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Simon H. Okoth
Zayed University

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Do Pluralist Power Structures Enhance Involvement in Decision-Making by Nongovernmental Organizations?

Simon H. Okoth
Zayed University

Abstract: *Previous studies conducted in the United States show that pluralist power structures lead to greater involvement by organized groups in issue-areas that affect communities. Given that pluralism is a procedural theory, broad stakeholder involvement thus depends on the effectiveness of the power structures. This article uses the Nile Basin Initiative project in Ethiopia, as case study, to explore the extent to which the presence or absence of pluralist structures influence involvement by nongovernmental stakeholders in the decision processes that affect shared water use. Analyses of qualitative data show that while theoretically the presence of pluralist power structures broadens stakeholder involvement, in practice it is not a sufficient condition. It is further observed that despite certain similarities in the way pluralism is defined and structured, the manner in which the pluralist power structures function depend on the degree of democratic openness at any given time and context.*

Keywords: Pluralism, power structures, decision-making, Nile Basin Initiative, Ethiopia

Introduction

This article explores the reasons why involvement by nongovernmental stakeholders in the decision making processes of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) has been missing in Ethiopia. A number of theories such as Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (Olson 1965), Advocacy Coalition Framework (Ostrom 1990) and Pluralism (Dahl 1961) have guided researchers to better understand the degree of stakeholder involvement in public matters that affect their well-being. The pluralist theory, in particular, has been applied to analyze whether the presence or absence of pluralist power structures influence the level of stakeholder involvement. Some of those who have employed this theoretical approach includes Floyd Hunter (1963), Robert Dahl (1961), Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman (1960), Aaron Wildavsky (1964), and Nelson Wikstrom (1993). Such studies have confirmed that pluralist power structures increase broad level of stakeholder involvement (Wildavsky 1964; Olsen 1982; Yishai 1990; Mattila 1994; McCool 1995).

Given that pluralism is a procedural theory rooted in Western democracies, this article explores whether the presence or absence of pluralist power structures explain the degree of stakeholder involvement in a developing country context. In this regard, the Nile Basin Initiative's Water Resources Planning and Management project in Ethiopia is used as a Case study. The article proceeds as follows: First, a statement of the problem is presented by examining the Nile Basin Initiative, its functions, and expectations. It further highlights the historical events leading to its formation before posing the research questions. The second part of the article explicates the pluralist theory and how pluralist power structures can be used to assess the degree of stakeholder involvement. The third part presents the study method. The fourth discusses the findings, followed by discussion of those findings in part five. The sixth presents the conclusion.

Problem Statement

The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), temporary water compact signed in 1999 by ten African countries (i.e., Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and Democratic Republic of Congo) that share the River Nile basin, was created to enable the member states to share in the socio-economic benefits through joint projects (World Bank 2003). Driven by international experience that joint investment projects by riparian nations can reduce potential conflicts, the ten Nile Basin countries launched eight of the following projects: Applied Training Project, the Nile Trans-boundary Environmental Action Project, the Nile Basin Power Trade, the Efficient Water Use for Agricultural Production Project, the Confidence-Building and Stakeholder Improvement Project, Socio-Economic Development and Benefit Sharing Project, the Shared Vision Program Coordination Project, and Water Resources Planning and Management Project (Nile Council of Ministers 2001). For the projects to be successfully implemented and for the benefits to accrue, involvement by nongovernmental stakeholders was considered essential. Relevant studies from around the world show that such involvement enhances stakeholder trust and support for international water agencies charged with overseeing shared water projects (Bell and Jansky 2005; Bruch et al. 2005). Similarly, involvement by nongovernmental stakeholders adds value to decisions because of the grassroots information that they bring to the table (Creighton 2005).

After more than a decade of its operations, the NBI is today caught up in a cycle of challenges that inhibit the success of its activities. Foremost is the low level of involvement by nongovernmental stakeholders in the decisions that affect the design and implementation of the regional projects. According to the World Bank (2003), charged with providing technical assistance to the NBI, without NGO involvement the projects will fail. Therefore, to enhance stakeholder involvement, support, and basin-wide ownership of the NBI programs, the Confidence Building and Stakeholder Involvement Project was initiated. The project employs public information and confidence building activities across all the member states (World Bank 2003).

Another challenge is the transnational nature of the water agency and how to ensure that those who have the interest can fully engage in the decision processes. Similarly, the different cultures, national political dynamics, history of involvement in individual countries, economic opportunities, and varied social values also pose the challenge to ensuring stakeholder involvement. Furthermore, the suspicion of organized groups by the governments create unnecessary rift between these two bodies that ought to be partners in development. For example, such rifts existed in Egypt and Ethiopia during the most recent leaderships of Hosni Mubarak and Meles Zenawi respectively (Nile Basin Discourse 2008). The level of suspicion has thus led some NGO representatives to assert that the Nile Basin Initiative operates in secrecy, thus limiting the space for stakeholder involvement (Kameri-Mbote 2005).

