

# Cooperation on the Nile - Bringing down the glass wall

*"There was a glass wall. We could see each other but we could not communicate."  
Andy Tola, NBI Kenya Focal Point.*

A unique cooperation program – working across different countries with varying national interests, stakeholders, and projects – has brought down the glass wall. Coordinated by the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), this program has successfully built trust, strengthened capacity, and created an enabling environment for sustainable and equitable development of the Nile Basin water resources. Transboundary cooperation has advanced regional integration through identifying and developing joint investments. This note presents the journey so far by the Nile Basin member states in building regional cooperation, and the crucial role played by the NBI in the achievement.

*"Development is inevitable, and the only way forward is cooperation, which should bring all countries peace and stability" Dr Abdulkarim Seid, Nile-SEC*

## Through the work of the NBI on Nile cooperation:

Nile Basin countries have worked together to negotiate, agree and prepare 30 projects with **REGIONAL, SHARED BENEFITS.**

Nearly **30 MILLION** people over the next decade could benefit once prepared projects that address food, water and energy security goals are implemented.

Over **14,000** people have enhanced capacity to ensure these projects work for their countries and the region.

Most Nile Basin countries now have policies in place to support engagement on transboundary water issues.

Regional economic growth is at the heart of the vision. By working to improve agriculture, incomes, and trade, and reducing energy constraints, transformational change is being achieved.



## Behind the glass wall

The 20th century saw all the Nile Basin countries increasingly facing significant challenges related to environmental degradation, recurrent flooding, droughts, and energy poverty. Not all of these challenges and pressures could be solved by national action alone. There was a need to urgently address them at a Basin-wide level: to find effective solutions that would ensure efficiency of action, basin-wide understanding of resource use issues, and equitable sharing of costs and benefits. However, before the establishment of the NBI in 1999, the scene in the Nile Basin was one of multiple constraints in relation to use of the Nile Basin water resource.

**Distrust and differences between countries:** Nile Basin countries were facing issues. Variances in cultures, languages, and beliefs contributed in part to distrust across borders. Some countries also felt more disadvantaged than others and so could see no benefit in cooperation. For many years, countries were therefore affected by conflict and tension over the Nile waters. Unresolved issues, such as ownership and control of the Nile, were an obstacle to development and cooperation. Countries did not communicate with each other and rarely shared technical information on the Nile waters.

**Countries taking a national perspective:** Before 1999 it was also usual for each country to develop its 'own resource' (for example, building dams or irrigation systems) without considering the implications for neighboring countries or the effect on the river elsewhere in the Basin. The Nile countries did not feel obliged to share technical information with each other on the best ways to manage the Basin-wide resource.

**Inadequate capacity and institutions:** Several Nile Basin countries also lacked the necessary institutional capacity and the skills and knowledge on transboundary water resource management to engage in regional discussions. There was an imbalance in the capacities among technical practitioners in member states. Some countries had very little capacity, few water technical experts, and little information to share. Few people understood the issues in any depth, had the skills to manage optimally the river as a whole, or knew how to tap into opportunities for securing greater development benefits by countries working together. In addition, there was no Basin-wide mechanism to ensure equitable use of the Basin's resources or to resolve disputes. Nevertheless, water resource management and development came to be seen as a real opportunity for addressing development and poverty challenges.

## Shifting perspectives

The recent journey towards cooperation focused initially on technical issues. For example, in 1967 the Hydromet project was established to conduct joint hydro-meteorological surveys on the Nile in the wake of high flooding earlier in the decade. And in 1983 Egypt spearheaded Undugu ("Brotherhood") which brought several Nile Basin countries together to consider regional economic development. These initiatives though were of limited scope and did not have the full representation or participation of the Nile countries. Above all, they lacked a comprehensive institutional setting in which to engage. However, they showed that countries were starting to look at options for working together for development based on a shared use of the Nile.

A key foundation of today's cooperative environment was the Technical Cooperation Committee for the Promotion of Development and Environmental Protection of the Basin (TECCONILE), which ran from 1992 to 1999 and focused on environmental and water quality. This brought together six of the riparian countries of the Nile, and identified 22 projects for technical assistance and capacity building as part of a Basin-wide action plan for development and use of the Nile waters.

