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Are We Scorpions?

The Role of Upstream–Downstream Dialogue in Fostering Cooperation in the Nile Basin

Simon A. Mason

Water consumed upstream does not flow downstream. Consequently, upstream–downstream relations along a shared river may entail competitive use or even conflict. What is the role of communication in preventing or transforming such behavior? The present article addresses this question based on lessons learned in 3 Dialogue Workshops carried out between 2002 and 2004 in the Eastern Nile Basin, with participants from Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan. It indicates that the danger of upstream–downstream relations is not primarily "scorpion-like" behavior (damaging an opponent), but rather "ostrich-like" behavior (burying one's head in the sand, ignoring unilateral developments). Dialogue is shown to be a key determinant in rectifying this situation, as it is the basis for trust-building, exchange of information, and development of mutually acceptable management options. Other key factors to be considered are the balance of power between highland–lowland actors and the legal/institutional framework governing their interaction.



Fragments of a theory on the transformation of conflict

In the context of water negotiations in the Middle East, Jon Martin Trondalen, who was facilitating a water negotiation process, recounts how he "… was taken aside by one of the most experienced, though not necessarily one of the most successful negotiators in the region. The incident was triggered by my disbelief that he was blocking a settlement that had obvious advantages for the other party with no costs to him. 'But,' he said, 'you must understand that this is like the scorpion who wanted to cross the river, and asked several animals if he could ride on their back. No one dared to trust the scorpion and declined until he asked the sheep, because the scorpion said that if he struck during the crossing, both would die. So, in the middle of the river, the scorpion struck, and as they both sank, the sheep cried, "why?" The scorpion said, "I could not do anything else, I am a scorpion." The negotiator said: 'This is the climate that we are living in'." This incident is described in Trondalen's very readable ESCWA (UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia) Manual, *Dispute Resolution of International Water Resources*.

Scorpions and ostriches

Unfortunately, all of us act like scorpions under certain conditions. All of us, if we are involved in a highly escalated conflict, will tend to behave in destructive or even self-destructive ways. The good news, however, is that such behavior is not fixed; in this sense we are *not* scorpions. Behavior can change, be prevented, or be transformed. The same is true for less spectacular but much more common "ostrich-like" behavior, ie ignoring the negative impacts of our actions on other actors. In what follows, the term "conflict" is used to include both kinds of behavior: intentional damage to one's opponent, and ignorance of the negative impacts of one's actions.

Escalation has been described as an increase of tension between two actors in conflict. In an escalation model developed by Friedrich Glasl, escalation is a downward movement, analogous to being blindly "sucked" into the dynamics of the escalating conflict. According to Glasl, escalation does not occur in continuous fashion, but rather in a series of plateaus and sudden falls. Ostrich-like behavior can be seen as a conflict that remains on a plateau; there is no escalation, nor is there any de-escalation. During the process of escalation, there is a shift from cooperation—seeking to satisfy the interests of both conflicting actors (the goal of interest-based negotiations)—to conflict. As the conflict escalates, we start by seeking to satisfy our own interests while ignoring the impact on others (ostrich-like behavior). In the final phase of escalation, we seek to damage our opponent, even at the cost of damage to ourselves—as when the scorpion killed the sheep.

How can we counteract escalation? Glasl's model argues that the form of intervention in a conflict should be appropriate to the level of escalation. In low-level conflicts, the 2 actors can normally sit together and thrash out an agreement. Above a certain level, eg when actions take over and actors no longer believe that talking to each other will help, the active

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FIGURE 1 Projected water scarcity in the Nile Basin countries in the year 2025. The figures are based on UN population projections and FAO data of total actual renewable water per country; regional differences of water availability within a country are not considered. (Map by Marco Zanoli, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich; data: FAO and UNFPA).



assistance of an outside person who is accepted by the actors is often required.

Interests, positions, power

Another important aspect is focusing on *interests* (why people want what they say they want) rather than just *positions* (what people say they want) or *power* (the means to satisfy one's interests). All human interactions are characterized by a mixture of power, rights, and interests. Thus we can try to resolve a conflict by seeking to understand the other actor's interests, or we can try to apply rights, laws and contracts, or we can use coercive power to force the other party to make concessions. By focusing on interests, options can be developed that satisfy all the actors' interests. There are limits to the interest-based approach, however. First, there needs to be a certain degree of power symmetry; and second, existing rules and rights need to be considered—as illustrated in the concrete case described below.