The history of stakeholder involvement in the Nile water compact can be traced back to the colonial period. In an attempt to ensure uninterrupted flow of the Nile waters into Egypt and the Sudan, the British colonial government signed two water agreements. The first was the 1929 Nile Waters Agreement signed between Egypt and the British government; the latter acting on behalf of Sudan and other upstream colonies in East Africa (Okidi 1994; Collins 2002; Tvedt 2004). Under that agreement Egypt allocated herself 48 billion cubic meters of the Nile waters and Sudan 4 billion cubic meters. In the revised 1959 Agreement for the Full Utilization of the Nile Waters, Egypt apportioned herself 55.5 billion cubic meters and Sudan 18.5 billion cubic meters (Helal 2012, 17). The problems with the two agreements were that they did not involve other riparian nations. Thus the agreements failed to recognize the desirability of pluralism as a model to bringing stakeholders to the negotiating table. Additionally, the interests of upstream states were not considered since they

did receive any water allocation (Dinar and Alemu 2000; Klare 2001; Tvedt 2004). Moreover, other basin countries were not permitted to use the Nile headwaters for any project without the approval by Egypt (Collins 2002).

The issue of Nile water rights almost brought Egypt and Ethiopia close to war in 1978 when President Sadat of Egypt threatened President Mengistu of Ethiopia for planning to build a dam on the Blue Nile tributary (Collins 2002). Egypt, at the end of the pipe, depends entirely on this water source for its livelihood, hence it is feared that the construction of such a dam would reduce the amount of water that reaches Egypt. Ethiopia, in the upstream, contributes 86 percent of the total water flow into the Nile and yet consumes only 1 percent from the Blue Nile, a major tributary emanating from within its territory (Okidi 1994; Collins 2002). Given the high stakes, and the fact that for a long time Ethiopia has attempted to construct dams to generate power and to irrigate farmlands, one would hope that the country's Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) take the center stage in the matters affecting Nile water use. Unfortunately, according to the World Bank and the Nile Basin Initiative Secretariat, that involvement has been missing (World Bank 2003). This study attempts to explore why this has been so in Ethiopia. Hence the following research questions are explored:

- 1) *What are the characteristics of the power structures of the Nile Basin Initiative as they relate to stakeholder involvement in Ethiopia?*
- 2) *For those not involved in the decision-making process, what constraints prevent them from getting a 'seat at the table?'*
- 3) *Do the power structure characteristics in Ethiopia relate to pluralism and, if so, how?*
- 4) *To what extent are conditions in Ethiopia compatible with the prerequisites of pluralism?*

To answer these research questions, the existence and the characteristics of pluralist power structures in the Nile Basin Initiative and Ethiopia are analyzed, including the extent to which the conditions in Ethiopia are compatible with the prerequisites of pluralism. In addition to the power structures, Rational Decision Making Model is analyzed to understand the stages of decision-making in which Ethiopia's NGO representatives are either included or left out within the existing NBI power structures.

Theoretical Frameworks

Understanding stakeholder involvement in public issues continues to attract a broad body of literature as well as theoretical frameworks. The application of theories to explain, analyze and to predict a phenomena is by and large determined by its social, economic or political dimensions and the practicality of the theory to provide a more robust explanation compared to the others. For example, theoretical frameworks such as the Institutional Analysis and Development (Olson 1965), Advocacy Coalition Framework (Ostrom 1990), and Pluralist Theory (Dahl 1961) have found relevance in the analysis of stakeholder involvement in the decisions that affect water rights. Each of these theories is briefly explained below.

Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (IAD)

The IAD provides a conceptual map that allows for the identification of an action arena in order "to analyze, predict, and explain behavior within institutional arrangements" (Ostrom 2007, 28). Ostrom goes on to suggest that Action arenas "include an action situation and the actors in that situation" (28). An Action situation includes participants, positions, outcomes, action-outcome linkages, the control that participants exercise, information, and the costs and benefits assigned to outcomes, while

the Actors in the situation embodies “the resources that an actor brings to a situation; the valuation actors assign to states of the world and to actions; the way actors acquire, process, retain, and use knowledge contingencies and information; and the processes actors use for selection of particular course of action” (Ostrom 2007, 28). The framework can be employed to determine who, among the stakeholders, is eligible for involvement in the policymaking process, including the rules of that guide that activity.

Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)

This theoretical framework was developed by Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1994) to help understand the complex policy processes that involve conflicts over goals, technical disputes, and the role that multiple actors and science and technology play in the determination of policy outcomes. At the core of the ACF are five assumptions: First, policymaking takes place at the subsystem level (i.e., government agencies, judicial institutions, scientists and research community, consultants, interest groups, and the media). The subsystem coalitions occur because, in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville (1835), they enable people with unlike minds but with unified interest to confront complex issues such as water rights. Moreover, it is only through this type of synergy that the coalition can hope to make significant influence on matters affecting their interests.

The other assumption is an individual member of a coalition is primarily driven by a normative belief system, rather than by rational self-interest (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1994). This implies that advocacy coalitions have the tendency to defer to the heuristics to guide policymaking. Moreover, the belief systems tend to be stable over time therefore the ideal policy change should minimally take place 10 years or more. The third assumption holds that it is through scientific research and information technology that the normative beliefs among coalition participants can be modified, hence the importance of including researchers and consultants into the policymaking.

Despite its usefulness in the assessment of the degree of coalition involvement in the policy process, the framework has been criticized for assuming that any advocacy coalition will marshal their way through regardless of restrictive political conditions. Besides, such subsystems, at least in developing countries, tend to be weak given the lack of capacity and strenuous relationships with governments (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1994). Another criticism of the ACF is the belief that multiple decision venues, akin to the American pluralist structures, will guarantee involvement in policy decisions. Not only that, another strand of argument that points to the weakness of both IAD and ACF is provided by Ostrom (Schlager 2007). According to Ostrom, “Frameworks organize inquiry, but they cannot in and of themselves provide explanations for, or predictions of, behavior and outcomes. Explanation and prediction lie in the realm of theories and models” (2007, 293). These limitations provide the rationale to apply the Pluralist Theory and the Rational Decision Model to this study.

