

Why the 11 countries that rely on the Nile need to reach a river deal soon

By [Richard Kyle Paisley](#)

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More than 300 million people rely on the waters of the River Nile. The Nile river basin contains [over](#) 10% of Africa's landmass, in 11 countries: Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Egypt, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea and Kenya. Many of these countries rely almost exclusively on the Nile as their source of freshwater.



The River Nile at Cairo, Egypt. Flickr/Emad Faied

Water demand throughout the region is [expected](#) to soar. This is on the back of rising populations as well as ambitious initiatives, particularly in Egypt and Ethiopia which have plans to develop hydroelectric power.

The need for cooperative sustainable management of the trans-boundary water, and related, resources of the basin has never been more compelling.

The Nile is [one of](#) more than 260 so-called “international drainage basins” throughout the world where water, and related, resources are shared between two or more nation states.

Historically, vying for these scarce resources has been a source of friction as well as a catalyst for peace, as nations are forced to work together. Disparate, but successful, examples of turning adversaries into improbable partners include: the [Indus River Treaty](#) between India and Pakistan, which has survived three wars, and the [Senegal River Treaty](#) where four countries share joint ownership of water related infrastructure. In these examples, finding a way to equitably and reasonably share international waters has been the key to success.

Grey Area

The [UN Watercourses Convention](#) requires every country that shares an international drainage basin to participate in its use, development and protection. But there is a grey area. The convention leaves it up to individual countries to negotiate what they see as equitable and reasonable.

And despite many decades of concerted effort no comprehensive deal between all 11 countries has yet been reached in the case of the Nile River Basin. Meanwhile, tensions have continued to mount including between Egypt and Ethiopia.

Both Egypt and Ethiopia are arguably more heavily dependent on the Nile river basin than any other countries. The Nile is functionally [the only real](#) source of water for Egypt. The preponderance of Egypt's fast growing population lives in the Nile Valley and nearly all of whom are farmers that rely on the water to grow crops. Yet [more than](#) 80% of the water reaching Egypt comes from the Blue Nile which originates in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's population [growth rate](#) is equal to or greater than Egypt's, establishing an equally compelling need for water for increased food production.

The urgency of reaching an agreement to reasonably and equitably share benefits on the Nile Basin can't be overstated. Apart from the need to manage a precious resource carefully, the very process of reaching cooperation [would create](#) a stabilising and more transparent atmosphere in the countries that depend on the Nile basin. It [would](#) widen political participation, build political stability and spread confidence between states. This is important given that the potential for friction will likely continue to increase as the Nile faces new challenges.

New challenges

Fresh [evidence](#) now points to the fact that both the political and ecological situation in the Nile basin is becoming more precarious.

Water quality appears to be worsening, there are growing water quantity issues and agricultural yields appear to be falling. These challenges are exacerbated by the looming completion of various dams on both the Blue Nile and the White Nile. The biggest of these is the [Grand Renaissance Dam](#) in Ethiopia.

There are also new, and increasing, concerns over the potential impact of climate change on the Nile river basin. Recent studies point to two contradictory scenarios that would require completely opposite adaptation strategies: one entails floods and increased runoff, the other water scarcity and possible drought.

At least [one study](#) suggests that an increase in global temperatures will cause more evaporation, leading to greater water scarcity. Another [study](#) suggests increased evaporation in Egypt will result in increased precipitation in the Ethiopian highlands. This could lead to increased runoff downstream, in Egypt, which may cause floods.

These uncertainties are intensified by the fact that most of the nation states sharing the Nile Basin are generally [more likely](#) to be increasingly "water scarce" by 2050. This is due to climate change and increased water demand due to population growth.

On top of all these challenges many Nile countries, particularly Egypt and Ethiopia, continue to have ambitious plans to use more water as well as develop hydroelectricity projects along the Nile.

For example Egypt has embarked on the [New Valley Project](#). This is designed to redirect approximately 4.94 billion cubic metres of water to create and maintain an attractive, habitable area in the Western Desert.

These developments underscore the need to successfully design institutions and legal frameworks, using adaptive management, for the shared water resources. Adaptive management is a process which aims to reducing uncertainty over time via system monitoring.

Moving forward

There [is no](#) “one-size-fits-all” approach to these challenges. But what’s clear is that such agreements can protect the environment whilst also stabilising and enhancing [security](#) at the regional level.

Now is the time for all 11 Nile sharing nation states and the international development community to pull together. They must redouble their efforts to successfully establish and maintain a Nile Basin wide cooperative framework agreement and a Nile Basin Commission. This is not a panacea for all that ails the Nile Basin. However, these initiatives would clearly help focus the region on establishing a nascent international river basin organisation that could eventually embrace larger water and energy governance solutions.

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