Water&Africa

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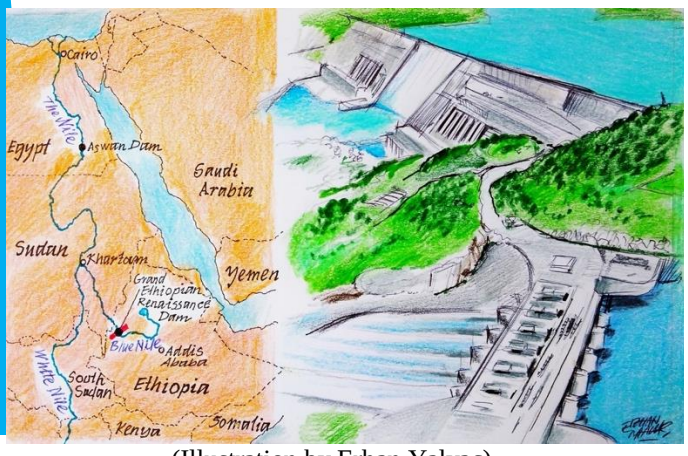
Water for peace and prosperity in Africa

African Desk
HPA Center Türkiye

Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: Path to national development, regional integration

(By Yusuf Ali Mohammed & Afework Shimelis Legesse)



(Illustration by Erhan Yalvaç)

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is a hydroelectric dam built on the Abbay (Blue Nile) River, financed through a comprehensive mobilization effort involving all Ethiopian citizens. The GERD has long been an intergenerational dream of the Ethiopian people. However, it is the current generation – under the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, along with the collective contribution of his predecessors and the participation of the people – that has turned this long-held aspiration into a tangible reality.

The inauguration of the GERD on Sept. 9, 2025, marks a historic milestone, not just for Ethiopia but also for the Nile River basin countries and Africa as a whole. Often described as the continent's largest hydropower project, the GERD represents more than a dam – it is a symbol of resilience, unity, hope and a demonstration of the dawn of Ethiopia's awakening and rejuvenation.

The GERD is more than a structure; it is a flagship project and national symbol that signifies a profound shift in the region's geopolitical dynamics. At a time when the international system has been

biased and failed to deliver justice, Ethiopia has demonstrated what collective will can achieve and written a new chapter under the African sky, one that could match the victory of Adwa. Entirely funded and built through the collective sacrifices of Ethiopians from all walks of life, the project embodies a rare story of national solidarity and determination. Citizens and Ethiopian diasporas willingly bought bonds, donated from their modest earnings, and stood behind the project despite tremendous external pressure. Farmers, civil servants, merchants, students, civic and religious institutions, intellectuals, advocacy groups, and the diaspora, among others, contributed financially and morally to the project, turning what was once a dream into a powerful reality.

Thus, the GERD's story is not only one of concrete and turbines, but of people and unity of purpose. It is Ethiopia's answer to a long-cherished vision: harnessing the natural resources of the Blue Nile for sustainable growth and development, while contributing to the wider prosperity of the basin and East Africa. This spirit of unity reflects the broader African narrative of self-reliance and resilience. In this sense, the GERD is not only Ethiopia's project but also a model for other African nations aspiring to develop their natural resource by mobilizing funds from their own coffer. It demonstrates that locally driven initiatives can overcome both financial and political preconditions and constraints.

Socioeconomic benefits, integration

The economic benefits of the GERD are vast and far-reaching. At full capacity, the dam is expected to generate more than $1 billion annually, a figure that represents both direct revenue and indirect economic stimulation. With a capacity of 5,150 megawatts (MW), the electric energy produced by the GERD will power a substantial number of households and industries, while reducing dependence on fossil fuels and significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

By providing reliable electricity, the GERD will transform Ethiopia's industrial base, enabling manufacturing and agricultural processing to flourish. Beyond industry, tourism is also set to benefit, as the dam becomes a landmark, drawing new visitors and serving as an important tourist destination in Ethiopia. In a world increasingly shaped by the green energy transition, the GERD places Ethiopia at the forefront of Africa's sustainable development drive.

Far from being a source of division, the GERD has the potential to strengthen regional cooperation. By exporting surplus power to neighboring countries, Ethiopia is contributing to Africa's interconnected future envisioned in the African Union's Agenda 2063. Energy interdependence is expected to foster closer ties, reduce conflict, and promote shared prosperity across the Horn of Africa and beyond. This regional vision is not merely aspirational; it is already unfolding. Agreements for power exports to Sudan, Djibouti, and Kenya are part of Ethiopia's strategy to transform the GERD into a cornerstone of African integration.

