

GERD and High Aswan Dam: Technical, Socio-Economic and Geo-Political Parallels between the Two Mega-dams on the Nile River

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Abstract

Contrary to the narrow ancient Herodian attribute, the eleven Nile riparian Nations are 'Gifts of the Nile'. The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has refreshed the omnipresent geo-political tension and debate among the Nile riparian countries and international community. The mainstream discourse about GERD lacked the benefit of comparative assessment with the High Aswan Dam (HAD) of Egypt, the largest dam on the Nile River. Such comparison may help to highlight the crucial importance of GERD to Ethiopia as is High Aswan Dam (HAD) to Egypt. The planning and construction of GERD shares a stark similarity with HAD and will likely continue to manifest more parallel attributes during operation. Like the early construction periods of HAD, critics of GERD has evolved from the technical feasibility, structural safety, economic feasibility to contentious initial filling strategy. Both dams are symbols of national pride to their citizens and center of political mobilization for their leaders. The leaders were determined to construct these dams at any cost. These dams were envisioned to boost economic growth and improve livelihood of their citizens. Over the last half century, HAD saved Egypt from catastrophic droughts while scores of Ethiopians were dying of food shortages. Looking back to the history of HAD from inception to operation can provide invaluable lessons and insight into the challenges and opportunities. Therefore, integrating the similarity of HAD in the mainstream discourse on GERD can provide perspectives and common ground for understanding and establish trust. The cultural, socio-economic and political history of people living in the Nile watershed of the riparian nations has always been intertwined with the River. The dialogue and negotiations initiated with GERD may help to move away from ownership towards building shared vision and trust for equitable development and utilization of the Nile water resources among all riparian nations.

Keywords: GERD, HAD, Nile River, Equitable development

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