Pluralism and Stakeholder Involvement

Pluralism is based on the notion that in any representative democracy, power is distributed equally between organized groups and that these groups will compete for resources with which to influence policy decisions (Presthus 1964; Dahl 1967). In this article, power is understood to mean “political space” or legal authority accorded public officials and organized groups in the decision-making processes affecting issue-areas in the community or within organizations. In an ideal contemporary democracy, political space is generally provided through diffused power structures and participatory practices (Dahl 1989). Under a strict pluralist model, power structures that provide avenues for broad citizen involvement include decentralization, representation, autonomy, mediation, procedures,

and involvement mechanisms (Wildavsky 1964; DeLeon 1993; Bowler and Hanneman 2006). When these structures are in place, benefits such as citizen support, trust, and legitimacy of public programs are enhanced (Sabatier et al. 2005). However, when structures such as centralization and bureaucratization (i.e., rules, procedures, and hierarchies) dominate, mistrust or even conflicts can result (Bruch et al. 2005; Edelenbos and Klijn 2005). While political theorists, including Alexis de Tocqueville (1835), have contended that pluralist structures are the most critical variable to ensuring broad-based involvement, others in the same school of thought have asserted that greater involvement is only possible when such structures function well (C. J. Fox, personal communication, September 10, 2007). In essence, pluralist structure is not a sufficient condition for greater stakeholder involvement. In fact, Theodore Lowi (1979) has argued that pluralism, and by extension diffused structures, can inhibit broad involvement because there is a tendency for the most influential associations to act in oligopolistic manner. Lowi adds that plural structures act to slow down the decision process and thereby compromises efficiency of the process or even the outcome.

Despite Lowi's views, separate studies by Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman (1960), Robert Dahl (1961), and Aaron Wildavsky (1964) have confirmed that pluralist power structures leads to greater stakeholder involvement in community issue-areas compared to elitist ones. This article replicates the approach used by these researchers in order to establish the links between two major variables: "pluralist structures" (Independent Variable) and "greater stakeholder involvement" (Dependent Variable) in relation to the NBI's Water Resources Planning and Management Project (WRPM) in Ethiopia.

Rational Decision-Making Model

Rational decision-making model is incorporated as one of the analytical lens through which involvement in different stages of decision-making can be understood. Three reasons justify the model's inclusion. First, the model's decision stages, including identification of goals, developing alternative solutions, implementing program solutions, and evaluating outcomes, provide systematic means to analyzing the areas in which involvement by various actors can occur. Second, despite the criticisms labeled against the model such as the difficulty of amassing all the information to assess policy alternatives and to select the most optimum decision, this approach and its decision procedures are frequently used to support political processes (Denis et al. 2006). Third, in a bureaucratic institution such as the NBI, which is also a politically instituted body, the model is assumed to be the *modus operandi* for making decisions. Therefore, the NBI is presumed to have some elements of the rational approach at the bureaucratic level and pluralist ones at the political level. Furthermore, the blending of the two theoretical models is anchored on previous studies that have linked pluralism and decision-making capacity and outcomes (Underdal 1973). Hence the integrated framework (Figure 1) provides an analytical lens through which the degree of involvement by various stakeholders can be better understood.

