

Cross-border water resources management in the Horn of Africa:

Regional, transboundary, and national frameworks for cooperation

This brief is part of a series of knowledge briefs on “Cross-border water resources management in the Horn of Africa”:

1. Status and trends in cross-border basins and aquifers
2. Regional and cross-border initiatives and frameworks for cooperation
3. Digital platforms for collaboration and decision-making

These knowledge briefs draw on the full report “Transboundary Water Resources Management for Resilience in the Horn of Africa: Mapping of actors, policies, and initiatives”, UNEP-DHI Centre on Water and Environment, 2020. The work supports the UN’s five-year Comprehensive Regional Prevention Strategy for the Horn of Africa (2019-2023), in particular Pillar 4 on sustainable natural resources development and climate resilience.

This knowledge brief gives an overview of: the socioeconomic dependence on cross-border basins and aquifers in the Horn of Africa; threats to socioeconomic development in the form of droughts and floods; the future impacts of climate change and socioeconomic shifts; and the importance of natural resources management for resilience.

This brief is intended as a dialogue starter that may be used in discussions with country governments and other national stakeholders in the IGAD region, UN Country Offices, IGAD, donors, and development partners.

Disclaimers

The information contained within this document is drawn from the abovementioned desktop review. The review contains data found at the time of writing, what has been reported to databases, and information from targeted interviews. Any additional information is welcomed and can be sent to Alexandra Murray at almm@dhigroup.com.

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Regional water resources

Three-quarters of the people in the Horn of Africa live within river basins and over aquifers that are shared by two or more countries, known as ‘transboundary’ or ‘cross-border’ basins and aquifers. Collaboration over these shared water resources is vital for regional stability and resilient communities.

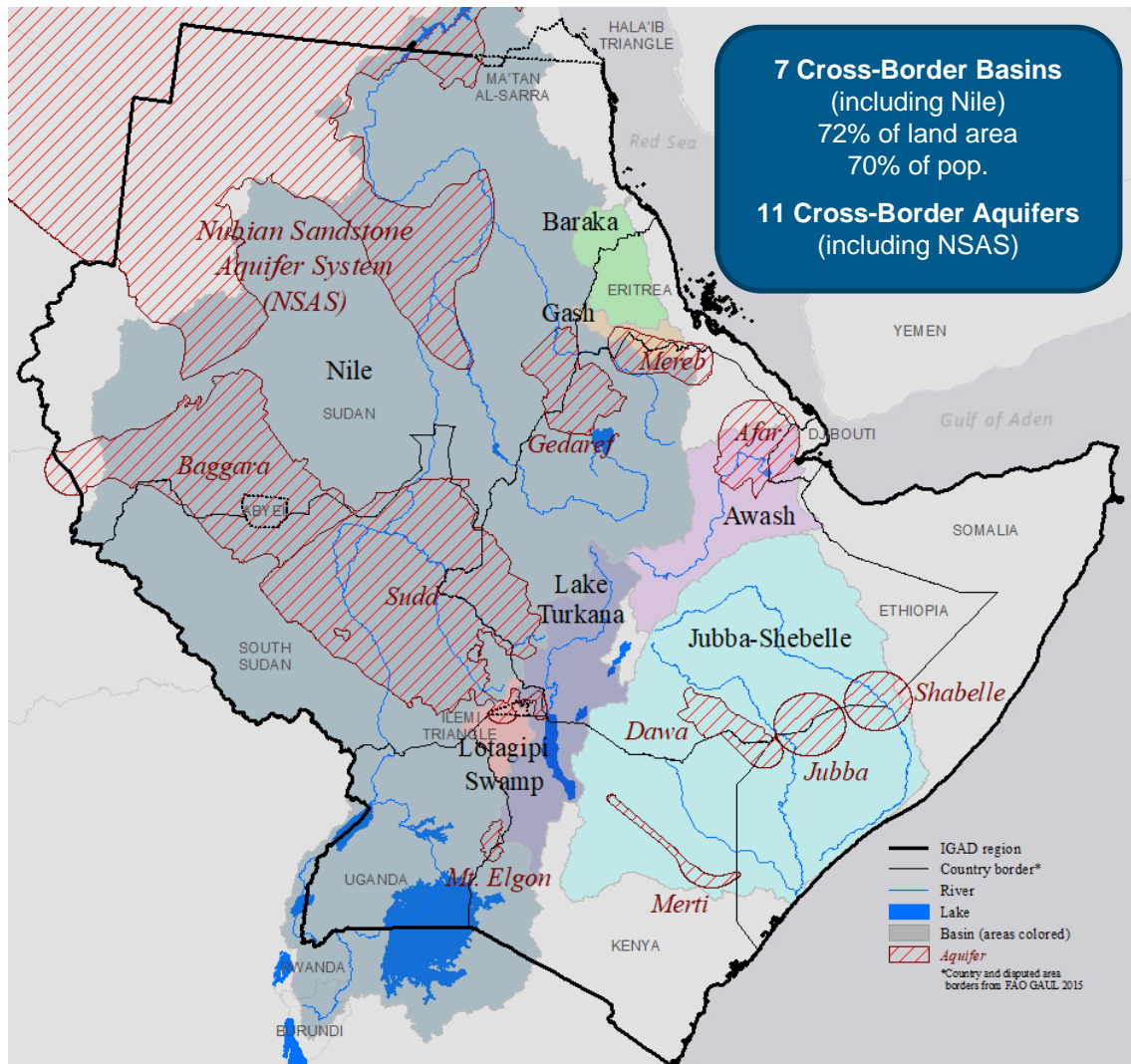


Figure 1 - Cross-border river basins and aquifers entirely contained within the IGAD region (8 countries), as well as the Nile basin and the Nubian Sandstone Aquifer System, which extend beyond the region.¹

