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UNU-CRIS

Institute on Comparative
Regional Integration Studies

Policy Brief

NUMBER 1, 2018

Keywords

Civic engagement, Water governance,
The Nile Basin Initiative, The Lake
Victoria Basin Commission

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on Comparative Regional Integration
Studies, 2018

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Bridging the Gap Between Civil Society and the Nile Basin Organizations

Executive Summary

This policy brief provides an analysis of civic engagement practices within, and by, the two leading regional organizations in the Nile basin: the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) and the Lake Victoria Basin Commission (LVBC). The brief analyses how civic engagement is characterized in both the strategic plan of the NBI and the founding protocol of the LVBC and draws upon reports and interviews conducted with officials from the respective organizations. The brief detects that civic engagement is integrated in the mandate of the two organizations under the purpose of incorporating stakeholders' participation in the organizations' activities. However, it shows that governance mechanisms in the two organizations demonstrate limited and conditional civic engagement in decision making.

Introduction

The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) and the Lake Victoria Basin Commission (LVBC) are transnational organizations operating in the Nile region. The NBI, founded in 1999, includes the eleven basin countries* while the LVBC, founded by the leaders of the East Africa Community (EAC) in 2003, is considered a sub-basin organization for the Lake riparian countries. Both organizations have acknowledged civic involvement in their mandates' - the pursuit of sustainable development along the Nile.

Stakeholder involvement in the NBI is currently articulated under the NBI Strategic Plan. The aim is to create a platform for sharing information and for sustaining dialogues. In the LVBC, the founding protocol asserts the significance of stakeholder participation when designing policies and projects affecting the Lake.

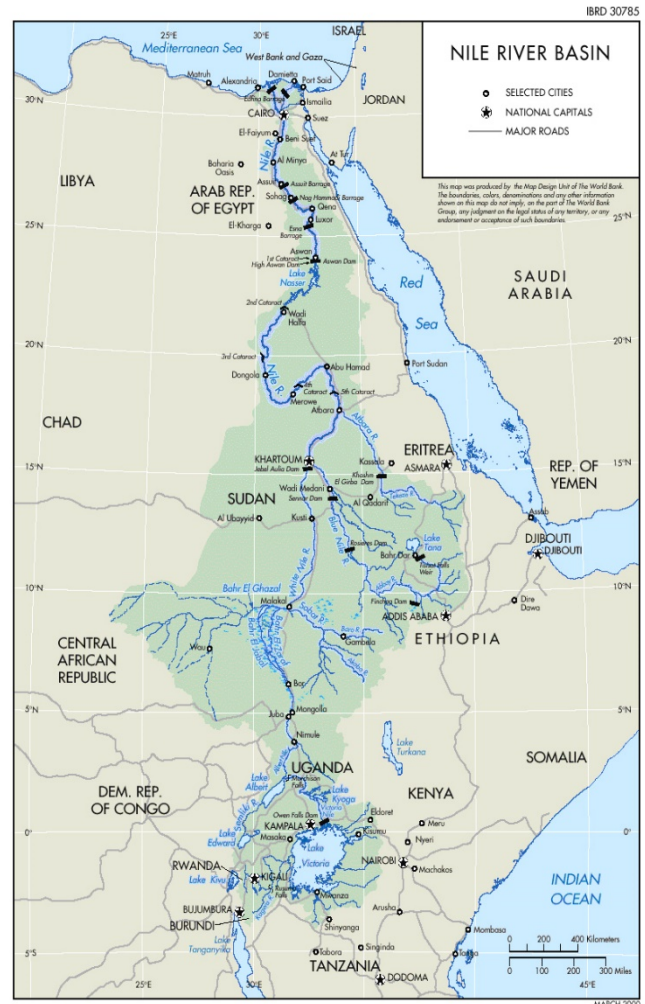
The circle of stakeholders in the NBI is wide and includes governmental, non-governmental, national, regional and international organizations beside private sector representatives and individuals. Similarly, many stakeholders are targeted in the LVBC; however, in this instance, the economic development agenda plays a substantial role in determining stakeholder relations.

Stakeholder interactions with the NBI and the LVBC are most commonly taken the formats of workshops, discussions and forums. Organizationally, there is a designated position in the NBI structure to manage the relations with different stakeholders. In the LVBC, the committee format has been chosen as the means to facilitate stakeholder discussions.

Yet, the inclusion of civil society in decision making as a constant actor is still bounded because of a power

asymmetry and capacity constraints on the part of civil society actors. Accordingly, the gap between these regional organizations and civil society needs to be narrowed in order to attain water sustainability and peaceful coordination of the Nile waters.

