S H A R E D D E S T I N Y
TIED BY THE GIFT OF THE NILE

> The Nile basin countries are sleeping giants. They are endowed with substantial human and physical assets which, combined with proper financial and technological resources, have the potential to spur high levels of economic growth and development.

Today Ethiopia, the fountainhead of the Blue Nile and its many tributaries, is in a process of a rapid transformative change as its leadership is determined to close the chapter of its age-old underdevelopment. For in its eyes, underdevelopment has been the country's biggest hurdle that had kept the people vulnerable to recurrent drought and famine. This legacy is now receding since Ethiopia has begun to effectively utilize its natural resources through government-led economic interventions and mobilization of its huge reservoir of labor force. Naturally favorable conditions had to obtain for Ethiopia to embark on its present groundbreaking agenda that aims beyond insuring food security. Chief among which has been the prevalence of a solid environment marked by peace, security, and stability that took hold in the immediate aftermath of the fall of its oppressive military regime in1991. Another crucial, if not, decisive factor behind Ethiopia's rise is the political will of its leadership manifest in its commitment to lift the country out of centuries of stagnation and reliance on external subsidy to compensate for its annual food deficit. To this end the government has been implementing a series of comprehensive development strategies which explains the country's impressive turnaround and enhanced capacity to plan and execute multiple mega infrastructural projects. Equally important has been the policy environment which invites interested external parties to a mutually- beneficial investment venture in the country's vast agricultural potential. Including in its huge untapped renewable energy resource matched by only one other country in Africa.

Currently, encouraged by its eleven-year spell of double-digit growth, Ethiopia is in the midst of implementing yet the most ambitious of its development programs, appropriately called Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP). The GTP is expected to lay the foundation of Ethiopia's leap into a mid-income country by around 2025. The lever by which Ethiopia is to elevate itself to approximate the second tier of the world's income level is predicated on outcomes envisioned in the GTP. This includes a two-fold increase in food production based primarily on small-holding agriculture through construction of mini-irrigation dams, increased use of fertilization, and improved high-yield seeds. A no less ambitious goal of the GTP is increasing the country's energy generation capacity by five-fold, i.e. from the present two-thousand to ten thousand mw of electric power. Understandably, Ethiopia's stride in this sector is attracting international attention as one among the multiple purposes of its electrification program is to export clean energy to neighboring countries at a price unavailable elsewhere. Currently, Ethiopia supplies a modest level of hydroelectric power to Djibouti and north Sudan. As work is in progress for export to Kenya, the hope is to supply Egypt in the north, and every signal country in the southern part of the continent. Domestically, higher public sector investment in the energy sector is a function of strategic policy decision, necessitated by soaring current local demand. The forecast, in fact, is that Ethiopia's energy consumption level is likely to grow at an exponential rate as the mainstay of the country's economy -- rain-fed agriculture — yields the lead to the manufacturing sector. Secondly, electrification is expected to end Ethiopia's reliance on fossil-fuel imports by about one-third. "This alone could reduce the country's balance of payments deficit by several billion dollars in 2030".

Naturally Ethiopia' sustained effort to increase its energy production output almost exclusively rests in construction of hydroelectric power dams. In addition to completing three such projects, Ethiopia is currently building two mega dams, each bigger than any in Africa. Nonetheless, none so far has been a subject of needles guesswork as has the Renaissance hydroelectric Dam being built on the Blue Nile. Such unhelpful and off-the- mark speculation over the Dam's possible adverse effect on lower riparian countries could not have come at a worst of times. Since for centuries, largely due to its own failure and lack of direction, Ethiopia has never invested so much of its meager financial resource to tap into the Nile's potential "to spur high levels of economic growth and development.'' Today, however, as it is racing against time to overcome the accumulated burden of its inertia, Ethiopia is determined to put to good use all its natural resources. But, let it be underlined, not at the expense of any of its close or distant neighbors. Not lest Egypt for Ethiopia is sensitive to the hard truth that no other people of the Nile riparian countries depends more on its waters than the people of Egypt. It is in this spirit, then, that Ethiopia plans to generate six thousand mw of electricity from the only river she can. A project, as it were, conceived with malice to none, but out of a deeply felt need of converting Ethiopia's only abundant resource into fuel to quicken the pace of its developmental progression on which its very existence depends As a recent writer aptly put it, "Ethiopians hope these water projects—which extend to 2035 with other Nile tributaries and river systems—will lift their country out of poverty. Similar large dams have produced economic miracles in the United States, Canada, China, Turkey, India, Brazil, and, of course, Egypt''.

