research centres, bilateral aid agencies, and global intergovernmental organisations) have contributed to creating CSOs (e.g. the NBD), providing disbursements to conduct transnational activities (e.g. the NBCBN) or framing the mandate of activism (e.g. the SYPW). Actors belonging to the primordial public have relied on diaspora or community support and have a different vision compared to the national one. Consequently, they do not occupy a position of closeness to the state or donor actors and they are located at the periphery of the Eastern Nile network.

Civil society actors in the Eastern Nile Basin have developed transnational relations around patterns of knowledge exchange, technical capacity building, the provision of public water services and advocacy. Apparently, environmental challenges and uncertainty have implicitly constituted the rationale for activities. Donor agencies, research centres, and governments support and facilitate such apolitical activity types. Accordingly, a component of respective ties are tangible materials, namely funds, as well as intangible resources, when actors share knowledge and experience across levels and scales of governance. Thus, the ties in the Eastern Nile network, in a network analytical perspective, are undirected ties.

The majority of linkages between the actors in the Eastern Nile network has been structured under the frame of partnership arrangements. Furthermore, many of the conducted activities have been in project or program format. Therefore, the strength of ties is generally weak and unsteady, because it relies fully on the availability of funds.

The empirical data collected for this research have demonstrated that the Eastern Nile civil society actors, in general, do not invest in the tools of building coalitions and conducting lobbying

activities across the riparian countries even though the causes of their interests to engage in Nile affairs are comparable to each other.

Given the pattern of nodes and the modest strength of ties, clustering is a significant feature characterizing the Eastern Nile network. Civil society actors have significantly rescaled national activism to a regional one when the NBD was established. In addition, allocation of financial disbursements to Nile development has caused the range of activism to be closely interwoven. Accordingly, external actors possess the power of 'network-making', which delineates the main features and functions of the Eastern Nile network.

Civic engagement in Eastern Nile politics is muted, because the majority of civic engagement activities have evolved around non-political development approaches. Importantly, civil society has not been involved in political negotiations over the contested issues in the Nile (most notably, the CFA and GERD), although the majority of investigated civil society actors in this research aligned with the respective national positions.

Hence, the findings of this research contribute to shift the discussion about the prospective role of civil society in Nile Basin studies, to a goal of investigating their existing positions, power dynamics and interlinkages with conventional actors (the state, donors, and intergovernmental river organisations). The complexity of these patterns have been captured by network analysis and by information derived from interviews and fieldwork, as conducted in the framework of this dissertation.

8.3 Future research

Nile Basin affairs involve issues of low and of high importance, with civil society being allocated the low/depoliticized issues. However, the Nile is a shared river and its transnational politics are entangled with general state-society dynamics. Thus, transnational civic engagement should be politicized (not nationalized), because of the centrality of the Nile to the riparian peoples; Nile Basin contestation is political and not only about development of its resources. Further research is

required to enrich Nile studies with the potential roles to be played by civil society. There are two areas to investigate:

- 1- The role of anti-dam movements. The Nile River has been transformed by the construction of many and different types of dams. Recently the GERD has created tense contestation between upstream and downstream countries. However, it can be an opportunity to explore civic engagement in the GERD and compare this pattern with engagement related to other dams in the Nile Basin. This could contribute to establishing a strand of studies on anti-dam movements in the Nile.
- 2- This research has focused on the Eastern Nile Basin, but civil society in the other sub-basins is also active, notably in the Lake Victoria basin. Accordingly, comparative studies between these Nile sub-basins could illuminate the divergence and convergence of factors and respective patterns of civic engagement.

In addition to these examples of possible future research, a policy recommendation can be offered to promote connections among civil society actors and organisations in the Eastern Nile Basin. The respective network is clustered, as has been shown in this research. However, social network analysis provides a distinct perspective on such poorly connected networks. Granovetter (1973) argues that strong ties are not the only indicator of a comprehensive network. By comparison, weak ties can uphold the network if 'more people can be reached through weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973:1369). In view of that, global and regional donors can adapt their influence on network-creation and rather invest in organising activities bridging multiple clusters in the Eastern Nile network. That might help civil society entities to develop a consensus on Nile affairs in the long run.