Figure 1: The Nile River Basin



Nile River Basin (World Bank, 2000).

The need for civic engagement in hydro-politics

The recent development strategies in the Nile Basin countries show heavy dependence on water as an initial natural resource to generate energy and to increase agricultural output; therefore, different actors became critical in the hydro-politics of the Nile River. Water governance draws on the integrated water resources management (IWRM) paradigm to tackle the different water-related sectors such as irrigation, drinking, sanitation and health in a holistic manner. Importantly, it asserts that actors and institutions, in addition to embedded principles and norms, are all essential components of effective management (Moore 2011, 21). Civil society's engagement in the politics of the Nile is therefore important to transmit the interests and preferences of local people about water utilization to the regional level (Kameri-Mbote and Kindiki 2009, 659).

River basin organization is a significant component of water governance at a regional level. Schmeier et al identified it as: "*Institutionalized forms of cooperation that are based on binding international agreements covering the geographically defined area of international river or lake basins characterized by principles, norms, rules and governance mechanisms*" (Schmeier, Gerlak and Blumstein 2016, 600). This definition demonstrates that river basin organization should be seen as a formal collective arrangement with a legal mandate that drives its legitimacy to govern water resources. Moreover, river basin organizations play different roles. From an international legal perspective, they are a means to apply the rules of water law. Economically, they manage water scarcity and monitor the effective usage of water resources. They can also facilitate the decentralization of

water management by including relevant stakeholders to discuss and refute policies proposed by powerful politicians and businessmen (Mukhtarov and Gerlak 2013, 315).

Despite the practical benefits of civic engagement in water governance, an empirical study conducted by Susan Schmeier that assessed 119 basin organizations, found that only 44 of these involved stakeholders in their governance mechanisms. This led Schmeier to conclude that such organizations around the world do not have a clear strategy to involve non-state actors and to sustain connections with people on the ground (Schmeier 2015, 62-63).

The NBI and the LVBC are of no exception when it comes to civic involvement. Both of the Nile organizations were established by governments that then defined their missions and scope of activities across the basin. This top-down approach is reflected in the limited civic involvement within their governance. When it comes to public participation and stakeholder involvement there is a clear gap between their stated principles and the reality, which is of fluctuated and semi-structured involvement.

Civic involvement in the NBI and the LVBC

The NBI

The Rationale of Stakeholder Involvement

After establishing the NBI, stakeholder involvement was framed at the project level. There was the 'Confidence Building and Stakeholder Involvement (CBSI)' project which ran from 2004 to 2009, then the NBI developed a 'Communication and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy' in 2013 to become a part of the NBI Strategic Plan (2012-

2016). The subsequent 'communication strategy' that will cover next five years (2017-2022) has not yet been published.

The titles of these initiatives, which framed stakeholder involvement, display how the NBI has rationalized its relations with stakeholders. The CBSI project, initially a regional arrangement, interacted with other non-state actors in the Nile. To be consistent with the NBI inclusive vision, the project tackled stakeholder relations under the mandate of confidence building as a necessary step to attain effective cooperative management among all riparian countries. The succeeding 'strategy' was formulated after the NBI had been consolidated in the Nile countries, and focused on conducting sustainable communication with stakeholders.

Both the 'project' and the 'strategy' stressed the importance of disseminating accurate information on the Nile, and providing a platform for engagement with stakeholders, connecting the NBI as a regional organization with the public (NBI 2009, 16).

The CBSI project consisted of four components (NBI 2009, 21):

1. Regional, sub-regional and national implementation and facilitation
2. Public information and development communication
3. Stakeholder involvement
4. Confidence building

The first component emphasized the structural aspect of the NBI as a regional organization. The second component aimed to disseminate information on projects and activities conducted by the NBI programs to

foster a better understanding of the role of the NBI. The stakeholder involvement in the third component was intended to build the capacity of stakeholders and to channel their concerns over project designs - particularly of investment projects. The fourth component was designed to build upon the two components of information dissemination and stakeholder involvement at a regional level. It was assumed that mutual trust and confidence would be created among the riparian countries when information was shared, and different actors were involved in the NBI activities (Mumbo 2005, 5-7).

Regarding the 'strategy', because it is part of the general strategic plan of the NBI, the main objective is "*To keep NBI stakeholders well informed, actively engaged and committed to Nile cooperation in support of the realization of NBI's 2012-2016 Strategic Plan*" (NBI 2013, 3).