The region is dominated by the Nile river basin, which includes all IGAD countries apart from Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea (though Eritrea is an observer member of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI)). The Nile has two sources: the White Nile with headwaters flowing from Lake Victoria (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania), and the Blue Nile originating in Ethiopia.

The next most significant basin in the region is the Jubba-Shabelle, with these two rivers originating in Ethiopia and flowing into Somalia. The Lag Dera sub-basin originates in Kenya and joins at the mouth of the Jubba-Shabelle in Somalia. Due to its central location in the region, and highland areas, Ethiopia contains the headwaters of 5 of the 7 cross-border basins in the region.

¹ Cross-border basin delineation: UNEP-DHI and UNEP, *TWAP* (2016), cross-border aquifer delineation: IGRAC, *TWAP* (2016).

Regional frameworks for collaboration

Cross-border water collaboration

IGAD has spearheaded efforts to develop a Regional Water Resources Policy, which was signed by all member states in 2015. The Policy is based on modern principles of transboundary water resources management, including the key tenants of the Water Convention.² The Policy considers surface and groundwater in an integrated manner. The Policy commits the IGAD Secretariat to support Member States in the negotiation of a Regional Water Resources Protocol, which is intended to operationalise the Policy. The Protocol was discussed by a Regional Negotiation Committee from 2015-16, but negotiations stalled. From 2016-18, the project “Strengthening trans-boundary water governance and cooperation in the IGAD region” built country capacity and advanced dialogue on the Protocol. However, since the end of the project (2018), no further progress has been made.

Institutional capacity within IGAD to facilitate negotiations on the Protocol, and generally advance transboundary water management in the region, is relatively low, and this needs to be addressed. One element in the Policy is to develop a regional institutional framework for water resources management, and this has not progressed. Any efforts in this regard should be cognisant of dialogue challenges related to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

Regional Water Collaboration Lessons from SADC and ECOWAS

1. All efforts are underpinned by the fact that water is perceived as an instrument for peace and stability.
2. The integrated nature of water resources management across sectors is recognised and prioritised, including the water-food-energy nexus.
3. Regional strategic action plans are developed through broad stakeholder participation and input from all countries, guided by the regional secretariat.
4. Regional bodies are responsible for overseeing policies on regional water resources infrastructure.
5. These regions are more homogenous than the Horn of Africa, and the diversity in the Horn must be recognised when designing efforts to advance cross-border collaboration.

Cross-border frameworks for resilience

In the past decade, roughly USD 10 billion has been pledged to the Horn of Africa region on activities related to stability and resilience, with much of this directly or indirectly linked to cross-border water resources management, resulting in thousands of activities implemented by hundreds of actors at regional, national, and local cross-border scales. It is recommended that efforts in advancing frameworks for water resources management should be fully aligned with, and if appropriate embedded within, broader resilience initiatives related to land, agriculture, pastoralism and socioeconomic development.

The primary mechanism for implementing resilience-related initiatives is through the IGAD Drought Disaster Resilience and Sustainability Initiative (IDDRSI) (2012-2027). It has been recommended that all resilience building initiatives at regional and national levels be harmonised under a common IDDRSI programme framework.³ Of particular significance is IDDRSI’s focus on eight cross-border clusters, which provide an entry point to cross-border, on-the-ground collaboration over natural resources management, including water, in the absence of regional or basin / aquifer level management frameworks.

Furthermore, the importance of supporting these cross-border areas is being increasingly recognised by various development partners, including the [UN](#), the [World Bank](#), and the [EU](#).

² UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention, open to all countries in 2016)

³ UNDP 2018. IDDRSI review of 1st phase (2013-2017).

Transboundary management of basins and aquifers

Of the six transboundary river basins and ten transboundary aquifers which lie entirely in the region, none of them have dedicated institutional arrangements or strategic frameworks for their management. Only the Nile, which extends beyond the region, has such arrangements.

Transboundary basin management

Only the Nile has a dedicated institutional arrangement – the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) (est.1999) – and strategic framework – Nile Basin Sustainability Framework (NBSF) (2011). Furthermore, the Eastern Nile Technical Regional Office (ENTRO) and the Nile Equatorial Lakes Subsidiary Action Program Coordination Unit (NELSAP) provide sub-regional coordination.

In the remaining six basins, there has been very little progress in developing basin-wide frameworks. Nevertheless, there have been a number of bilateral MoUs between countries, as well as some more local cross-border initiatives, with some links to water and natural resources management. These may serve as useful entry points to cross-border dialogue with consideration of basin-wide management approaches.