## Emergence of basin-wide cooperation

The TECCONILE efforts culminated in the establishment of the Nile Council of Ministers (Nile-COM), comprised of ministers with responsibility for water affairs. In 1997, Nile-COM requested World Bank coordination of financial support for TECCONILE. This led to the signing of a 1998 strategic agreement among the Nile countries for the establishment of a more inclusive cooperative process and greater focus on regional development outcomes.

Finally, in 1999, nine Nile countries (Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda, with Eritrea as an observer) came together in a remarkable intergovernmental partnership to launch a shared vision to explore opportunities for maximizing the benefits of the river's waters for all partners. This was the birth of the NBI.

### Objectives of the NBI:

- To develop the Nile Basin water resources in a sustainable and equitable way to ensure prosperity, security, and peace for all its peoples
- To ensure efficient water management and the optimal use of the Nile resources
- To ensure cooperation and joint action between the riparian countries, seeking win-win gains
- To target poverty eradication and promote economic integration
- To ensure that the program enabled a move from planning to action

As a regional intergovernmental partnership, driven and directed by government ministers from each country, the NBI provided the countries with the first truly inclusive and impartial platform for multi-stakeholder dialogue, information sharing, and joint planning and management of the Nile Basin's water resource. With no pre-existing institutional base to build on, this was an enormous step. The NBI recognized the need to make the most of the opportunities of the diversity of the Basin by establishing two regional centers (in the eastern Nile region and in the equatorial lakes region) as well as a secretariat. The NBI was established as a transitional mechanism for this purpose, alongside parallel efforts towards a formal Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) to create a permanent and legally-mandated institution.

Despite the foundations, the initial stages of cooperation were not always smooth. The first meetings of NBI

members were often tense, and participation between some of the countries was difficult to achieve. Not all countries would attend Nile-COM sessions. So, the primary challenge in 1999 was to build the trust for cooperation that would consolidate the partnership and enable work towards the shared vision for development.

A major next step came in 2001 at the International Consortium for Cooperation on the Nile (ICCON) meeting in Geneva, which brought together both the Nile Basin governments and their international development partners, who pledged over US\$140 million in support of Nile cooperation. Putting funding behind the shared vision gave the countries something tangible around which to cooperate. The Nile Basin Trust Fund (NBTF), which was managed and coordinated by the World Bank, ran from 2003 to 2015 as the mechanism through which 10 donors realized these commitments.

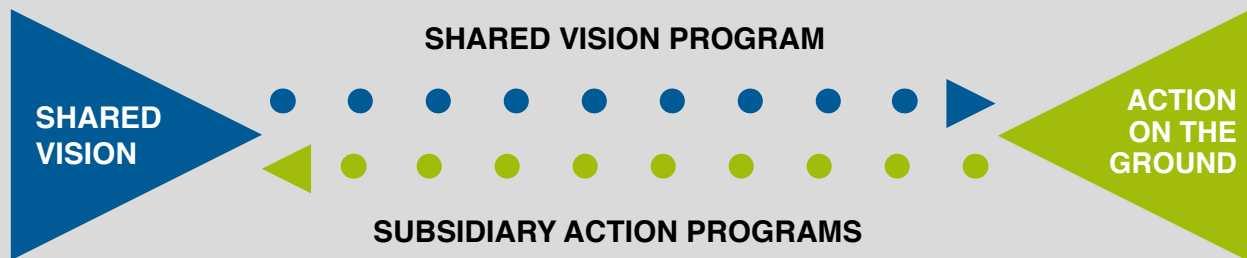
## Towards a shared vision in practice

From competing demands to shared benefits: The way any one Nile member state uses water has effects on other countries, and upstream use determines downstream options in water management. This sets the stage for either dispute or cooperation. As water becomes scarce relative to demand, transboundary competition for the resource grows. Without institutional mechanisms to respond to these transboundary problems, competition has the potential to lead to disruptive conflicts.