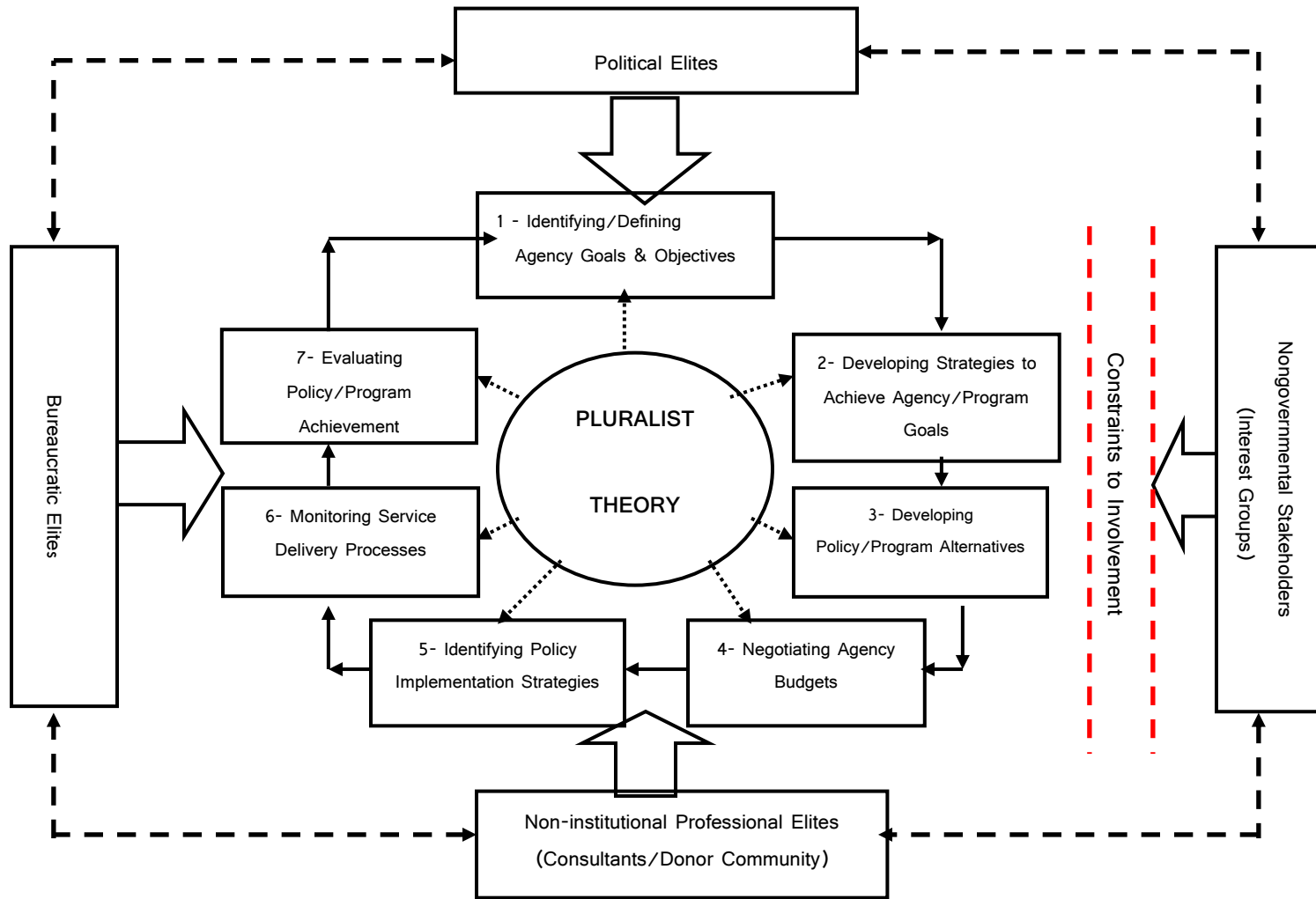


Figure 1. Pluralism and Rational Decision-Making Conceptual Framework

Measures of Pluralism

Two levels of measurements of pluralism are applied in this study.

1. Organizational level (Dahl cited in Newton 1969, 212; Kim and Bell 1985). The following measures are used: *representation; multiple centers of power; autonomy (of nongovernmental organizations); and involvement mechanisms (e.g. information, meetings)*
2. National Level (Lineberry and Sharkansky 1971; DeLeon 1993). The main indicator is the presence of the “Prerequisites of Pluralism” whose measures are: *decentralized power structures; heterogeneous population, large sized and autonomous NGOs, existence of strong labor unions, diversified economy, information accessibility, and competitive party politics.*

Measures of Rational Decision-Making

The measures of involvement in decision-making through the Rational Approach include the extent to which stakeholders are invited to be part of: *problem identification and defining goals and objectives; coming up with alternative solutions; planning of project implementation; developing monitoring procedures and part of the process; and evaluation process* (Hoy and Tarter 2004).

Method of the Study

An inductive qualitative research design was employed because of the exploratory nature of the study. This study was guided by two hypotheses: 1) Non-governmental Organizations have not been a central element in the NBI policy decisions, and 2) Pluralist structures lead to greater stakeholder involvement.

Data Collection

The sample population consisted of nongovernmental stakeholders (NGOs) in Ethiopia who were either involved or had interest in the decision-making processes of the Nile Basin Initiative. A comprehensive list and contacts of all registered NGOs in Ethiopia was obtained from Christian Relief and Development Association, an umbrella organization for registered NGOs in Ethiopia. A similar list was obtained from the NBI headquarters in Uganda. Other sources included published documents, email inquiries, and electronic copies of newsletters. The next step involved the recruitment of key informants from the list.

The Reputational Approach was used to identify the key informants. The approach first involved the engagement of a particular panel of informants (or “judges”) to identify who the informants should be. This approach was initially applied by Floyd Hunter (1963) in his study of community power structures and has subsequently been used in similar studies (Lineberry and Sharkansky 1971). It is premised on the assumption that a cautiously selected panel of informants will be familiar with individuals who are influential and those who are not (McCool 1995). As applied in this article, this approach involved three steps. First, a basic list of 20 influential officials of the NBI in Entebbe, Uganda (i.e., Secretariat headquarters) and another 40 NGO officials in Ethiopia were developed. Second, a “short list” of a panel of judges was put together. The panel, consisting of five (n = 5) in each country, involved individuals of authority as determined by their positions within the community or organizations. It was assumed that leaders of governmental institutions have power, influence, keep good records, and have the knowledge of what is going on in the community (Lineberry and Sharkansky 1971). The nomination of the judges was also based on

the willingness to serve on the panel. It was obvious that those who made the final list held top positions in the NBI Secretariat in Uganda, the Eastern Nile Technical Regional Office in Addis Ababa, and from selected NGOs in Ethiopia.

The third step involved asking the judges to independently identify 10 individuals out of 20 perceived to have “power” and “influence” over NBI issues. The same process was repeated in Ethiopia except were asked to identify 20 out of 40 on the list. According to Clelland and Form (1968, 83), one’s degree of influence can be assessed by her role in “a number of community issues or projects.” In a study of New Haven, Connecticut, Dahl (1961) applied the same concept of “relative influence” to identify leaders who had more influence than others in the community. The approach has been replicated in later studies (Sayre and Kaufman 1960; Wildavsky 1964).

To assist the panel of judges with their selection of key informants, the following instruction used by Hunter (1963, 258), albeit tailored to this research, was replicated:

Suppose a major project were before a community or organization, one that required a decision by a group of leaders whom nearly everyone would accept. Which 10 people out of this list of 20 would you choose to make up this group regardless of whether or not you know them personally? Please include any other person who you think should be on the list and the reasons why. Next, rank order. The judges were verbally requested not to share their choices with others.