International legal framework

While Ethiopia celebrates the GERD's inauguration, opposition from downstream countries, particularly Egypt and Sudan, remains a recurring challenge. Their concerns often draw on colonial-era treaties, notably the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian and 1959 Egypt-Sudan agreements, that allocated the Nile's waters exclusively to downstream states, despite their contribution being almost nil. However, these treaties – which were signed without the consent of upstream countries and disregarded their interests, particularly that of Ethiopia – are outdated, no longer serve the current reality and thus do not reflect modern international law.

Furthermore, the downstream riparian states have also invoked the notion of "natural" or "historical" rights over the Nile, attempting to maintain a monopoly over the river's use. To this end, downstream states have deployed various strategies: international diplomatic campaigns, securitization of the Nile issue at global forums, financing opposition groups and obstructing international funding for the GERD. These efforts, however, overlook a fundamental reality that the Nile is a shared international watercourse that must not solely serve Egypt and Sudan, but also the other nine riparian states of the basin, including Ethiopia.

In response, Ethiopia has pursued a balanced strategy, rooted in sovereignty, cooperation and regional integration. Standing on international water law that advocates for equitable and reasonable use and the obligation not to cause significant harm, Ethiopia, alongside other upstream nations, has championed the Nile Basin

Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA).

Signed in 2010 and coming into force in 2024, the CFA represents a shift from outdated colonial treaties to a forward-looking, basin-wide governance system. Once fully implemented, the CFA and its institutional arm, the Nile Basin Commission (NBC), will provide a durable mechanism for cooperation and conflict resolution.

Moreover, Ethiopia has consistently emphasized its right to use the Nile for development while reaffirming its commitment to cooperative solutions. Ethiopia has engaged in trilateral negotiations with Egypt and Sudan, guided by the 2015 Declaration of Principles (DoPs), which commits all parties to peaceful dialogue and mutual benefit. By doing so, Ethiopia underscores its preference for diplomacy over confrontation. At the same time, Ethiopia has strengthened partnerships in the Horn of Africa and beyond, using the GERD as a platform to project stability and constructive influence in both the Nile Basin and the Red Sea region.

Shared Renaissance for Africa

The GERD is a living symbol of Ethiopia's determination to achieve economic transformation and prosperity, while embracing a future of clean energy, industrial growth, and regional solidarity. Its inauguration is not only a celebration for Ethiopia but also for Africa, a demonstration that collective will, rooted in justice and equity, can overcome even the weight of history.

As misconceptions give way to knowledge, the GERD's story will stand as a reminder: the Nile is not the monopoly of a few, but the lifeline of many. Through cooperation, respect for international law and shared vision, the river can become a bridge to prosperity rather than a source of discord. The way forward is only cooperation based on a win-win principle.

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Note: This article is published in "Daily Sabah" and is available here.

About the Contributors:

1. Yusuf Ali MOHAMMED, PhD Candidate at Anadolu University, Türkiye
2. Afework Shimelis LEGESSE, Diplomat at the Ethiopian Embassy in Ankara, Türkiye

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Ethiopia's mega dam has taken 14 years to build: what it means for the Nile's 11 river states and why it's so controversial

(*By John Mukum Mbaku*)

In April 2011, Ethiopia began construction of Africa's largest hydroelectric dam, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), on the Blue Nile river. The dam is expected to generate more than 6,000 megawatts of electricity, effectively transforming Ethiopia into the continent's largest power exporter. The dam affects 11 countries, two downstream and nine upstream. Addis Ababa completed construction of the US$4 billion-plus project in July 2025, mainly with funds sourced from Ethiopians at home and in the diaspora, with an official launch on 9 September 2025.

What are the simmering tensions around the official launch of the dam?

The dispute over the allocation and use of the Nile waters has been going on for many years. This has been exacerbated by climate change, and increased demand for food and water from growing populations.

The 11 countries that share the waters of the Nile

have competing development priorities too. These states include Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan, Rwanda, Tanzania and Kenya.

Egypt and Sudan lie downstream. They receive the river's waters only after it has passed through the nine upstream states.

Initially, the downstream states, particularly Egypt, opposed the construction of the dam, arguing that it was a threat to their water rights.

However, Ethiopia powered ahead with construction. Egypt and Sudan then shifted negotiations to securing an agreement for filling and operating the dam.

The two downstream states had suggested that filling the dam should take about 12 to 21 years in order to protect their water supply. For domestic and political reasons, Addis Ababa prefered a shorter filling period. In addition, Egypt and Sudan argued that filling the reservoir without a legally binding agreement would disregard their interests and rights.

But with the dam now fully filled and due to be officially inaugurated on 9 September 2025, the issue of a binding agreement for filling the dam's reservoir is moot.

