

Understanding Africa's water wars



The world is replete with cases of water being used as a weapon to score either political or socio-economic goals, especially if many countries share the common resource.

So, what are some of the causes of the current water wars in Africa and what are their impact on the environment?

Egypt and Ethiopia are going at each other's throat over River Nile. Ethiopia is busy constructing a controversial dam, which Egypt complains will disrupt the river's flow, with detrimental impact on its population that is almost entirely dependent on the Nile.

Addis Ababa embarked on construction of the \$4.2 billion Grand Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam (GERD) with 6,000MW electric power generation capacity in April 2011, possibly taking advantage of the Arab Spring, that distracted Cairo.

This move angered Egypt so much that at one point Cairo threatened military action against Ethiopia, though the parties later agreed to dialogue over River Nile's governance.

Ethiopia adopted the Harmon Doctrine - an international resources law that holds that a country has absolute sovereignty over the water that flows through its territory, regardless of its impact on other riparian states. Cairo now views Ethiopia's move as bullish and reads political sabotage

Egypt, however, adopted a hard line by holding onto the 1959 historical usage rights to exploit the waters and earlier treaties that the majority of Nile Basin nations never signed.

Egypt gets 94 per cent of its total water resources from the river. The Nile Basin supplies water to about 300 million people across Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Congo, Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia.

Food production

Water wars in Africa are not new, given the growing populations and rising temperatures, especially where rivers are shared by more than one country. Experts have tied these wrangles to water usage rights and shortages. Some of the disputes have even resulted in serious conflicts.

Conservationists have pointed out over and over again that these lead to droughts, soil erosion and other unfavourable environmental consequences.

There have been calls on various countries to utilise three main river basins - the Nile, the Zambezi and the Senegal. The three constitute the economic backbone of the countries they flow through.

This is not only for avoiding conflicts, but also to ensure everyone has enough to drink. It will also increase hydroelectric power generation, tourism and food production. All these result in sound environmental management, which boosts economies courtesy of trade and growth.

Just last year, conservationists in Kenya were outraged after Ethiopia announced that it would build a dam on River Omo, which is the main source feeding Lake Turkana.

They argued that Lake Turkana in north-eastern Kenya, which sustains many lives, might dry up due to reduction in the flow of River Omo. Ethiopia became bullish, insisting it would go ahead with the Gibe III dam project.

Friends of Lake Turkana pointed out that the water mass has been shrinking because of increased evaporation, reduction in the flow of River Omo due to less rainfall and human activities like irrigation, which often lead to diversion of water and upstream dam projects. As the lake has diminished, it has disappeared altogether from Ethiopian territory and retreated south into Kenya.

In 1990, armed clashes erupted between Nigeria and Cameroon over the use of Lake Chad water. This was fuelled by water and land scarcity. Lake Chad has shrunk by 90 per cent, though it remains the only large source of fresh water in the Sahel zone.

Nigerian fishermen who depend on the lake, followed the retreating water up to Cameroonian territory and established villages there, leading to the outbreak of conflict. The case was then taken to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which ruled in Cameroon's favour in 2002.

Electricity needs

In Southern Africa, the Lake Malawi issue is the hot topic now with both Malawi and Tanzania claiming ownership.

