

Land and Hydropolitics in the Nile River Basin. Challenges and new investments.
Edited by Emil Sandström, Anders Jägerskog, and Terje Oestigaard.

This book, edited by Emil Sandström, Anders Jägerskog and Terje Oestigaard, investigates the new complexities of the hydropolitical dynamics and water-land-energy nexus in the Nile River Basin. This book is particularly relevant because it is focused on a region that is both geopolitically extremely important and has seen significant inward foreign investment. No other study currently provides the combination of updated information and data and the rich analysis of the current opportunities and challenges these investments represent in terms of the regional (and global) political economy. The work identified the major investors and provides critical new insights into the linkages between the Nile Basin and the Middle East, exploring how important these are in terms of virtual water's trade. Another important contribution is that the authors look at the transboundary impacts such investments might have, namely in terms of hydropolitical relations between Nile riparian states, relations that are already very tense. This book will interest both academics and water-sector professionals, and makes an important contribution to the work of water practitioners and researchers in the Nile River Basin. It will also be of interest to newcomers to the subject since it provides a comprehensive picture of both the past and present challenges, and the prospects for the future.

This work situates the complexities of the water-land-energy nexus within the broader new geopolitical context of a basin without a hydro-hegemon – given the declining position of Egypt in influencing hydropolitical relations in the basin – and taking into account the new role played by Sudan, historically a solid Egyptian ally, and of new institutional-legal arrangements. The various chapters analyse the history, politics and economy of the Nile River Basin relating them to the current land and energy investments within the evolving transboundary relations. Although the Nile River Basin has been extensively studied, and it is therefore a challenge to produce original work on the topic of hydropolitics in this basin, this book still makes a much needed contribution to the hydropolitical literature. A particularly important contribution is the analysis of the increasing complexities of “land grabbing”, and its different and often competing perceptions and implications within the evolving geopolitical dynamics. The work unfolds the complexity of the problem, not only by looking at the material impact of investments, but also showing the reader the multifaceted rationales behind these decisions and the power struggles behind them: for instance in the case of Qatar. It shows the political economy of food security in the Middle East and it discusses how “land grabbing” can also have positive implications for local communities, such as in the case of Gambella. It sheds light on the role of Sudan as a “kingmaker” in the new hydropolitical context, bearing in mind that Sudan is one the Nile (and even African) countries with the most potential for irrigated agriculture and, as such, is very attractive for large-scale investors.

In the first chapter, as well as setting out the structure of the book, the three editors provide an eloquent and concise historical overview of the geopolitics of the Nile River Basin, highlighting the evolving challenges of the new hydropolitical

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landscape, in particular the increased complexities and the absence of a hydro-hegemon.

In chapter two, Emil Sandström examines the large-scale land deals taking place in Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda. In particular, he analyses the Egyptian investments in upstream countries, considering these to be an Egyptian strategy to gain geopolitical influence over the river, ensuring access to water upstream for Egyptian food security. In addition to the Egyptian “military” discourse about the Nile River, this new trend has resulted in a new “business” discourses about the river. Sandström notes that the Egyptian land deals in Uganda may also alter the historic resistance to a new Nile agreement, shifting the power struggles from the inter-state to the intra-state realm, between marginalised local communities impacted by relocation as a consequence of projects resulting from the land deals, versus the business elites behind and benefiting from these deals.

In the third chapter, Kyungmee Kim and Anders Jägerskog argue that land grabbing among Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries can be considered as a strategy to risk-mitigate national food security. The analysis brings together considerations of water and of food security, considering how much, as well as what type, of water is used. Nevertheless, the focus in respect to water security seems still to be focused on water insufficiency, driving towards supply side solutions. Further research should focus on how the MENA investments will shape hydropolitics in the Nile Basin.

In the fourth chapter, Harry Verhoeven provides an overview of the complex historical dynamics of the role of the Gulf States in the hydropolitics of the Nile Basin. In particular, he analyses the influence of the Gulf States in geopolitical dynamics, and in the development of agricultural and water resources, especially in Egypt and Sudan. He also investigates the role of the Gulf States in maintaining the hegemony of the Egyptian and Sudanese regimes, both within their countries and societies, and in the Nile Basin more broadly.