Once the process was complete, the lists were tallied. Only individuals with most nominations were selected to serve as key informants. Consequently, a total of 30 key (Uganda, 10; Ethiopia, 20) informants were interviewed face-to-face using open-ended questions. The Uganda-based informants were mainly members of the NBI Secretariat. The interviews with Secretariat officials focused mainly on the history of involvement as well as the framework used to engage stakeholders. Archival data, including memos and meeting records, were examined to determine the trend of involvement by relevant actors. In Ethiopia, the interviewees consisted of NGO officials, with additional representatives of the NBI, and other international organizations. All were based in the capital, Addis Ababa. The objective was to know in which decision stages, if any, they have been involved, and the reasons for noninvolvement in others.

Data Analysis

An inductive process was used to analyze the qualitative data. First, the interviews were transcribed, followed by the development of a codebook to help organize the data into ‘chunks’ or categories. Second, the unstructured data were downloaded into Software for Qualitative Research (QSR NVivo7) for further synthesis and identification of emerging themes. Third, claims about the relationships among the emerging themes were made.

Findings

The findings in relation to each of the research questions are summarized below.

1. *What are the characteristics of the power structures of the Nile Basin initiative as they relate to stakeholder involvement in Ethiopia?*

Evidence from the interviews and archival data showed that the NBI in Ethiopia is characterized by two power structures: decentralized and centralized. On the one hand, the NBI's Shared Vision and Subsidiary programs are decentralized at the regional, national and local levels. The purpose is to bring the NBI project activities closer to the stakeholders. To some extent, they have enhanced awareness and stakeholder involvement. For example, about two-dozen community-based organizations have benefited from micro-grant projects funded by the NBI, including involvement in project identification, and to some degree, in the monitoring and evaluation activities. However, such level of involvement was found to be missing in the Water Resources Planning and Management Project (WRPMP) — the issue-area investigated in this study.

On the other hand, the actual exercise of decision-making was found to be highly centralized. This was the dominant view of the informants in Uganda and Ethiopia. As a senior NBI official confirmed, "We are more inclined to a centralized decision-making with all sincerity... If you look at projects supported by UNOPS, the decision[s] [are] still centered with the project managers. If you look at the organs like Technical Advisory Committees ... the level of openness here is still low." Another informant in Uganda observed that "It is still a very government thing. It is a bureaucratic kind of institution. If the Nile Council of Ministers doesn't say ABCD, then ABCD won't be done..." Moreover, the decisions affecting project identification, alternative solutions, program implementation, monitoring and evaluation relative to the WRPMP were highly centralized. It was further noted that only the project and designated government officials were involved in the process; NGOs were invited only as observers.

2. For those not involved in the decision-making process, what constraints prevent them from getting a 'seat at the table'?

Politics was the most important constraint to involvement. In particular, the NGOs decried the lack of political space and support. The delay in the registration process, as in the case of the Ethiopian Nile Basin Discourse, further inhibited their ability to engage in the decision-making processes. Besides, the NBI officials claimed that decision-making was solely a government prerogative. As one senior NBI official stated, "When you talk about government, this is high level. We have ministers, the technical committee and the secretariat. We cannot invite NGOs to the management meetings of the secretariat. There is no way." NGOs were viewed by the NBI officials as confrontational and hence treated as enemies rather than as allies. This has further strained the relations between the NGOs and NBI officials.

Another constraint was lack of capacity among the NGOs. First, the channels of information sharing with the civil society were found to be limited. The NBI's apparent faith in its website as a means of keeping the stakeholders informed was considered inappropriate because rural-based NGOs in Ethiopia did not have internet access. Additionally, some of the NGOs located in Addis Ababa, the capital city, lacked the resources for internet access. Similarly, most of the information distributed by the NBI was considered too technical and not user-friendly. In order to address this problem, the Nile Transboundary Environmental Action Project, for example, embarked on translating a NBI newsletter into the local Amharic language. This has reportedly improved awareness about NBI activities among several NGOs. Inadequate funding to the NGOs also weakened their capacity to attend NBI activities or to organize training for their own staff.

Additional problem was the location of the power structures and their characteristics. For example, most of the NBI projects in Ethiopia were found to be concentrated in the capital city. Therefore, NGOs outside of Addis Ababa must have the time and resources to travel great distances to participate in the NBI decision processes if and when they are invited. Moreover, for those who got invited involvement in the process was limited by the existing hierarchical structure, decision rules, and their own lack of technical knowledge of the issues discussed.

Another related structural problem was the lack of involvement framework that is inclusive of the stakeholders. Currently, the framework provides for direct involvement by bureaucratic elites (NBI professionals), political elites (government officials), and non-institutional professional elites (consultants, donors); see the concentric circles in Figure 2. Each concentric circle represents a type of stakeholder. In the inner circle is the NBI Secretariat where all the decision agendas are formulated and finalized. Closer to the NBI is the government that consists of the Nile Council of Ministers (Nile-COM) and the Technical Advisory Committee (Nile-TAC). Next are the donors and consultants. Outside that circle is the Nile Basin Discourse, an umbrella organization presumed to represent the welfare of the NGOs with interest in the NBI affairs.