Transboundary aquifer management

There are no known multilateral institutions or agreements that specifically address transboundary aquifer management in the region. The current 'Horn of Africa Groundwater Initiative' (2019-2021) includes support for consolidating and improving access to groundwater data, institutional capacity building, and feasibility studies for economically exploitable groundwater resources in selected transboundary aquifers.

Lessons from Southern and Western Africa

1. In southern Africa, regional frameworks have resulted in the establishment of transboundary River Basin Organisations (RBOs) in 6 out of 13 transboundary river basins in the region, and there are a series of SADC guidelines on strengthening RBOs.
2. In western Africa, the success of transboundary RBOs has been attributed to: climatic and hydrological shocks, international aid, socio-economic stability and the relative homogeneity between member states.
3. In the North Western Sahara Aquifer System, transboundary collaboration has been ongoing for 20 years, initially focussing on technical aspects such as aquifer mapping, then moving on to developing joint management plans, mostly coordinated by a regional technical body (Sahara and Sahel Observatory (OSS)).

Recommendations:

Consider further coordinated analysis at the basin and aquifer level, which may include:

- Investigating the potential (barriers, enablers, options) for establishing basin and aquifer level institutional arrangements. These do not have to be new institutions but could be other arrangements such as committees.
- Assessing the key drivers and issues in each basin and aquifer, as well as mapping significant actors, with a view to making recommendations on advancing transboundary collaboration.

National frameworks for transboundary collaboration

In the absence of an effective regional framework for cross-border collaboration, there have been some national and bi-lateral initiatives, though the sustainability of these can be threatened without an overarching regional framework in place.

National governmental frameworks

National strategic frameworks for water management increasingly recognise the transboundary nature of their water resources and set out mechanisms for increasing transboundary collaboration (Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Uganda). For example, in Uganda, the Joint Water and Environment Sector Support Programme (2018-2023) has “International and transboundary water resources management as one of five key components, and has three key output indicators to monitor progress on this component. In Ethiopia, a new National Water Policy and Strategy is currently under public consultation, and contains a whole chapter on transboundary water resources, covering topics such as access and use of transboundary waters, institutional capacity building, and cooperation and coordination. However, in other countries, there is very little mention of transboundary water resources management in their national strategic frameworks (Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan). There is scope for peer-to-peer learning from experiences with developing and implementing these national documents.

Bi-lateral frameworks

There are numerous bi-lateral arrangements between countries in the region. While these do not explicitly address transboundary water resources management, many of them relate to sustainable natural resources management. These MoUs provide examples of willingness to collaborate, as well as opportunities for incorporating clauses more specifically related to water resources development and management. They may also be used as entry points to developing multi-lateral agreements on a basin or aquifer scale.

UN country frameworks

Most of the UN country level analysis and planning documents (CCA and UNDAF/UNSDCF) don't systematically discuss transboundary waters and their management. The exceptions are Ethiopia and Kenya, where it is explicitly brought up, and, to some extent, Somalia. However, only Kenya explicitly includes action on transboundary water in the planning document. There is scope to engage with UN Country Teams, to discuss how consideration of water resources management in a more cross-border context could support both national development objectives and regional peace and security. Building on this, there is potential for UN country cooperation frameworks to explicitly include action on transboundary water resources management, as they are being periodically revised. This is especially the case in light of the increasing recognition of the issue in most government strategic frameworks.

Possible next steps

To further progress cross-border management of basins and aquifers in the Horn of Africa region, the following are recommended:

1. Undertake a 'benefit assessment' to identify, assess and communicate the benefits of transboundary water cooperation for the Horn of Africa, as well as prioritized basins and aquifers.
2. Initiate dialogue with UN Country Teams to explore how collaboration over transboundary water resources can support national and regional development objectives and peace and security.
3. Initiate a consultative design phase to develop an integrated, sustainable digital platform for transboundary water resources management for the Horn of Africa.
4. Investigate mechanisms to strengthen the capacity and visibility of the IGAD Water Unit, including its institutional links with other IGAD units and programmes.
5. Use the IGAD Drought Disaster Resilience and Sustainability Initiative (IDDRSI) as an entry point for strengthening cross-border collaboration over water resources, particularly through the eight cross-border clusters, and building on the experiences of the SECCCI project.
6. Investigate options to provide more support to countries in reporting on SDG indicator 6.5.2 on transboundary collaboration, and build on the reporting to advance transboundary frameworks for collaboration.
7. Assess barriers and enablers to establishing appropriate institutional arrangements for transboundary basins and aquifers, and make recommendations on establishing these.
8. Investigate opportunities to support UNECE's dialogue with countries to ratify the Water Convention, including support from the Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa
9. In all work to advance transboundary water resources management, where feasible and appropriate, ensure links to land, energy and environment under Pillar 4 (sustainable natural resources management and climate resilience), as well as the other Pillars under the UN Comprehensive Strategy for the Horn of Africa, being cognisant of the cross-cutting themes of gender, youth, migration, and human rights.