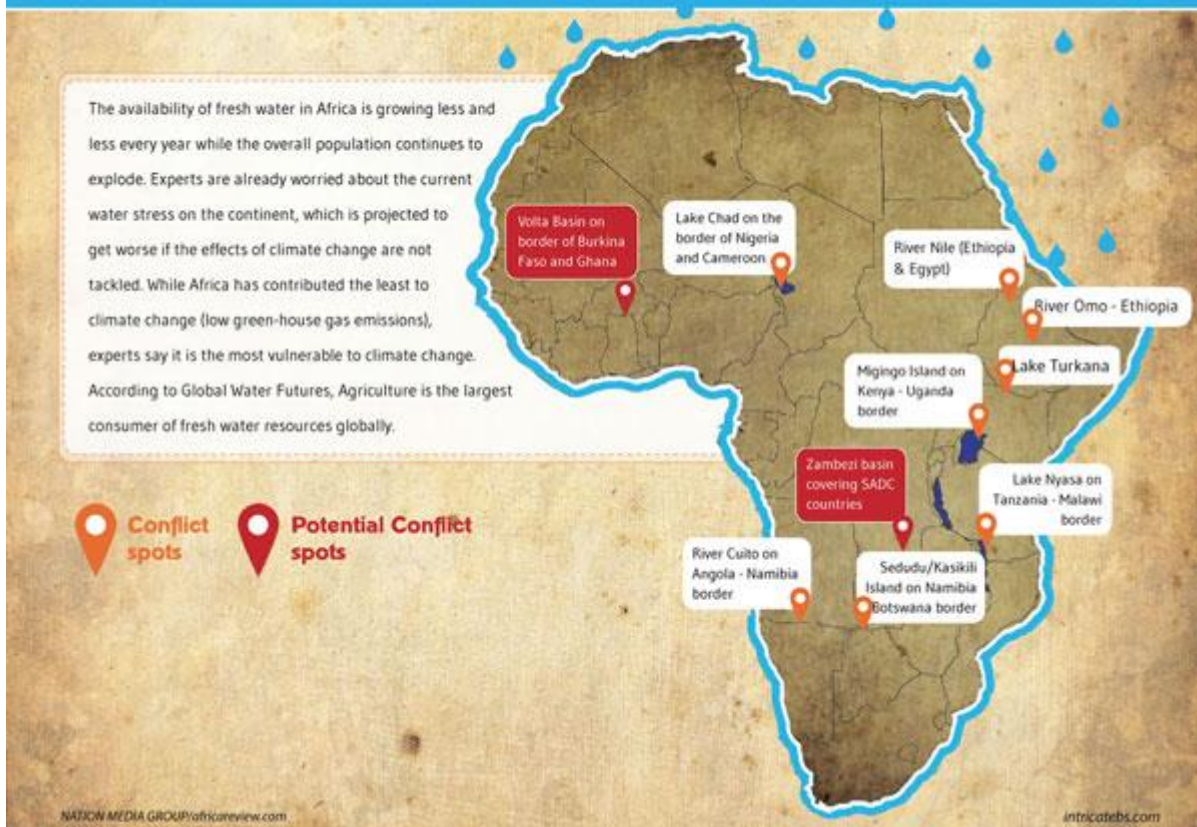
The issue is being mediated by SADC even as Malawi threatens to take it to ICJ if they are not satisfied with the mediation. The dispute, which has been running since colonial times, was reignited last year when Malawi allowed gas and oil exploration to begin around the lake. The lake, which connects Malawi, Tanzania and Mozambique, is the eighth largest in the world and sustains about 600,000 people.

River Cuito, which has its source in Angola, flows through Namibia before ending in Botswana. It has also been a source of conflict with each country trying to have control, though the dispute has not escalated.

Namibia and Botswana also exchanged bitter words over the ownership of Sedudu/Kasikili Island in the Chobe River, which is on the border of the two countries. After failing to resolve the issue amicably, they both presented it to ICJ which recognised the territorial claims of Botswana.

Analysts have pointed out that Burkina Faso and Ghana, which share 80 per cent of the Volta Basin, might end up quarrelling over the use of water resources. Ghana depends on the river to feed and maintain its hydroelectric dam that accounts for 80 per cent of its electricity needs.

Water conflict spots in Africa



The Zambezi River, flowing within SADC countries with a catchment area of 1,300,000 square kilometres, occupying the territories of Angola, Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, has also been predicted as a potential source of conflict if water resources are not properly managed.

Then there is the Migingo Island dispute pitting Kenya and Uganda. The island which sits on Lake Victoria, measures about an acre of land.

Climate change

Kenyan anglers have complain of harassment by Ugandan police for 'illegal fishing in Ugandan waters'. Kenyans living there have also been asked by Ugandan authorities to purchase residency permits.

Unpleasant words have also come from Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who at one time insisted that the island was in Kenya but the waters surrounding it belonged to Uganda.

The island is a fisherman's paradise going by the reports that it has a lot of Nile perch. About 30 million people depend on the lake for survival - as a source of income, employment, food and foreign exchange for East Africa.

According to the Lake Victoria Fisheries Organisation, the lake produces a fish catch of over 800,000 tonnes annually, currently worth about \$590 million of which \$340 million is generated at the shore and a further \$250 million a year is earned in exports from the Nile perch stock.

Nile perch stock is dwindling in the lake due to overfishing, overpopulation, pollution and deforestation according to the Uganda National Fisheries Resources Research Institute (NaFIRRI). This has forced five factories to shut down in the country, leaving only 15, which were operating below capacity.

Experts have traced the conflict to the declining fish stock and declining water levels.

However, Dr Shadrack Kithia, who is an environmental and water expert at the University of Nairobi, believes that investing in research to enable African countries tap into available resources like underutilised aquifers will help reduce water wars.

"Africa has large and often underutilised aquifer resources, which can sustain large populations in both arid and semi-arid areas," he said.

Dr Kithia also called for trans-boundary treaties and legal frameworks to be put in place to regulate the management of shared resources that often extend across the borders to reduce water wars.

He adds that that more effort needs to be put into conservation by various governments as the demand for water usage increases with population boom and climate change.