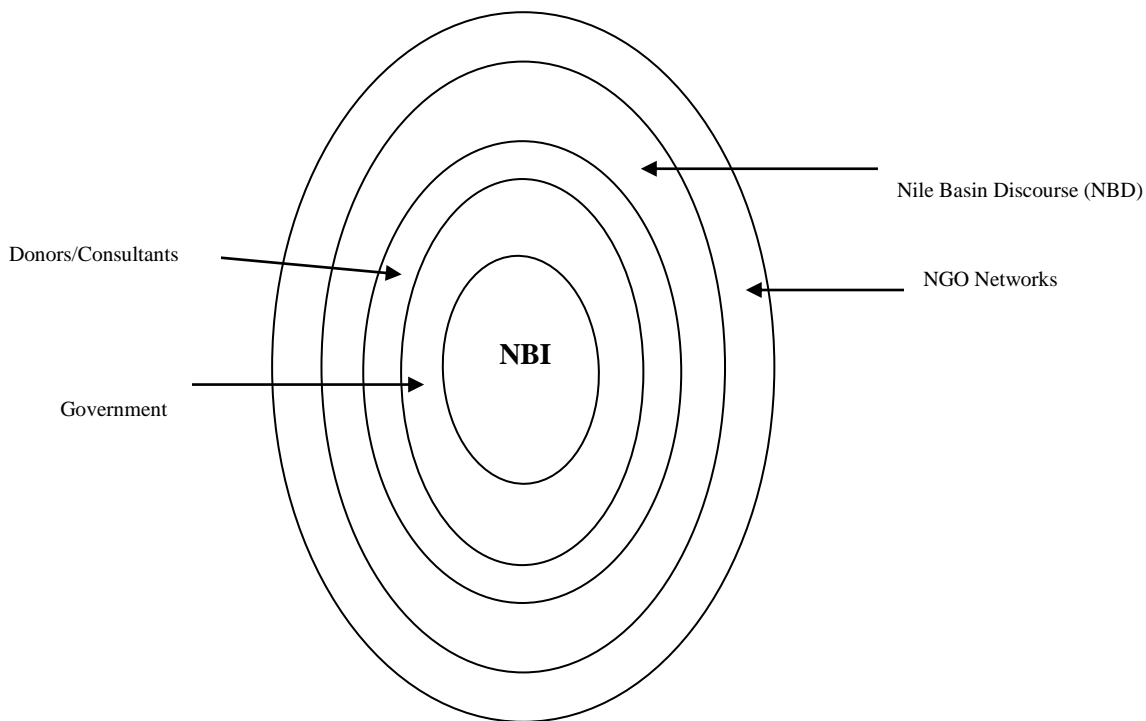


Figure 2: Current Involvement Framework

On the outermost circle is the NGO network with interests in the Nile. Thus the nearer one is to the NBI Secretariat the more likely direct involvement in the decision-making is guaranteed. The converse is also true. The further out one is the less likely involvement is assured.

3. Do the power structure characteristics in Ethiopia relate to pluralism and, if so, how?

In order to answer this question, the following framework initially applied by Wildavsky (Hawley and Wirt 1968), albeit tailored to this study, was adopted: a) If it is found that the same group, the NBI, the power elites or the NGOs, exercise direct influence in most or all the decision-making processes of the WRPMP's project components, then it can be concluded that power elite structure exists; b) If involvement overlaps and varies from issue to issue, and from one decision process to another, then it can be inferred that a pluralist structure exists. According to Wildavsky (Hawley 1968) and Dahl (1961), this conclusion is arrived at when no one group dominates influence in all decision-making areas.

Based on the above analytical criteria, two diametrically opposed power structure characteristics were evident. First, a centralized (or elitist) structure was found to exist given the fact that the NBI and its affiliated elites dominate most of the decision-making processes. As two officials of the NBI Secretariat and the WRPMP affirmed, "On the Policy, Good Practices and Support component of the project, the formulation has been to a large extent done by professionals... We principally work with the government. I don't think we have realized the benefits of what we are doing until NGOs get involved." Second, some involvement overlap was evident at the implementation stage, especially for the Water Resources Planning component at the local levels. Other decision stages such as program formulation, finding alternatives, and evaluation are dominated by the elites (i.e., consultants, bureaucrats, and government officials). This overlap, although somewhat limited, is evidence of a pluralist structure.

The existence of centralized/elitist structures alongside pluralist ones brings to the fore a contradiction between structures and functions. On the one hand, Ethiopia's federal constitution mandates pluralist structures that allow organized groups to form and operate. On the other hand, the functions of these structures are restricted either by mandates of the same government or by bureaucratic inertia. The irony of this trajectory is that the expectations for involvement are laid down by the structures but in practice they function differently, thereby limiting NGO involvement.

4. To what extent are conditions in Ethiopia compatible with the prerequisites of pluralism?

Information about whether conditions in Ethiopia are compatible with the prerequisites of pluralism was obtained from the literature, but some additional comments from the key informants also were considered in this regard. Generally, and as reported earlier in this article, a democratic pluralist society should, at the minimum, have the following attributes: decentralized power structures, diversified and heterogeneous population; diversified economy; reasonable level of industrialization; strong labor unions; large-sized and autonomous NGOs; competitive party politics; involvement mechanisms; information accessibility; and, policy influence by organized groups. The analyses of archival documents and responses by key informants show a "strong" presence of decentralized power structures at the national level and heterogeneous

population, and a “weak presence” of the other attributes. A brief explanation follows.