Egypt and Sudan's political and diplomatic efforts highlight what they say is the illegality of unilaterally operating the dam without a binding agreement. Despite the intervention of the African Union and the US government, as well as appeals by Egypt to the UN Security Council, the three countries haven't been able to secure a deal.

The location of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Created with Datawrapper

Part of the reason is that Egypt has insisted that any negotiations on water allocation begin with the rights granted to it under its 1959 Nile Waters Treaty with Sudan.

Under this agreement, Egypt was granted 66% of the Nile's estimated average annual water flow of 84 billion cubic metres. Sudan got 22%. The treaty ignores upstream countries' legal claims to Nile waters, since 10 billion cubic metres were reserved for seepage and evaporation. Ethiopia's highlands, for instance, supply more than 86% of the water that flows into the Nile River.

Egypt continues to argue that Ethiopia's dam is a threat to its water security and that, if necessary, it will take measures to protect what it refers to as its "historical rights" to Nile waters.

Egypt relies on the Nile for more than 90% of its fresh water supplies. The country's water needs have risen as its population has grown and its economy has expanded significantly.

However, Egypt and Sudan's insistence on keeping their historical water shares cannot be considered equitable and reasonable. Additionally, Cairo doesn't appear to be prioritising a water-use approach that acknowledges the legal claims of upstream states to the Nile's waters.

Instead of improving and updating its water infrastructure, minimising wasteful irrigation practices and generally improving water use, Egypt has focused on grandiose mega projects that are putting significant stress on the region's scarce water resources.

Sudan, which has been battling a devastating civil war since 2023, has raised concerns about Ethiopia's dam affecting the operations of its own dams. This would make it more difficult to manage Khartoum's development plans.

What makes agreement on the Nile so elusive?

The legal framework regulating the allocation of the Nile's waters has been dominated by colonial-era agreements. These have been embraced by the two downstream states, Sudan and Egypt, but contested by the nine upstream ones.

Two of the most important of these agreements are the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and the 1959 Egypt-Sudan treaty.

The 1959 treaty augmented the water allocations granted to Egypt and Sudan by the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty. These treaties also granted Egypt veto power over any construction projects on the Nile or its tributaries.

The terms of these treaties, however, are only possible if the nine upstream riparian states don't access or utilise any water from the Nile and its tributaries.

Most importantly, they make the water rights of the other Nile countries dependent on Egypt and Sudan's goodwill.

Ethiopia and other upstream states have long argued that they were not parties to the colonial-era treaties and are, therefore, not bound by them.

What international principles guide water use across borders?

The pillars of international transboundary water law are:

(i) equitable and reasonable use

(ii) the obligation not to cause significant harm

(iii) the duty to cooperate.

International legal scholars have noted that the 1959 Nile Treaty stands in sharp contrast to these principles. It disregards the sovereign rights of other riparian countries to their fair share of the Nile, and interferes with their development.

What does the dam promise for Ethiopians?

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is a symbol of national unity and pride. It is significant that construction was undertaken without reliance on financing from external actors, such as international financial institutions or major industrial countries.

The dam's electricity output could potentially transform Ethiopia's development.

First, the electricity would provide a reliable source of energy for rural industrialisation, reducing deforestation by eliminating the need for households to cut down trees for firewood.

Second, it would reduce the pollution associated with burning wood, dung and other forms of biomass for cooking and other activities.

Third, it would improve access to education, effectively providing light that enhances the ability of pupils to complete homework assignments and study at night. During hot seasons, the electricity generated could be used to cool classrooms, improving learning outcomes.

Finally, higher electricity output would boost internet connectivity in rural areas in Ethiopia, effectively boosting access to the outside world.

The dam could also help with flood control in Sudan and drought protection in Egypt – but only if the three countries work together.

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Note: This article is published in "The Conversation" and is available here.

About the Contributor:

John Mukum Mbaku, Professor, Weber State University, USA

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The Africa Water Vision for 2025: Equitable and Sustainable Use of Water for Socioeconomic Development

(*Part V*)

10. Framework for Action

The framework for action defines the road map towards the Vision. Table 3 shows the milestones and corresponding targets towards the Vision. The framework for action consists of actions under the following broad categories:

1. Strengthening governance of water resources;
2. Improving water wisdom;
3. Meeting urgent water needs;
4. Strengthening the financial base for the desired water future.

