

# Utilizing The Nile: A Matter of Life and Death for Ethiopia

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There have been different narratives regarding the management and utilization of the world's longest river-the Nile. These stories mainly are reflected in different forms and styles. But their messages have been the same. One of the narratives is based on obsolete, partial and unfair self declared water `right` propagated by the most downstream state-Egypt. According to Egyptian policy makers, they have "a historical right to the Nile which is declared under the 1929 exchange of notes with Britain and the 1959 agreement with Sudan." But, Egypt's such self-declared [historic right` is a historic wrong which Egypt is not yet trying to undone and solve.](#) Based on such a historic wrong, Egypt has claimed that it has a fixed amount of water i.e. 55.5 Billion Cubic meters of the Nile waters.

Based on the aforementioned wrongly self-declared claim, it is common for Egyptians saying that, that fixed amount of water is a matter of life and death for Egypt. In a futile attempt to justify this claim, Egyptian pundits and politicians state that 'their population is rising therefore they need more water than the 55.5 BCM, they have no any other water source except the Nile, other riparian states in the Nile Basin has other water sources such as rain and other rivers etc...!' This unconvincing and baseless justification is more or less very strong when it comes to Ethiopia which is the source of more than 86 percent of the waters of the Nile.

For Egyptian policy makers, as they have heard saying it repeatedly, ["while the Nile is a development issue for Ethiopia, it is a matter of life and death for Egypt."](#) As stated this narrative is not new. It is one of Egypt's attempts to thunderously tell its version of the `Nile is a matter of life and death for Egypt` and undermining Ethiopia's and other upstream states` claim on the management and utilization of the Nile waters a mere development issue. But the truth is the contrary.

## **The Nile: A Matter of Life and Death for Ethiopia too!!!**

As stated earlier Egypt's attempt of narrating the Nile as a matter of life and death for Egypt is a mere attempt to undermine Ethiopia's just claim. In fact, Ethiopia's humble and smooth use of language might helped the Egyptian narrators as Ethiopia has been saying "its aim of building dams on the Nile is to alleviate poverty and achieve development to millions of poverty stricken Ethiopians." However, the Nile is a matter of life and death for Ethiopia as it is to Egypt. In fact, Ethiopia needs the waters of the Nile not simply to achieve developmental objectives but to answer a question of *survival*. The *Numbers* do indeed speaks louder than anything else why developing the Nile waters has an indispensable and irreplaceable role in Ethiopia's political, economic, as well as socio-cultural life.

As clearly stated, in Ethiopia's "Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy" document, achieving "rapid development is not merely important in raising the standard of living of the people, but also a guarantee of national survival." Therefore, if Ethiopia is to continue to survive as a country, in this globalized and fast growing Darwinian world, it must be able to achieve rapid socio-economic development that benefits the Ethiopian people. The document further stressed that, "assuring accelerated development and raising the living standard of [the]... people of [Ethiopia] is critical in preventing [Ethiopia]... from disaster and dismemberment." But the question is, how can Ethiopia achieve the intended developmental goal which has a direct link with its survival? How can Ethiopia be able to survive as a country by dismantling its number one enemy-poverty which has been a threat to its national security?

The answers to that question basically rely on whether Ethiopia is able to turn its natural resources into an asset apart from 'establishing a democratic order in a multi-ethnic Ethiopia' as the document clearly states it. Therefore, the key to Ethiopia's development and alleviation of poverty is at the mercy of developing the available water resource of the country. The total annual volume of Ethiopia's surface water is estimated 122 billion cubic meters of which more than 96 percent flows to the neighboring countries mainly to Sudan and Egypt, Somalia and Kenya. Out of the major river basins of the country, the Nile in Ethiopia covers 70% of the country's total surface water. This makes the Nile life for Ethiopia. The detail arithmetic of the mentioned figure makes the Nile the issue of life and death for Ethiopia. Here is why.

One of the mysteries of the Nile river in Ethiopia is the total area that it covers. The Nile Basin in Ethiopia accounts 32 percent of the total area of Ethiopia. It traverses two-third or six of the nine regional states under the current federal arrangement-namely Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, Benshangul-Gumuz, Gambela and Southern, Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State. One can, therefore, imagine how many people live directly in the Basin in particular and in the mentioned regional states in general. According to statistics from the State of the Nile Basin Report of 2012 prepared by the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), 40 percent of 86.5 million population (almost 39.5 million) lives directly in the Basin. There is a higher figure, however, in 2014 as reported by the world Population Review, which is estimated at 96.5 million which makes Ethiopia the second populous country in Africa next to Nigeria. Out of this, more than 67 million population lives in the six regional states mentioned above. One has to also take in to consideration that the total population of Ethiopia will grow to more than 187 million by 2050 double from where it is now. This rapidly growing population, therefore, needs water to survive.

