

Smallholder farmers need improved stake in Nile's development

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A new book finds that the Nile river, together with its associated tributaries and rainfall, could provide 11 countries—including a new country, South Sudan, and the drought-plagued countries of the Horn of Africa—with enough water to support a vibrant agriculture sector, but that the poor in the region who rely on the river for their food and incomes risk missing out on these benefits without effective and inclusive water management policies.

The Nile River Basin: Water, Agriculture, Governance and Livelihoods, published by the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF), incorporates new research and analysis to provide the most comprehensive analysis yet of the water, agriculture, governance and poverty challenges facing policymakers in the countries that rely on the water flowing through one of Africa's most important basins. The book also argues that better cooperation among the riparian countries is required to share this precious resource.

"This book will change the way people think about the world's longest river," said Dr. Vladimir Smakhtin, water availability and access theme leader at the International [Water Management](#) Institute (IWMI) and one of the book's co-authors. "For the first time, hydrologists, economists, agriculturalists and social scientists have pooled their research to focus on agriculture and food security along the Nile to give a comprehensive and timely overview of the development challenges facing the river. With significant new dams and development works being planned, and South Sudan joining the river basin countries, the need for solid, science-

based evidence to inform policy decisions has never been greater."

Agriculture, the economic bedrock of all 11 Nile countries, and the most important source of income for the majority of the region's people, is under increased pressure to feed the basin's burgeoning population—already 180 million people, half of which live below the poverty line. According to the book, investing in a set of water management approaches known as Agricultural Water Management (AWM), which include irrigation and rainwater collection, could help this water-scarce region grow enough food despite these dry growing conditions.

"Improved AWM, which the book shows is so key to the region's economic growth, food security and poverty reduction, must be better integrated into the region's agricultural policies, where it currently receives scant attention," said Dr. Seleshi Bekele, senior water resources and climate specialist at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and one of the book's co-authors. "It is tempting for these governments to focus on large-scale irrigation schemes, such as existing schemes in Sudan and Egypt, but more attention must also be paid to smaller, on-farm water management approaches that make use of rainwater and stored water resources such as aquifers."

Lack of access to water is another area that could negatively impact the poor, according to the book. In the Nile basin, poor people live further away from water sources than the wealthy, which forces them to travel longer distances to collect water. Women that are responsible for collecting water for their households and smallholder farmers who rely on rainwater to irrigate their crops would therefore benefit from policies that give them greater access to water in the Nile basin.

"We need to look beyond simply using water for crop production if we are to comprehensively address the issues of poverty in the region," said

Dr. David Molden, IMWI's former director general and one of the book's co-authors. "Water is a vital resource for many other activities, including small-scale enterprises like livestock and fisheries. This should not be forgotten in the rush to develop large-scale infrastructure."

Improving governance, especially coordination among Nile basin country governments, is another crucial aspect of ensuring that the poor benefit from the basin's water resources. The book argues that the establishment of a permanent, international body—the Nile Basin Commission—to manage the river would play a key role in strengthening the region's agriculture, socio-economic development and regional integration.

"The Nile basin is as long as it is complex—its poverty, productivity, vulnerability, water access and socio-economic conditions vary considerably," said Molden. "Continued in-depth research and local analysis is essential to further understanding the issues and systems, and to design appropriate measures that all countries can sign on to."

According to the book, reports of conflict among these countries over these complex management issues are exaggerated. "Past experience has shown that countries tend to cooperate when it comes to sharing water," said Alain Vidal, CPWF's director. "On the [Nile](#), recent agreements between Egypt and Ethiopia show that even the most outspoken basin country politicians are very aware that they have much more to gain through cooperation than confrontation."

Provided by CGIAR

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