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Egypt

Still the gift of the Nile?

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Herodotus's formula is well known: "Egypt is the gift of the Nile". But it seems that, 2,500 years after the death of the Greek historian, this will no longer be the case.

Egypt is a huge desert traversed by the Nile and its population (100 million inhabitants) is crowded into the Nile valley and the Delta, or 5% of the total area of the country. Water resources are one of the challenges for the Egyptian economy, which depends on the Nile for 90% of its drinking water supply as well as for industry and especially irrigation. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the country will reach the threshold of absolute water stress, i.e. less than 500 m³ / inhabitant / year, by 2030, and this without counting the effects of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), still under construction but already partially operational.

The Great Renaissance Dam

The waters of the Nile are shared between 11 countries. The agreement on this sharing, signed in 1959 between Egypt and Sudan (but not recognized by upstream countries such as Ethiopia) assigns Egypt an annual quota of 55.5 billion m³, or 75% of the annual flow. This quota has been exceeded in practice for many years due to the under-consumption of Sudan, and in fact nearly 65 billion m³ / year goes through the Aswan dam.

It is in this context that Ethiopia began the construction of the Great Renaissance Dam in 2011 on the Blue Nile, a tributary from which 80% of the volumes of water arriving in Sudan and Egypt originate, in order to power a hydroelectric power station with a capacity of 6.45 GW. A crucial project for Ethiopia, which intends to lift its 110 million inhabitants, more than half of whom do not have access to electricity, out of poverty with agricultural projects and the export of the majority of electricity produced.

Initially, Egypt, preoccupied at the time by the revolution of January 2011, denied the impact this could have on the country, but it quickly began tripartite negotiations with Sudan and Ethiopia insofar as the repercussions on the two downstream countries are likely to be dramatic. "If the dam reservoir is filled without coordination between Egypt and Ethiopia, the consequences will be destructive for all of Egyptian society, and the state will not be able to cope" said Mohammed Nasr Allam, a former irrigation minister. He says a permanent decrease of 5 billion m³ would cause the loss of 400,000 ha of arable land, or 12% of the total.

Stalemate in negotiations

It should be noted that the Aswan High Dam, built between 1960 and 1970, has already caused serious difficulties in agriculture: the silt brought by the flood of the Nile (fed by the Blue Nile coming from Ethiopia) is deposited at the bottom of Lake Nasser and no longer fertilizes irrigated land. The Delta's north coast is being eaten away by the sea, despite the dikes and concrete blocks. The earth is no longer washed and is inexorably salinizing, resulting in an ever-increasing use of chemical inputs. The fall in the level of the Nile will consequently affect fish farms, which until now constituted a significant source of protein with a production of 1.5 million tonnes of fish, mainly Nile tilapia. Sudan too would see its dams endangered even if it could take advantage of the Great Dam with cheaper electricity.

The negotiations that began nine years ago have still come to nothing, with each side blaming the other for their

failure. The latest negotiations under the auspices of the African Union, with the European Union and the United States as observers, have also failed. Sudan and Egypt want a binding agreement on the filling of the dam and then a comprehensive agreement on water sharing. Ethiopia rejects any constraint and, in fact, filling began in July without any agreement, and the goal of filling for the first year was reached in two weeks because of the abundant rains on the Ethiopian highlands. Ethiopia even caused a provocation by saying that the Nile belonged to it, implying that it was free to dispose of its waters.

Sudan immediately suffered the consequences: in Khartoum, six drinking water stations were shut down in July for lack of sufficient water. Egypt partially escaped thanks to the reserve of Lake Nasser, retained by the Aswan High Dam.

Water, a vital issue

Egypt has therefore decided to take radical measures: as a first step, the construction of 68 seawater desalination plants, all along the Mediterranean coast and on the Red Sea, resulting in around 170 plants within the next five years. An interesting undertaking if it really took into account the foreseeable rise in sea level due to global warming, which is already being observed throughout the north coast. In the same way, there is an interest in developing methods of drip micro-irrigation and limiting crops requiring a high water supply, such as rice, which is widely consumed in the Egyptian diet. Recognizing the risk of famine for an ever-growing population, Egypt is also considering leasing agricultural land in Sudan, which is not using all of its available land.

However, one major problem has not been addressed by the authorities: the dismal state of the water network due to lack of maintenance and investment. For example, in parts of Cairo and Alexandria we regularly see water leaks which are only repaired superficially and long after the authorities have been notified. In addition, there is the problem of insufficient processing of wastewater.

Another equally important problem: the lack of a public education policy on these issues. The public have many other concerns, not least survival on a daily basis. Water is still wasted in cities, while in some areas, especially oases, people only have access to water every two or three days. And again, it is ferruginous water that must be left to stand for a while to be usable. This is the cause of kidney disease for the vast majority of those who cannot afford bottled water.

One of the consequences of this situation, neglected by the authorities, is the rejection of Ethiopian refugees by the Egyptian population, flamed up by nationalist speeches concerning the Nile and the dam. The 16,000 Ethiopians who fled to Egypt to flee persecution in their country find themselves victims of abuse and physical assault. Most hide their nationality by declaring themselves Somali or Sudanese. As in the whole region, the issue of water sharing is a source of growing tension between all the riparian countries. A vital issue which risks causing a radicalization of the existing conflicts, for the moment confined to the diplomatic scene but which could well spill over.

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#), 15 October 2020.*

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