Energy is fundamental to achieve socio-economic transformation in any country. Without Energy it is impossible to achieve development and alleviate millions of population from poverty. Energy is the backbone of development. Despite such truth and its rich potential, Ethiopia is one of the energy hungry countries of the world as access to modern energy sources is very limited. The country's major energy source is biomass fuels which aggravates the deterioration of the natural environment because trees are cut down to meet energy needs especially in the rural areas. In Ethiopia more than 65 million people have access to electricity. And electrification rate in the country is very low which is about 74 percent in urban areas and 24 percent in the rural areas-where nearly 84 percent of the total population lives. This is the lowest even in Sub-Saharan standard. If we compare this with Egypt it is astonishing. Electrification rate in Egypt, for instance, is 100 percent in urban areas and 99.6 percent in rural

areas. This shows the gap in energy access between the two countries. Besides, the demand for energy in Ethiopia is growing by 32 percent which is a high rate as compared to the 25 percent demand growth for the last 5 years. Despite government attempts to solve, energy shortages, power outages and power rationing are not exceptions in Ethiopia. The energy shortage in the country in one way or another has a huge negative impact on the country's fastest growing economy. Ethiopia to sustain its economic growth and development, energy security is a matter of necessity. Therefore, Ethiopia has to find some way or mechanism to tackle the energy poverty that it faced. The Nile has the answer!!

The Nile Basin in Ethiopia is the power house of the country. Ethiopia is blessed with hydropower potential-thanks to its geography. Research findings estimate that the country has a potential to generate 45000 megawatts of hydroelectric power which makes Ethiopia the second potentially rich country next to the Democratic Republic of Congo which has a potential of generating almost 100,000 megawatts. Despite this huge potential Ethiopia has produced not more than 2100 megawatts which clearly shows the country's hydropower potential is underutilized. In fact, this will change when Ethiopia accomplishes its mega hydropower projects in Gibe III and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and other forthcoming projects. Out of the aforementioned 45000 megawatts of hydropower potential two-third or almost 30000 megawatt is in the Nile. Ethiopia, to solve its energy hunger, therefore, has to develop the Nile. Besides, it is worth noting that the energy that Ethiopia will produce will be its petroleum oil and source of foreign currency. This will benefit not only Ethiopia but also the electric buying neighboring countries who will have access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy. The Nile is energy, the Nile is life!!

Due to climate change rainfall patterns at the global level is becoming unpredictable at the global level. Ethiopia is country which suffered from a long history of rainfed agriculture. Ethiopia's reliance on rain for its agriculture cost the country millions of lives due to drought and shortage of water. Ethiopians in the 1970s and 1980s were survived by the mercy of the food aid from the developed world. The 1973 news coverage and broadcast of the Hidden Famine by Jonathan Dimbleby, the mid 1980s Live Aid concerts and the released charity song "We are the World" and "Do They Know It's Christmas?" are eternal testimonies to that tragic history. It is, therefore, difficult to continue to survive as a people and a country while stretching hands to the erratic rain in a situation where the country is exhibiting rapid population growth. Hence, switching to irrigation is not a luxury for Ethiopia rather a necessity triggered by a need to survive.

Despite there are various figures about the irrigation potential of Ethiopia, many agrees that the country has 3.7 million hectares of irrigable land. Here again, the Ethiopian Nile comes to the equation. Of the mentioned figure nearly 2.3 million hectares of land or 62 percent of the total irrigable land is in the Nile Basin. To put it more clearly, the three sub-basins of the Ethiopian Nile namely Abbay/Blue Nile, Baro-Akobo and Tekezze sub-basins have 1,001,000, 985,000 and 317,000 hectares of irrigable land. Is not the Nile Ethiopia's bread basket? Is not the Nile a matter of life and death for Ethiopia?

To sum, according to research findings Ethiopia so far has able to utilize nearly 5 percent of its total surface water. When it comes to the Nile it is a meager. Ethiopia utilizes less than 1 percent. The numbers shown above are calls for Ethiopia that Ethiopia must utilize its water resources. This writer remembers a speech by Ethiopian famous engineer Tadesse Gaileselassie in 2007 when he remarked that, "It would have been a great importance that the students' movement of the 1960s in the Haileselassie I University sloganeered Water to the Farmer in line with the famous Land to the Tiller slogan of the day." It is true that, the recent initiatives taken by Ethiopia are signaling that Ethiopia has firmly, truly and passionately take utilizing the country's water has no other alternative.

What is interesting, as well, is Ethiopia's firm stand that when it is utilizing its water resources, it is not with a blind eye of let me and me alone use the water. It is the country's unchanged policy and principle that, utilizing the waters of the Nile or any other transboundary water in its territory is based on fairness and equity. Egypt or any other downstream country has to thank Ethiopia for this as there are countries in other transboundary watercourses with little concern for other users downstream. Irrespective of the bad memories due to the injustice done by Egypt against Ethiopia, the later still has open arms to utilize the Nile waters equitably and reasonably.

Therefore, it should be underlined that, the Egyptian narrative that the Nile is a mere developmental issue for Ethiopia and a matter of life and death for Egypt is far from the truth in Ethiopia. The Nile is a matter of life for Ethiopia as it is to Egypt despite little degree difference. And of course, it is worth noting here that Egypt is one of the water rich countries in the world taking its huge and exploitable ground water. In any case, trust and confidence and strong belief in mutual benefit and win-win gains is the solution.