The 'strategy's' main goal is captured in four objectives: the first focuses on governments and their vision of the Nile development as a shared resource; additionally, affirming the role of the NBI as a regional platform to sustain dialogue among governments on the one side and with stakeholders on the other. The second targets the national level through promoting the benefit of cooperation in Nile water management. The third and the fourth objectives are related to the organization itself, by building the capacity of its staff so that they can communicate with stakeholders clearly about the organization's identity and role in the basin (NBI 2013, 4). Compared with the CBSI project, the 'strategy' is an inter-program one embedded in the two main programs of the NBI: The Shared Vision Program (SVP) (closed program) and two Subsidiary Action Programs (SAPs) in the

Eastern Nile Basin (ENTRO) and Equatorial lakes (NELSAP).

The current strategic plan of the NBI (2017-2027) includes *"organizing multi-stakeholder dialogue events to deliberate on issues of Nile cooperation and the management and development of the shared Nile water resources"* (NBI 2017, 5) with the ultimate goal of this involvement being to reach "consensus" regarding the cooperative development in the Nile (NBI 2017, 22).

Categories of stakeholders and channels of communication

A circle of stakeholders was defined at the beginning of the CBSI project. It included: decision makers, public-opinion leaders and local riparian users. These three main categories were identified as direct stakeholders to the NBI's projects. Then, after a mid-assessment, the categories were expanded to include all potential actors the NBI and its programs or projects could interact with on all levels including (NBI 2009, 23-24):

1. Governmental stakeholders
2. Nile Basin Civil Society
3. Private business
4. Community and faith-based organizations
5. Local communities
6. Development partners
7. International civil society organizations

The direct interaction with civil society was applied in the CBSI project after the mid-assessment. The CBSI project then continued to drive the shift from the level of principles to governance structure. For example, civil society representatives were invited to the CBSI Project Steering Committee in 2007. Additionally, a MoU was

signed with the Nile basin Discourse (a regional civil society organization) (NBI 2009, 25). After the end of the CBSI project, stakeholder engagement was institutionalized in the NBI structure in the Nile secretariat with the establishment of a 'Public Participation Specialist' besides two Public Information Specialists, and in SAPs under the position of 'Social Development Officer and Development Communication Officer' (NBI 2009, 26).

The 'strategy' adopted the CBSI categories and added others; media, academics and research institutions because the aim of the 'strategy' is to further strengthen communication and outreach. The 'strategy' also details sub-categories. For instance, the opinion leaders' category involves parliamentarians, artists, sports men and women and diplomats. Importantly, the 'strategy' recognizes that each project would have its primary stakeholders - who are affected directly by the project - and secondary stakeholders such as the media, research institutions and donor agencies. Therefore, the categories of stakeholders became more fluid (NBI 2009, 11).

The media, to some extent, became a significant tool to connect with stakeholders particularly in the 'strategy'. Therefore, different media outlets were targeted and radio and T.V programs were encouraged to host technical specialists and officers on the Nile issue. The NBI sponsored the establishment of the Nile Media network to keep Nile updates in the public sphere. Additionally, awareness campaigns such as the 'Nile Day' and various workshops and surveys were used to reach ordinary people. Finally, the Nile Basin Development Forum was established as a biannual forum to discuss the

scientific, economic and social dimensions of the Nile (NBI 2013, 10).

The LVBC

The Rationale of Stakeholder Involvement

The mission of the LVBC is to coordinate and guide cooperation among the riparian countries in order to develop and sustain the Lake's resources. The Lake is a "regional economic growth zone" thus economic development is the driver of the regional arrangements around the Lake. The Lake is rich in different resources that provide the core livelihoods for those that live around it. Additionally, these resources can be developed for other economic sectors such as tourism and mining. However, the Lake is vulnerable to climate change, pollution, deforestation and overfishing which has led to poverty in the region and impedes economic development (UNDP-GEF International Waters Project 2011, 172). Accordingly, the main objective of the LVBC, is to manage the Lake's resources in a sustainable way. The LVBC communicates with various stakeholders who engage in different economic activities, policy designs and research in and on the Lake (EAC 2003, 21).

The founding Protocol of the LVBC stresses the importance of "public participation in policy and projects formulation" (EAC 2003, 7). This is reaffirmed in article 22: "The Partner States shall create an environment conducive for stakeholders' views to influence governmental decisions on project formulation and implementation" (EAC 2003, 16).

