

Pathways for building capacity and ensuring effective transboundary water resources management in Africa: Revisiting the key issues, opportunities and challenges



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ABSTRACT

The performance of most organizations and institutions set up to facilitate transboundary water resources management in Africa remains unsatisfactory and new frameworks are required to address this performance gap. Using the Nile and Senegal River Basins as case studies, this paper applies qualitative research methods to explore the transboundary river basin management terrain in Africa with a view to identifying and articulating some of the major issues, challenges and opportunities faced in building the capacity of the main actors and institutions in the sector. The paper establishes that the creation of basin management institutions as the assumed panacea to challenges evident in this sector has not delivered the desired results. Some of the institutions established for this purpose in Africa have remained functionally weak and ineffective. Thus, demand for capacity-building interventions in this landscape remains high. The paper concludes that comprehensive capacity-building interventions should seek to improve the competencies and skills of key actors in implementing the broad range of activities constituting integrated water resources management in transboundary basins. In-depth analysis of the fundamental capacity constraints and challenges that key players face in relation to key drivers for cooperation is the absolutely necessary ingredient.

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1. Introduction

The historical legacy of arbitrary sub-division of geographical areas into various states during colonialism has left Africa being home to at least 55 of the world's transboundary river basins, which is more than on any other continent. Some of the transboundary basins are shared by as many as 10 countries (see Fig. 1). The multiplicity of countries sharing transboundary water makes management of the resource quite complex on the continent. Therefore, the agenda for capacity building in African transboundary river basin management (TRBM) should be partly informed by the fact that the continent is well-endowed with river basins and lakes that cross the national borders of two or more countries. In some cases, a nation's entire water supply system originates outside its borders and has to rely on the goodwill of the upstream countries to sustain that supply, for example, Egypt (99%); Mauritania (95%); Botswana (94%); and the Gambia (86%) (see Rieu-Clarke et al., 2012). Thus, the continent is one of the most hydrologically interconnected regions on the planet (Brozek, 2013). This scenario suggests

that in the face of diminishing global freshwater resources, Africa is a special case.

With the anticipated sharp rise in water demand due to population growth and climate change, reliance on international shared water resources is likely to significantly increase, thereby increasing competition and potential for inter-state conflict over these finite resources. It is therefore, no coincidence that for several decades, analysis of drivers and constraints to transboundary water cooperation in Africa has received increasing attention in both theory and practice. At the same time, knowledge and understanding about the key factors that determine successful technical cooperation and capacity-building interventions in this area has remained limited. Consequently, considerable amounts of funds from various national and international sources have been mobilized to address this challenge and have actually been deployed in various transboundary basins to generate specific projects and programmes. However, results have been mixed and in some cases, far less impressive than originally expected, irrespective of the glowing evaluations that may have been made by various actors (see Gumbo et al., 2005; Merrey, 2009; Biswas, 2011). Therefore, the search for more solutions in this domain remains an ongoing challenge.

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It is also very important to note that thinking about resource allocation and capacity-building paradigms in this sector has significantly shifted away from the traditional single-minded focus on how to share water in absolute volumetric terms to perspectives that promote sharing of multiple benefits and costs derived from inter-state collaboration within transboundary river basins. Ways of turning what is often perceived as a zero-sum predicament – in which one party's gain is another's loss – into a win-win proposition are now constantly the subject of interest to scholars (see Van der Zaag and Savenije, 2001; Sadoff and Grey, 2002). This is the emerging landscape in which TRBM and capacity building in Africa also have to be understood.

This paper explores the main discourses on TRBM and capacity building in Africa with a view to generating specific recommendations that can inform future interventions aimed at strengthening institutional performance in this domain. The paper presents an overview of key issues that one must expect to confront when designing capacity building interventions. It provides provocative commentary on the nature and significance of the key issues and how to deal with them. The key question guiding the narrative in the paper is: *how best can riparian countries and transboundary river basin organizations (TRBOs) be capacitated to cooperate and adapt or facilitate effective inter-state cooperation over water resources?* In addressing this question, the paper highlights the major issues,

challenges, opportunities and pathways for improved TRBM in the context of capacity-building interventions.