Strengthening governance of water resources

- Adopting and implementing IWRM principles and policies;
- Developing and implementing institutional reform and capacity-building at local, national and trans-boundary water-basin levels;
- Promoting transparency and participation;
- Adopting the river basin as the unit for water-resources management; Strengthening river-basin and aquifer management;
- Creating an enabling environment for cooperation between countries sharing international water basins;
- Mainstreaming management at the lowest appropriate level and creating institutional arrangements for full stakeholder participation;
- Liberalizing water markets while meeting basic needs of the poor.

Improving water wisdom

- Raising awareness on water-management issues;
- Establishing a sustainable system for data collection, management, and dissemination, including standardization and harmonization of data;
- Building institutional, technological and human capacity for effective water management;
- Conducting research and development on water-resources issues;
- Facilitating access to knowledge and information centers and services such as the Internet;
- Mainstreaming gender and youth concerns in all activities.

Meeting urgent water needs

- Expanding safe water-supply and sanitation services to meet basic human needs;
- Ensuring an adequate supply of water for sustainable food security;
- Ensuring that water for the environment is adequate in quantity and quality;
- Ensuring an adequate supply of water for urban, agricultural, energy, and hydropower production, industry, tourism and transportation development;
- Managing climate variability and change, including drought, desertification, and floods;
- Conserving and restoring ecosystems;
- Protecting watersheds and controlling siltation of hydraulic structures;
- Meeting rural energy needs;
- Developing non-conventional resources such as desalination and re-use of water.

Strengthening the investment base for the desired water future

- Mainstreaming full cost recovery and service differentiation, while ensuring safety nets for the poor;
- Securing sustainable financing from national and international sources for tackling urgent water needs;
- Securing sustainable financing for institutional reform;
- Securing sustainable financing for information generation and management;
- Promoting and facilitating private sector financing in the water sector;
- Establishing mechanisms for sustainable financing of water-resources management.

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Note: The following part/s will be presented in our next issue/s. Stay tuned!

Source: African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW)

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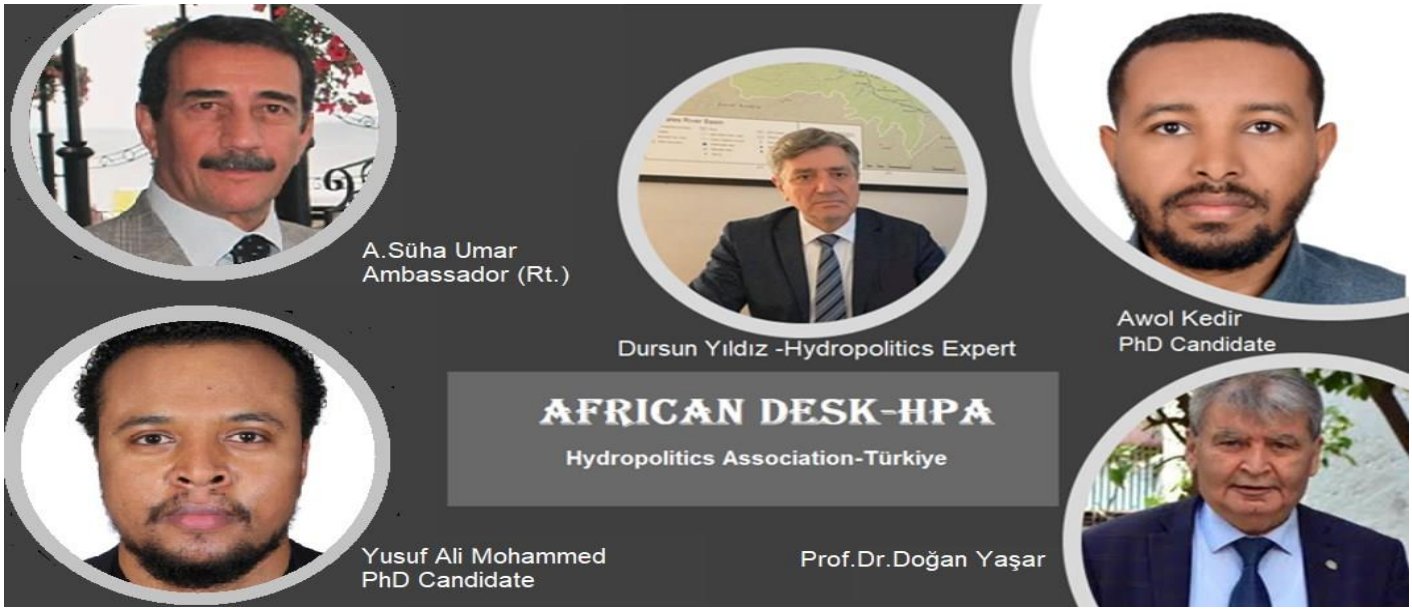

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Where people live in harmony with nature

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