Table 1: Levels of civic involvement in the NBI and the LVBC

Levels	NBI	LVBC
Legality	<input type="checkbox"/> Project level <input type="checkbox"/> Strategic plan	Founding protocol
Mandate	<input type="checkbox"/> Confidence building <input type="checkbox"/> Sustainable communication and dialogue <input type="checkbox"/> Advocacy of the NBI activities	Discussing projects and policy making
Categories	<input type="checkbox"/> Wide category <input type="checkbox"/> Project base: primary and secondary stakeholders	All related-actors in the Lake economic development
Channels	<input type="checkbox"/> Tailored messages <input type="checkbox"/> Media <input type="checkbox"/> Awareness campaigns <input type="checkbox"/> Workshops and surveys <input type="checkbox"/> Scientific forums <input type="checkbox"/> MoUs	<input type="checkbox"/> Committee meetings <input type="checkbox"/> MoUs <input type="checkbox"/> Awareness campaigns <input type="checkbox"/> Forums
Organization structure	<input type="checkbox"/> In NBI secretariat: Public Participation Specialist <input type="checkbox"/> In SAPs: Social Development and Development Communication Officer	<input type="checkbox"/> Sectoral Committees <input type="checkbox"/> Project base

Categories of Stakeholders and Channels of Communication

Again, the economic value of the Lake is reflected in the definition of what constitutes a stakeholder. According to the founding protocol of the LVBC, stakeholders are "all persons, legal or natural and all other entities being governmental or non-governmental, residing, having interest or conducting business in the Basin" (EAC 2003, 5). What is remarkable when it comes to stakeholder involvement in the LVBC, is that it takes a structural form: the Sectoral Committees where the representatives from civil society organizations, the private sector and research institutes are all invited to discuss the sectoral policy agenda before it is sent to the Minister's Council; the LVBC conducts a plenary forum with different stakeholders to share information, discuss challenges and provide recommendations; additionally, the EAC

runs a forum attended by stakeholders in the region which is an opportunity for the LVBC to engage with more actors (Interview 04/12/2017).

Challenges in Governance Mechanisms

Power Asymmetry Among Stakeholders

Power asymmetry is an implicit challenge. Accordingly, the most important consideration is how to manage the differences and conflicts of interest among involved stakeholders. The NBI placed all stakeholders in the same boat. Governments, private sectors, donor agencies and civil society are all framed equally as stakeholders without considering their varying authority and influence. Additionally, the NBI vision of gathering stakeholders to create 'consensus' is difficult to achieve because stakeholders have different and conflicting interests; as a

result, water policies cannot meet the needs of all stakeholders, particularly grassroots. When it comes to the LVBC precedence is given to businesses because the economic development of the Lake is the priority. The founding protocol targets the all entities that have economic interest in the Lake without considering conflict of interests.

The Incapacities of Civil Society

The capacity of civil society is another challenge. There is an overriding assumption within these organizations that engagement with their projects and policies requires a certain level of knowledge, or a mindset that is capable of discussing constructively the development plans. A lack of this capacity among civil society groups drives the staff to instead approach well-structured organizations with higher educated members who can understand project cycles and logistics (Interview 24/02/2018).

A Lack of Cooperation Between the NBI and the LVBC

An active collaboration between these regional organizations working on Nile development is a reticent challenge. The CBSI final report stated, "*The River Nile is not considered key in some countries e.g. countries sharing Lake Victoria saw the lake as more of immediate relevance to their needs*" (NBI 2009, 31). Though there is a MoU between the two organizations, the collaboration revolves around data and information sharing not on community involvement in the joint development projects.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Both organizations endorse on principle and norm levels the significance of involving various stakeholders in the

Nile governance. However, the aforementioned challenges are visualized in operational level. So, the following recommendations can be considered to narrow the gap between civil society and these Nile organizations:

1. Inclusion with diversity

To curtail power asymmetry among stakeholders, it is essential to identify separate channels and venues for each category of stakeholders; particularly, the less powerful category (grassroots). This is a requirement on principle and practical levels of governance in order to ensure receiving relevant concerns of each stakeholders without the leverage of powerful actors over community representatives.

2. Simplified communication tools

To deal with the actual capacities of civil society, the two organizations need to develop communication techniques and tools that simplify the prospective water policies and projects because 'less professional' civil society organizations represent the real beneficiaries. Notably, civic engagement should be attained in the early stages of policies or projects making through adopting indigenous knowledges and practice of targeted communities.

3. Enlarging the scope of cooperation

To foster the cooperation between the two respective organizations, the NBI can promote cooperation between NELSAP and LVBC because these two entities cover the same area of the Nile. Furthermore, both the NBI and the LVBC need to allocate more resources on facilitating civil society engagement across the basin, for example, mutual and frequent visits among civil society organizations.

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