

Funding for Water Sharing

At the end of June, the Nile's riparian States secured funding from the World Bank and donor governments for initial programmes designed to look at improving access and sharing the Nile waters.

For years, increasing population pressures together with limited water access made conflict between Nile States a possibility. The source of much past friction is a 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan, in which Nile water is shared through a quota system. Drought-afflicted Ethiopia, whose mountains act as the catchment area for 85 per cent of Egypt's water, refused to sign.

Up to 1,600bn cubic metres of water fall in the Nile's catchment area annually. Yet the Egyptian and Sudanese quotas – at 55.5 billion cubic metres and 18.5 billion respectively – account for less than 5 per cent of watershed rainfall.

Ethiopia's mountains are well suited to damming and irrigation projects, and as one of the country's experts said at the meeting, "You don't put a dam in the desert, where the water evaporates." However, damming and irrigation work in Ethiopia's watershed would entail spending in the order of \$800 million "for the sake of regional benefits." Improvements on watershed management would not only increase the water available, but also reduce silting problems, which Egypt and Sudan suffer from with their downstream dams.

World Bank President James Wolfensohn pledged the

Bank's support and described the work planned as "a remarkable and fragile first step." He added, "it may be the first time in history that we are able to have both the scientific and the technical resources, the capacity, the knowledge and the experience to come together."

The Nile Basin Initiative has launched seven feasibility studies backed by a US\$140 million grant. The NBI unites Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with Eritrea's membership pending.

The grant is for initial programmes to meet the goals of improving access and sharing the Nile waters. The NBI will also develop a parallel legal framework for shared water management.

Initial studies under the NBI's "shared vision" will be followed by loans worth at least \$3 billion to finance the projects, according to the World Bank Vice-President for North Africa.

Sudan's minister for water resources said that the 10 States involved "were determined both at the political and technical level to enhance cooperation." The alternative to such cooperation was summed up unequivocally by the former water minister for Tanzania, who said that "water is life, and if countries could not get access to it, they were ready to fight for it. That is why the NBI helps to minimise regional conflict." (MJ)

