

IRRIGATING STABILITY

AN OVERVIEW OF WATER AS A SOURCE OF CONFLICT

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Part OF THE UN'S MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS (MDG) IS the target to halve the proportion of people without "sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation." Clearly, this target's aim is to improve the general health and life of millions of people. However, part of this equation is, of course, access to fresh water, the main ingredient for safe drinking water and basic sanitation. And that is where a fundamental complication arises. Besides nature's limitations, access to fresh water has come under threat by man-made limitations that have led to increasing tensions in numerous parts of the world. Water, and in particular access to fresh water, has become a potential source of conflict.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall the vast majority of the theory on violent conflicts and their sources has focussed on ethnicity, nationalism and other similar areas of disagreement. The end of the Cold War witnessed an increase of nationalistic fervour and demand for individual suffrage due to the void caused by the departure of the bipolar world. Yet for various reasons, oversimplified explanations of several conflicts have led to a wrongful categorization of conflicts as being inter-ethnic conflicts. In other words, what might appear as an inter-ethnic conflict could have easily started as a competition between groups over resources. This is the case in various African conflicts, such as the one in Congo for example. This does not mean, however, that no progress has been made on this topic. Since the dawn of this millennium, more attention has shifted to understanding conflicts as a competition for resources. One of these resources is water, or at least potable water.

In the Fifties, tensions rose between Egypt and Sudan. In the next two decades Israel and Syria, and India and Bangladesh saw tensions between them increase. In the second half of the Nineties, rows erupted between China, Myanmar and Thailand, as well as between Angola, Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe. The disputes did not concern border agreements or conflicting

territorial claims. Instead, the conflicts, of which those between Egypt and Sudan, and between Israel and Syria truly witnessed the exchange of hostilities, were conflicts about water, in particular unilateral proposals or actions that clearly affected the state of

the river in the other state or states. In the Fifties, Egypt decided to build the Aswan High Dam on the river Nile. As a result some of the other nine states that form the basin of the Nile were affected by it. The lake resulting from the Dam's construction spread across the Egyptian-Sudanese border forcing the relocation of people in Sudan. In addition, as Sandra L. Postel and Aaron T. Wolf, directors of the Global Water Policy Project and Transboundary Freshwater Dispute Database Project respectively, point out "a war of words has raged [...] for decades" between Egypt and Ethiopia as a result of developments related to the Nile as the two states do not have a water-sharing agreement.

Conflicts or tensions over water between states are mostly the result of a natural phenomenon; rivers generally do not tend to restrict themselves to the territory of one state. For this particular reason, Hussein Solomon, former Research Manager of the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes and currently Professor at the Department of Political Science at the University of Pretoria, amongst others, has argued to strengthen international laws and legal norms governing the use of water. In 2000 Solomon noted that within existing international law and practices there are various contradictions that make it difficult to solve interstate conflicts that derive from water usage by one state and the consequent effects it has on others. Additionally, the creation of stronger international authorities or at least the strengthening of existing ones has been called for.

The establishment and functioning of the Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM) is a good example of such an authority that needed strengthening. It was set up by Angola, Botswana and Namibia in 1994 to deal with the man-



Dividing Water. Photo by Sean Duggon.

agement of the Okavango River and regional issues related to it. The main function of OKACOM is to oversee “the management and development of the water resources of the Okavango River system.” However, in 1997 disagreement between the three States erupted over Namibian plans to divert the river. As Postel and Wolf note, the Commission was the designated body that could “help manage the dispute.” Yet, the dispute lingered on for several years. OKACOM was not able to project its authority in a meaningful way due to the manner in which it operated. For instance, it did not have a permanent secretariat until May 2005. Since then, several attempts have been made to make it tougher. In 2006, it was represented at the World Water Week in Stockholm with the mission to raise its profile. In addition, further international support, for example by the US Bureau of Reclamation’s Office of International Affairs and the Southern Africa Development Community, also strengthened the Commission’s capacities and capabilities. The further institutionalization of the authority, as well as the received international support, strengthened OKACOM, allowing it to project its authority over the ‘Okavango States’. The case supports the



argument that strengthening international bodies improves possibilities to resolve tensions in an international forum, thus alienating water as a source of conflict between states.

Unfortunately, interstate conflicts or tensions are recently accompanied by intrastate tensions and violent conflicts. Frequently mentioned is the case of Bolivia, where in the year 2000, civilians in the city of Cochabamba clashed with soldiers after its water system was privatized after years of mismanagement by public authorities. Subsequently, water bills demanded a larger portion of the income of Cochabamba’s residents. In the same year, farmers and police clashed in China as the first protested against the local government’s plans to divert parts of the Yellow River. The idea behind these plans was to increase water supply for urban (i.e. mainly to increase the proportion of the population with access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation) and industrial areas, clearly affecting agricultural activities in the rural parts of the River’s basin.

These two cases clearly illustrate that, particularly in parts of the developing world, including in rising economic powerhouses, governments at various levels have to make equitable decisions between improving access to fresh water (including the MDG target for fresh drinking water and basic sanitation) and raw economics. The urbanization of China resulting from its vast economic growth forces planners to face the choice of improving standards in urban (read: economic industrialized centers) or in the rural parts (improving lives of farmers and villagers). In contrast to the interstate conflicts over water mentioned above, in this case strengthening water authorities of

regimes would not be able to do the trick. As the Heads of State and Government set the above-mentioned target, it is somewhat questionable if they expected that attempts to reach such targets could lead to increasing internal stress, as depicted by the two cases discussed earlier. One could especially expect this in states characterized by weak governance and the lack of institutions in which citizens can easily voice their concerns and views during policy-making processes related to the management of the water supply.

To borrow Postel’s and Wolf’s term, ‘dehydrating conflict’ is deemed necessary to improve the possibilities of reaching the target of the MDGs related to the access of drinking water and

basic sanitation. As the strength-ening of the Okavango Commission has illustrated, muscled international organizations or institutions (or at least those with some form of enforcing authority) could make the difference. However, at the intrastate level it is a different ballgame. What seems especially necessary is that developing countries are not, for example, pushed by financial institutions to privatize activities, but that they are professionally advised during the policy-making process, and preferably

by creating possibilities in which the citizens themselves could contribute their views in a constructive manner as well. ■



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