Concern over possible reduction in downstream water flow has understandably been raised by lower-riparian states, notably Egypt. As the late prime minster, Meles Zenawi, the chief architect of Ethiopia's development has often said, this is a misplaced concern that, for several reasons, does not square up with reality. To the contrary, as he correctly pointed out, the real advantages outweigh the perceived disadvantages that ill-informed media pundits seek to have us believe. First, the Renaissance Dam project is purely a power- generation scheme, located at the Nile gorge close to the Sudanese border where large-scale irrigation is neither feasible nor cost effective. Hence, since the project site was not chosen for consumption, after hitting the turbines in the Dam's powerhouse, the river will continue its downward course with no loses in water volume. Second, and more importantly, like all hydropower plants, the Renaissance Dam is sure to regulate the flow of the Nile and thereby help Sudanese and Egyptian small farmers cope with over-flooding which continues to be their biggest challenge as it has been for centuries. In this regard, one only needs to look at the relief that the Tekeze hydro dam brought to north Sudanese cultivators around the bunks of Atbara by regulating the flow of this (Tekeze) major Nile tributary. To return to the Blue Nile itself, it bears to mention that evaporation cannot be much of an issue where the Renaissance Dam is concerned. For the storage site of the reservoir behind the Dam is within a narrow gorge, where less of the surface is exposed to the sun. Whereas, on the words of Milias, "For decades, water experts have pointed out that much of the water lost to evaporation from storage at Aswan, could be saved by storage behind dams in the Blue Nile Gorge. The Millennium (*read Renaissance*) Dam will address this issue. It will also provide Egypt the opportunity to save still more water…"

Third, over and above the benefits cited above, the Renaissance Dam has an additional measurable advantage to the two downstream countries which neither can deny. No one, in fact, can disagree that building more hydroelectric power plant in the Nile gorges of Ethiopia means less siltation to dams in Egypt and Sudan. Less siltation in turn raises the water storage levels of their dams and boosts their power-generating and irrigation capacity. Hence, all in all, it is only reasonable that Ethiopia's water resource development strategy, including its Renaissance Dam, be viewed as a win-win undertaking by all stakeholders, not least Egypt and Sudan. If anything, Ethiopia's clean-energy production projects is not only sensitive to their needs but also reflect the principle of 'equitable -sharing' of the Nile waters. A principle enshrined in the 2009 Cooperative Nile Basin Framework Agreement (CFA), signed by all upstream countries except the two downstream states of Egypt and northern Sudan. For no apparent, let alone, compelling reason, these two states have so far been reluctant to endorse the CFA's core principle of equitable sharing.

Nonetheless, constructive and confidence-building words of cooperation with Ethiopia's Renaissance project are being heard at the highest levels of the current Egyptian government. This is a most welcome potential game- changer as it is only through a cooperative effort that both countries whose fates are tied by the Nile can turn its rich bounty into mutual benefit as the rivers has more to offer beyond the two countries' needs. However, it may take some time before influential opinion-makers in Egypt warm up to the idea of equitable sharing. For it seems many are still wedded to the carryover elements of the obsolte19th century thinking that, among other inequities, led to the 1929 and 1959 Nile treaties. As many non-Arabic speaking upstream nations rightly argue, the 1929 Treaty is nothing but a unilateral colonial arrangement imposed by imperial Britain. No different, they reckon, than any which Brittan left behind that to this day remain a contentious source of tension and violence between neighboring communities and states across Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Thus, these countries consider the 1929 Nile Treaty in the same vein -- an accord laden with seeds of discord as it not only places monopoly control of the Nile waters in the hands of one out of eleven riparian countries, but also a veto-power over "any upriver water management projects." To most riparian states, the subsequent 1959 bilateral agreement signed by Cairo and Khartoum is no improvement on its discredited 1929 prototype. Ethiopia for one, which supplies the largest volume of the waters of the longest river, sees the agreement as most iniquitous. How else is Ethiopia to view an agreement that allocates an eighty-five percent share of the Nile waters to Egypt, the remaining fifteen percent to Sudan, and leaves it with nothing? Surely, a people united in the pursuit of justice as the people of Egypt are at present, cannot fail to see why their counterparts in Ethiopia see injustice in an arrangement that stipulates zero percent use of eighty-five percent of the Nile that flows from its mountains. That is why there is hope in Ethiopia that as the dust settles and calmer heads prevail, the people of Egypt and their elected leadership will realize that in this day-in-age the way forward on the Nile issue lies with the acceptance of the principle of "equitable share.''

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