

Sustainability of the Nile Waters: Challenges, Opportunities and Policy Options

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Abstract

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has brought the Nile Waters issue to the fore front of international news. The first round of filling of GERD is now complete, ahead of schedule. The three country negotiations (Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan) is still going on. Discussions around the sustainable development of the Nile Basin, challenges, and opportunities there in and actions to be taken by individual countries and collectively are yet to come. This paper makes a tour d'horizon of multiple threats to the Nile River upstream including its tributaries and Lake Tana arising from both anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic factors. Threats to the Lake Tana and Nile waters include: (a) decrease in water volume and deterioration of quality; (b) unsustainable traditional and extensive cultivation practices at the backdrop of growing demand for food; (c) deforestation, soil and water erosion in the upper catchment and consequent siltation from feeder rivers; (d) prevalence of waterborne diseases, pollution from poor waste management and improper dumping; (e) destruction of wetlands that are natural breeding and feeding grounds for fish and bird species; (f) water hyacinth (*Eichornia crassipes*); and (g) deficient property rights and institutions. Diminished Lake Tana and Nile waters and consequent biodiversity loss negatively impacts livelihoods and food security of surrounding communities and the country at large, ecosystem services and functions provided by the Basin; unique cultural heritage and ancient monasteries around the water bodies; and water requirements of downstream countries, Sudan and Egypt. The paper concludes by proposing biodiversity conservation, ecosystem restoration and the building of sustainable livelihoods and communities as a key strategy to achieving water security and enduring peace.

Keywords: GERD, Water quality, Nile River, Lake Tana, Aquatic weed, Biodiversity, Ecosystem restoration

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