Conflict transformation in practice: the Eastern Nile Basin

Egypt, located in a flat desert lowland, is totally dependent on the Nile river as its source of water. Water flowing into Egypt comes from rainfall in upstream countries—mainly in the Ethiopian highlands. The focus here is on Egypt and Ethiopia, as they represent extreme poles, bearing in mind that Sudan is a key player between Egypt and Ethiopia, and that there is a total of 10 countries in the Nile Basin (Figure 1). While Egypt has relied on irrigated agriculture for thousands of years, Ethiopia, the source of 86% of the Nile water in Egypt, has only sought to expand irrigation in the last 50 years (Figure 2), as its population cannot be sufficiently sustained by irregular rainfall. Ethiopia is characterized by chronic famine, normally affecting about 2 million people per year. Irrigation is one of its key development strategies.

Ethiopia and Egypt therefore seek to use the Nile to feed their growing populations, create jobs, and enhance economic growth in general, eg by tapping the enormous potential of hydropower. The irrigated area in Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan varies greatly: according to the FAO, Egypt had about 3 million ha of irrigated agriculture in the year 2000, and Ethiopia 200,000 ha, as it is mainly dependent on rainfed agriculture (Figure 3). Sudan has about 2 million ha. Some mutually beneficial development projects have already been identified: hydropower development, increased efficiency of irrigation systems, watershed management upstream to prevent erosion and siltation of dams downstream, and in general cooperation to access funding, eg from the World Bank.

It is clear that the Nile countries are far from the scorpion level of escalation described in Glasl's model. There is "ostrich-like" behavior, however: hardening of positions and occasional unilateral actions, although these things are not done intentionally to damage the opponent. What about "rights" and "power"? At

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FIGURE 2 Digging an irrigation ditch in the Ethiopian highlands. (Photo by Eva Ludi)



first glance, Ethiopia appears more powerful, as the water originates in the Ethiopian highlands. Geographically, the upstream/highland country is always in a more powerful position. At second glance, however, the economic and political power of downstream Egypt becomes apparent, in part compensating for its vulnerable downstream/lowland position. There is no existing basin-wide agreement between the Nile countries; rather, downstream historical "rights" confront upstream territorial "rights."

Research and action: the Nile Dialogue Workshop series

The aim of the Nile Dialogue Workshops was to enhance understanding of the various interests in the Nile and how best to secure these in a mutually compatible way. The Environment and Cooperation in the Nile Basin (ECONILE) project began in 1999. From the beginning, the project sought to have a strong element of action research; hence its fairly traditional approach in the form of two PhD candidates, one focusing on the downstream perspective of water use (Simon Mason), and one on the upstream perspective (Yacob Arsano). The aim was to prepare the groundwork for a specific project on the ground, ie a series of 3 Dialogue Workshops on international cooperation in the Eastern Nile Basin.

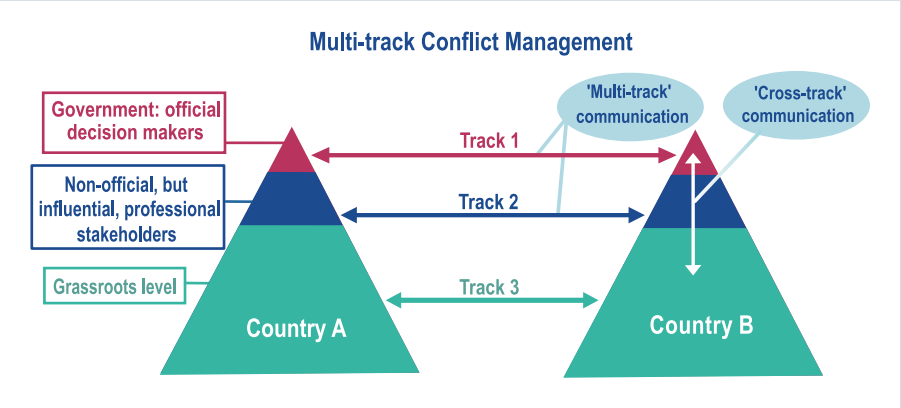
The workshop series was not intended to be a negotiation forum, as such fora

FIGURE 3 Small-scale rainfed agriculture in the Ethiopian highlands. (Photo by Samuel Luzi)



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FIGURE 4 Interactions in multi-track conflict management, showing complementarities.



were being carried out on an official level in the framework of the Nile Basin Initiative. Rather, the workshops sought to enhance mutual understanding and brainstorm management options on an informal level and in a non-polemical style. They were moderated, in order to structure and support communication. All participants attended in their personal capacity as experts, and not as official representatives of their governments or institutions. The workshops can be seen as an epistemic (community of academics) effort to support cooperation in the Nile Basin—a multi-track approach to conflict transformation (Figure 4).