A transboundary approach focusing on benefit-sharing provides a flexible framework that can increase trust, cooperation, and equity. Countries will work together when they believe it is in their interest to do so, and if they see that it provides greater benefits than not doing so. These benefits can be environmental, economic, or even broader – beyond the river to other areas of trade. Cooperation on international rivers can range from information sharing to joint basin management and

development. Benefit and cost sharing can promote more efficient and more equitable river basin management.

To work towards shared benefits, the Nile ministers recognized the need for a two-pronged approach – a Shared Vision Program (SVP) to build trust, capacity, and create an enabling environment for transboundary investments, alongside Subsidiary Action Programs (SAPs) to assist countries in identifying and implementing mutually beneficial investment programs in the Nile Basin. These two programs were designed to complement each other. The SVP started first as the critical foundation to generate the driving forces to get countries to engage in investment projects, while the projects later prepared by the SAPs were intended to reinforce the shared vision by demonstrating the quick wins and benefits of cooperation. Action on the ground through the SAPs therefore legitimized the trust and cooperation promoted by the SVP.



## Building blocks to cooperation – building confidence & trust



Through these parallel programs the NBI has addressed the constraints to cooperation in a number of ways.

**Bringing countries together in many ways:** A number of related factors have played a significant role: the NBI governance structures of the Nile-COM and Nile-Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), the shared vision projects, extensive inter-country training courses, cooperative sectoral assessments and studies, SAP project preparation processes, and the strong focus of the NBI on stakeholder engagement, networks and partnerships throughout. They have acted as platforms for dialogue among people at many different levels in the Nile Basin countries, and collectively have promoted engagement on a range of Nile issues. The NBI has embraced South Sudan as a new country in the Nile region. All of this has been achieved in the face of real constraints. When the parallel political process driving the establishment of a formal CFA broke down, regional cooperation could have completely stalled, but these neutral platforms kept the technical dialogue going.

**Generating and sharing knowledge:** One reason why countries have been able to keep dialogue going has been recognition of the benefits gained from the new knowledge being generated, which is vital to the Nile countries. The SVP and SAP sector studies (for example, the equatorial lakes region strategic sectoral environmental assessments and the eastern Nile region’s cooperative regional assessments of watershed, power, and agriculture sectors) were carried out with involvement from different countries, and have offered all countries insights into the resource and the potential opportunities from them. Knowledge tools such as the Nile Basin Decision Support System (DSS) are extending this benefit across the region. All this has been made possible by an increasing willingness of the countries to share data openly.

**Capacity development:** The NBI has offered an extensive range of technical training, in particular to government staff officials in the NBI countries. It has done this through specific training programs, such as the SVP’s Applied Training Project and the Institutional Strengthening Project, as well as through other sub-programs and project preparation processes. Training has covered technical issues (e.g. hydrology, integrated water resource management, dam safety, and environmental and social issues) to address the sectoral capacity constraints, especially important for upstream countries. It has also covered the role and benefits of transboundary perspectives, building the understanding and motivation for countries to work together.

**Institutional strengthening:** The mere fact of establishing the NBI as an impartial platform for dialogue was highly significant, removing some of the political tensions associated with any single country leading. The NBI’s credibility to play this role has gradually strengthened over

the years through the development of transparent operating norms and procedures, and through programs such as the Institutional Strengthening Project and Confidence Building and Stakeholder Involvement project, building internal capacity across the NBI. NBI cooperation with the Nile Basin Discourse has encouraged the inclusion of civil society perspectives in all the work, and has widened the dissemination of knowledge. As the NBI has generated and shared useful knowledge and prepared viable, beneficial projects, countries have come to rely on it to support transboundary efforts to manage the Nile.

*“What is unique about NELSAP ... technical expertise is high. Whatever NELSAP does, the government comes and takes the projects for implementation and scaling up”* Arsene Mukubwa, Water Resources Engineer, Nile Equatorial Lakes Subsidiary Action Program Coordination Unit (NELSAP-CU).