Ethiopia’s political structure is federal, with nine autonomous Regional States (United Nations Public Administration Network 2008). This means that the nine regional states make independent decisions and at same time have equal representation in the Federal government. The country is heterogeneous in nature, with seventy-three ethnic groups that speak different languages, practice different religions, and have the right to engage in different forms of economic activities. The population was estimated at 79 million (World Health Organization 2009) at the time of this study was conducted. In addition, organized groups can form and operate as nongovernmental organizations. Although labor unions and NGOs form, their size and freedom of operation were restricted. As one of the informants in Ethiopia stated, “I don’t know if labor unions are active at all in this country. They are at the margin. The regional unions, the teacher unions, and others don’t have much weight here.” Thus, even though diffused power structures are present in Ethiopia, NGOs and labor unions do not have the latitude to use them freely. This undermines competition and bargaining which are key elements of a well-functioning pluralistic society. Evidence further indicates that the government of Ethiopia is restrictive and distrustful of organized groups. This hostile treatment of organized groups has historical precedence and continues without adequate checks and balances. For example, under the imperial regime of Haile Sellasie operations of NGOs were very much restricted (Klare 2001); the restriction continued with Presidents Haile Mariam Mengistu and Meles Zenawi according to the Key Informant testimonies availed to the researcher.

The latest litmus test of the willingness to widen space for organized groups in Ethiopia can be seen through the passage of the ‘Charities and Societies Proclamation, No. 00/2008’ in January 2009. Section 1, Article 2, of that law stipulates that a locally registered NGO shall not receive more than 10 percent of its annual funding from outside sources. Given that the majority of NGO receive over 90 percent of their funding from external sources, this law will limit their capacity to operate and build effective partnerships to mobilize resources, and reduce incentives to organize and assemble. One NGO affected by this mandate, which works with the NBI to implement projects, is the Ethiopian Nile Basin Discourse Forum (EtNBDF). The EtNBDF founded in 2005 and it receives most of its funding from external sources (Technical Analysis of Second Draft Proclamation 2008).

Section 7, Article 93, Sub Article 1 of the law states that a federal body has the right to suspend, remove and replace an NGO officer (Technical Analysis of Second Draft of Proclamation 2008). This undermines the autonomy of civic organizations, and potentially opens doors for abuse by the supervising federal agency. As noted earlier, autonomy is one of the prerequisites of pluralism within a democracy. Section 10, Article 107, of that legislation further declares that any person who prints, publishes, displays, sells or exposes for sale, or transmits information through the post or any electronic media, in the interests of any “unlawful charity” or society shall be punishable with a fine not less than Birr 3,000 (US \$166 at September 2012 Exchange Rate) and not exceeding Birr 5,000 (US \$277) and by a simple imprisonment of not less than three years and not exceeding five years, provided the criminal code does not prescribe a more severe penalty. As defined by the legislation, unlawful organizations include unregistered NGOs. In this respect, the Ethiopian Nile Basin Discourse Forum—not registered since its founding in 2005 but continues to work with the Nile Basin Initiative on outreach and

implementation of community-based investment projects—stands to be victimized.

In light of the legislation, a senior NBI official in Ethiopia commented that, “The government wishes to control NGOs, particularly those whose areas of operation include human rights and governance... At the core, government wants to be sure that these NGOs receiving external funding are not spies... Civil society is perceived as a problem; it is better to deal with them by the book.”

Discussion

According to Alexis de Tocqueville (1835), pluralism has three potential benefits: the ability to unite the efforts of unlike minds; the creation of points of action and action strategies through the power of meetings; and enabling the actors to select representatives to influence public policy. How then do the pluralist power structures within the NBI’s WRPM project in Ethiopia measure up to the Tocquevillean ideals? On the ability to unite unlike minds, the study informants argued that this is unlikely until an official arrangement such as memorandum of understanding between the NGOs and the NBI is formalized. Even then, it will take overhauling of the individual attitudes within the NBI and the political leadership of Ethiopia to make that possible. At the time of this study, the government of Melles Zenawi was mentioned by the participants as hostile to NGOs. Similarly, the NBI officials were accused of being manipulative and evasive instead of being receptive to organized groups.

On the second criteria, or the creation of points of action in which the nongovernmental stakeholders could come together with the NBI officials to discuss policy issues and to make joint decisions, several power structures at the national level have been instituted. The problem however is that these structures are basically centered at the capital city, Addis Ababa. With lack of financial resources, it is not possible for rural-based NGOs to participate actively. Moreover, as noted in the findings, those power structures are meaningless when NGO representatives are invited only as observers. On third criteria, representation was found to be limited to the leadership of the Nile Basin Discourse, an umbrella body for all NGOs in the Nile Basin countries.

Generally in Ethiopia, the prerequisites of pluralism do exist as evident in the findings. However, internal pluralism is simply a style of government. But because the NBI is an extension of government within Ethiopia’s power structure, the question that must be asked is, “whose interests are being represented?” In the pluralist view, right now only the interests of government leadership are being considered as the evidence presented by the informants clearly attest. Similarly, the viability of Ethiopia’s pluralist structures is further put to test by the new legislation that disenfranchises NGOs with a real stake in the NBI’s national projects. The so-called Charities and Societies Proclamation law potentially restricts plural power structures in Ethiopia, and thus limits the ability of interest groups to organize internally and consequently crippling the NBI and NGO functions. As several scholars, cited earlier, have found in their research of community power structures, an open and equitable access to decision-making by nongovernmental stakeholders can increase the chances of achieving community program goals. But achieving such equity requires a democratic system of public management that promotes and ensures representation of all those who have a stake in a public issue. Unfortunately, for the NBI it is a Catch-22. On the one hand, it is possible to democratize involvement procedures. On the

other hand, those procedures can be prevented from use by an authoritarian government that deems openness as a threat to the status quo. This is exactly what was observed of Ethiopia during and after the field research. Ethiopia was then under President Zenawi whom research informants accused of heavy-handedness in his leadership style.