Track 1 refers to classical diplomacy, to interaction among officials from various countries. Track 2 has been defined by Joseph Montville, diplomat and political psychologist, as "informal interaction between (informal but influential) members of adversarial groups or nations which aims to develop strategies, influence public opinion, or organize human resources in a way that may help resolve the conflict." Track 1.5 is used to describe informal meetings among individuals who hold official government positions, but who attend such workshops in their personal capacity. Although the workshops were initially designed as Track 2 exercises, government officials attending in a personal capacity were included in later workshops, with the result that the intermediate Track 1.5 interaction level became the norm. To enhance communication across tracks, and to balance lopsided gender symmetry, a woman from a grassroots NGO (so-called Track 3) attended the 2004 workshop. This introduced a very positive dynamic of enhanced interaction across tracks, rather than just between countries.

Workshop 1

The first workshop took place in 2002, with 2 academics each from Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia. The 6 participants undertook a joint analysis and an exchange of perceptions. In the words of one participant: "Participants had the chance to give their independent reflections on the issue of Nile water. They had an opportunity to talk informally with researchers from other countries. This is very useful feedback for future research." The output of the workshop was a collection of 4 peer-reviewed articles in the journal *Aquatic Sciences*, presenting various perceptions, interests, and points of agreement, as well as open questions, in a comprehensive manner.

Workshop 2

The second workshop increased the number of participants. To maintain continuity, the original participants attended. The workshop aimed to move from joint analysis to joint learning experiences. Based on the wishes of participants in the first workshop, experts were invited, such as the Managing Director of the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (Europe). The workshop focused on interactive tools to support dialogue. A comment by one of the participants highlights the merits of the workshop: "Good interaction. Frank communication. Readiness to discuss issues, even those otherwise thought to be sensitive."

Workshop 3

The third workshop developed ideas for joint action. This time 4 participants from each of the 3 countries of the Eastern Nile Basin attended. There was also at least one person from each country who was also involved in the official negotiation process in the Nile Basin Initiative. In addition there was an NGO representative to strengthen the link to the grassroots level. As one participant said: "For me it was a great learning process to understand other people's perspectives. Beyond that, I have

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FIGURE 5 International conflict transformation workshops alone cannot solve water scarcity problems, which may be related to climatic fluctuations or irrigation mismanagement. Large-scale irrigated area in Gezira, Sudan, during a period with little water. (Photo by Simon Mason)



seen how an informal setting such as this could achieve more tangible outputs than a formal setting, which has a number of constraints." Ideas were developed to enhance cooperation and development in the Eastern Nile Basin. These ideas entail future training events, with a mixed student body from the 3 countries, as well as activities to support development in the region in such a way as to keep ownership in the hands of the people living in the region.

Conclusions

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of such a workshop series on the wider sociopolitical environment (Figures 5 and 6). Some indication can be deduced from the participants' evaluations, which were very positive. The openness and the progress made by the participants during the workshops would not have been possible without positive steps towards coopera-

FIGURE 6 Large-scale irrigated area in Gezira, Sudan. (Photo by Simon Mason)



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tion on the intergovernmental Nile Basin Initiative level. On this level too, however, communication was decisive in creating trust and supporting cooperation. The actual test of the success of the Dialogue Workshop will be in the realization of planned activities. If these are implemented, then the workshop can be viewed as a source of further initiatives, which could also involve people outside the group of participants. Joint publication in *Aquatic Sciences* is an initial indication that the workshop also had an impact outside the original small circle of participants.

What can be said in conclusion if we restate our original question concerning the role of dialogue in preventing or transforming scorpion- or ostrich-like behavior? Four points stand out:

1. Upholding meaningful dialogue, for example in such a Dialogue Series, is a key aspect in preventing escalation, since escalation advances by one step when people give up hope that communication might help.
2. To be effective, such Dialogue Workshops must be carried out over a period of years, as in the 3-year ECONILE project. Only with continuity, on the part of the participants as well as the moderators and facilitators, can a trust relationship be developed.
3. Dialogue Workshops must start small, expanding the type and number of participants as they develop. This makes it possible to do solid in-depth work rather than focusing on media-effective mega-events.
4. It is short-sighted to believe that communication can solve all problems. Yet if a certain degree of balance of power is achieved, and there are potential benefits for all cooperating actors, then dialogue can be decisive in discovering and implementing these mutual benefits—and thus in transforming ostrich-like behavior and preventing scorpion-like behavior.

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