**Forging agreements on project preparation:** The SAPs have been highly effective in identifying and preparing a range of investment projects of regional significance for the countries, some of which are already being implemented. These project identification and preparation processes are special in two key ways. Firstly, the processes ensure full participation of the Nile countries and key stakeholders. Helping countries to agree on jointly advancing projects of regional significance can be a major challenge, as it is often as much about diplomacy as it is about technical issues. This is complex and time consuming, so to have developed 30 projects in less than 10 years is a real achievement. Secondly, the NBI has developed a series of guidelines to ensure sustainable benefits from the projects, ensuring full consideration of environmental, social, gender, and climate change issues. This increases the countries’ motivation to work together to implement the projects going forwards.

## Cooperation addressing multiple constraints

So, reflecting on the original constraints noted, what has this multi-pronged cooperation program achieved?



# Cooperation addressing multiple constraints

(continued)

**Countries in dialogue:** We now see a picture of countries talking to each other much more openly at the political and technical levels. This is particularly significant given the political tensions around the CFA, which has not progressed as quickly as intended. Despite these problems, dialogue through the NBI processes has been effective. Countries trust each other enough to share freely technical and hydrological data that informs their policy and planning. They can see benefits in cooperation, and they are jointly preparing and implementing investment projects. Eleven projects of regional significance are already under implementation as a result of NBI facilitation, and at least 19 others are in preparation.

*“Exchange of information and hydrological data is an important sign of trust. Data is sent from countries into NBI and then used for modeling.”* Maria Vink, Embassy of Sweden, Nairobi.

**Effective capacity and institutions:** Dialogue remains ongoing in part because capacity development has effectively leveled the playing field. This means that countries are less likely to feel left behind. Over 14,000 people at all levels from central government staff, technicians, and community facilitators have been trained through the NBI’s work. This capacity, and the increasingly respected strength of the NBI as a neutral information and advice hub, means that the gains made can be maintained and increased in the future.

*“There were very few hydrologists in my home country of Burundi. NBI training helped me better design water projects. Before it, I never thought about environmental flow requirement and environmental impact assessment.”* Jackson Ndayizeye, Graduate in MSc in Water Resources Engineering at the University of Dar-es-Salaam (2008-2010).

**Basin-wide perspectives in practice and policy:** The emergence of jointly prepared investment projects that consider the whole Nile river system is a real achievement. Many countries with river basin organizations still have no shared investment projects in place despite many more years of engaging. The benefits of taking a transboundary view are now widely recognized, and policy that includes transboundary considerations is emerging in eight out of the 10 Nile riparian countries that support the NBI. For example, in Kenya, NBI’s work has informed the government’s formulation of a new transboundary water policy, currently awaiting cabinet approval.

*“Most studies funded through NBI have been mainstreamed into national policies. All activities ultimately are improving the way we manage water resources through both policy and practice.”* Silas Mutia, Assistant Director Water Resources/Transboundary Waters, Ministry of Environment, Water and Natural Resources, Kenya.

These are significant achievements in just 15 years – regional processes take time, even where there is strong will for change. Developing this type of cooperation is usually an iterative process: as demonstrated in the Nile, it goes back and forward, and meets many hurdles, and requires continuous reinforcement of trust. The projects emerging from Nile countries, having broken through the ‘glass wall’ to this picture of improved cooperation, hold great promise. Projects already being implemented will bring meaningful economic development to the region through improving food, water, and energy security for 18 million people. Furthermore, they will do it equitably and sustainably, with the benefit of best practice guidelines through the NBI processes. With many more projects in preparation, the NBI is poised to extend that impact much further – nearly 30 million people are anticipated to benefit in the next 10 years.

This note forms one of a series of briefing notes prepared to mark the completion of the Nile Basin Trust Fund (NBTF). The Nile Basin Trust Fund was opened in 2003 at the request of Ministers responsible for water affairs in the Nile countries, and was administered by the World Bank on behalf of ten donors.

The series of briefing notes highlight the achievements of the Nile Program, a set of projects and sub-programs that have been supported by Nile riparian countries, the Nile Basin Trust Fund and other donors in parallel to the NBTF, largely implemented by the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI).

## NBI Member States



## Nile Basin Trust Fund Partners

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