2. Methods applied

This paper is the result of a qualitative theoretical review of published and grey literature and reference to documented case studies to profile the trajectory of capacity-building efforts in TRBM. The major aim is not to review extensively the water conflict-cooperation discourses that have dominated scholarship in this domain for so long in thesis-anti-thesis fashion, but rather to identify viable options for strengthening TRBM institutional performance. While information on shared river basins relevant to the African continent is used, the paper presents lessons from two selected case studies, namely, the Nile and the Senegal river basins to illustrate the key drivers for and constraints to the formation of sustainable transboundary water governance regimes.

These basins are selected on the basis of their long history of water conflict and cooperation and significant capacity-building interventions implemented that could yield key insights. In addition, both basins are still considered as potential water conflict 'hot-spots' and are therefore, of ongoing academic interest. Therefore, the paper explores theoretical constructs common to

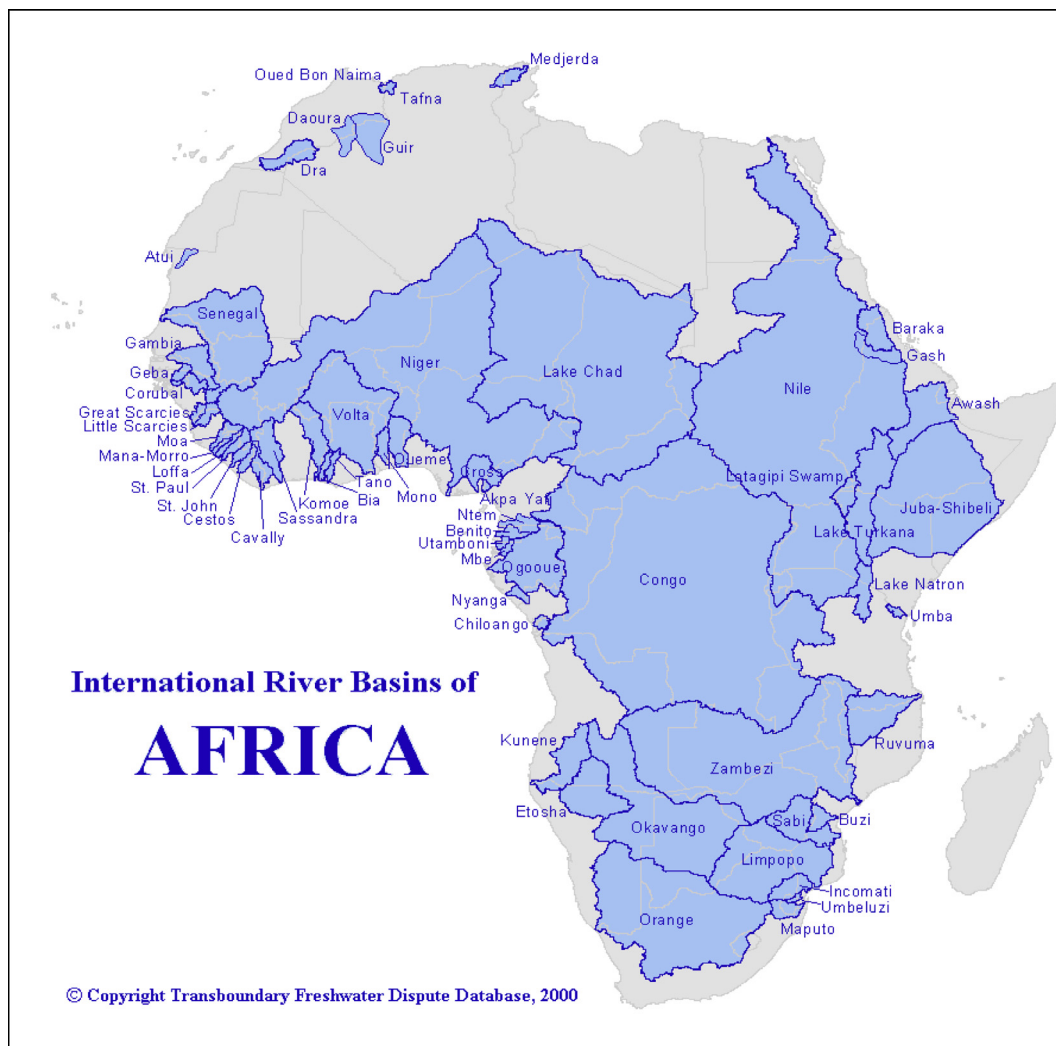


Fig. 1. Africa's Major Transboundary River Basins. Source: Transboundary Freshwater Dispute Database, 2000

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