In chapter five, Martin Keulertz discusses land investments in a variety of countries, presenting, in particular, insights into a failed land investment by Qatar in Sudan. Building on this, he investigates the domestic politics surrounding land investments in Qatar, revealing the power struggles, the role of shadow states, and the politics around land investments to increase groups’ interests and influences in Qatar.

In chapter six, Ana Elisa Cascão and Alan Nicol investigate the role of Sudan in shaping the hydropolitics of the Nile Basin. They show that while Sudan has traditionally sided with Egypt, Khartoum – like a “kingmaker” - now has the potential to shape the hydropolitical relations in the basin. This is mainly because Sudan is the Nile riparian with the biggest potential for agricultural development, mainly through irrigation, and this could increase significantly its water withdrawals from the Nile River. On the one hand, Sudan needs Ethiopia and its Grand Renaissance Dam for storage purposes. On the other hand, awareness of the challenges that Sudan could pose to its own Nile water utilisation is raising alarm in Egypt.

In chapter seven, Ramy Lotfy Hanna considers Sudan as a case study to show the role of the private sector and of state enterprises in large-scale land acquisitions and water grabs in the Nile Basin. While focusing on the variety of actors, he highlights that these new actors are not particularly relevant in the wider hydropolitics of the basin.

In chapter eight, David Ross Olanya analyses the expansion of hydropower in Uganda. He shows how this country is shifting from a peasant towards a middle-

income economy, and how increasing energy production is part of this vision. Nevertheless, the dams under construction – although of small size -, are having a negative impact on local communities, and especially on marginalised communities.

In chapter nine, Wondwosen Michago Seide examines the case of the Ethiopian region of Gambella, where water and land are abundant, but where malaria, violent conflicts, and poor transport provisions make investment a challenge. In this context, the Ethiopian government sees investors as “development heroes” and as an opportunity for the development of this region.

In chapter ten, Mats Hårsmar, Emil Sandström, and Atakilte Beyene focus on the region of Ethiopia around Lake Tana. They provide a historical overview of the hydraulic projects in the region, contextualising them within the evolving broader hydropolitical dynamics of the Nile Basin. In particular, they analyse the current developments on the ground in the basin and the changing power asymmetries, and discuss the potential opportunities to implement the new Ethiopian ambitions in the area.

In chapter eleven, Terje Oestigaard focuses on national identities, comparing water identities in Egypt and in Ethiopia. The author shows how water as a national ideology has been powerful in mobilising groups and countries over time.

Overall, this book is a milestone in the literature on the Nile River Basin, and the authors have kept the promise of guiding readers through a political and economic complexities of regions, sectors and actors relevant to the hydropolitics of the basin. What makes this work unique is that it draws on the experiences and expertise of relevant scholars in the field of hydropolitics to provide a valuable and convincing account of the water-land-energy nexus. The book would have benefited, however from more contributions from local scholars from the Nile River Basin. Including more authors from the region would have allowed the voice of local knowledge to be better captured. In addition, while the editors aimed to conduct inter-disciplinary research, including a political ecology approach, the experiences of local communities are not properly covered. The book would have benefited from a chapter on the views of local communities in different parts of the basin, and how the developing hydropolitical dynamics and land investments are affecting these communities. It would have also benefited from a chapter on hydrosolidarity principles, in particular on international law and the ethics of land grabbing, as Francesca Greco would say, “which kind of justice is regulating the virtual water trade?” and “why do we eat other people’s water?”

Finally, this book is an important contribution to the literature because it provides new critical insights on the effects of land investments, which is really missing from the literature, showing their impacts on the hydropolitical relations in the basin. Despite the varying subject matter of the chapters, they eloquently unfold to show the linkages between the Nile Basin and the Middle East, the major investors, and how important these linkages are in terms of virtual water’s trade.