Equity is even more difficult when NGOs are viewed with suspicion by the sitting government. Consequently, this kind of political atmosphere makes it daunting for the NBI to implement democratic values within its power structure. As one participant in Ethiopia acknowledged, the political environment instills some fear in the officials of the WRPMP hence the strategies that they adopt, including the engagement of stakeholders, must often avoid confrontation with the government.

Substantively, pluralism is a procedural theory concerned with the decision-making processes and how they work. It is not enough for a government or a public agency to declare that it has met the pluralist requirement by simply establishing laws that allow groups to form. Certainly, there is a difference between structures and functions. On the converse, there are certain similarities in the way pluralism is defined and structured. But the operationalization of those structures, as this study shows, can be influenced by contextual variables such as past history of involvement, the nature of NGO-government relationships, and the attitudes of water agency officials toward NGOs as the case the NBI in Ethiopia has shown.

Nonetheless, given that the NBI is an international body with diplomatic privileges, it seems reasonable to expect the officials to intervene directly or indirectly on behalf of its national institutions or other organized groups, if expected outcomes of the funded projects are to be achieved. Therefore, enhanced involvement in the WRPMP components will be dependent, to a large extent, not on the question of institutional efficiency but on the practical application of equity, fairness, and democratic openness. These observations thus lead this study to hypothesize that *there is a relationship between the exercise of pluralism and the degree of democratic openness that exists among the political leadership at any given time, whether in pluralist or centralized/elitist system.*

Recommendations

This study has reported some of the challenges facing NGOs with interest in the affairs of the Nile waters in Ethiopia. Apart from the desire for more funding and training opportunities, one issue repeated by the informants was the wish to actively get involved in the decision-making processes of the NBI. It is true that the power structures in Ethiopia are pluralist in nature, but the functionality of those structures is limited to political controls. At the NBI level, the power structures are similarly diffused, with project offices spread throughout the basin countries. However in Ethiopia, the project offices are concentrated in the capital city, hierarchical, and engage selected NGO representatives only as observers.

It is therefore recommended that the presence of power structures must be complimented with an inclusive framework that defines the responsibilities of each of the actors (i.e., NBI officials, policy makers, consultants, and NGOs). Figure 3 shows the link between the current and the recommended framework. The concentric circles to the left show the current involvement structure in which the NBI officials and those closer to the inner circle have the involvement structure in which the NBI officials and those closer to the inner circle have the

privilege to participate in the decisions made by the water agency. In other words, one's chance to get involved in the decision-making process is enhanced by the proximity to the inner circle. That framework thus leaves the NGOs at the margin of decision-making. An ideal structure is depicted by the concentric circles to the right in which all the actors are equidistant to the decision-making table, and thus jointly contribute to the process.

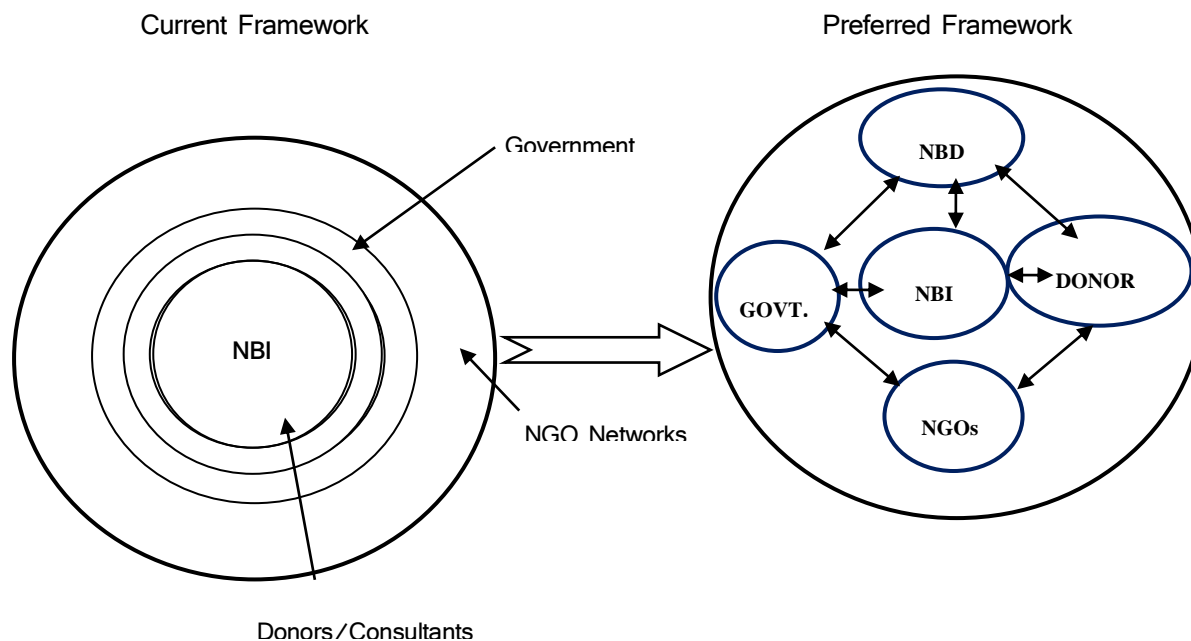


Figure 3: Circle of Involvement—Inclusion Model

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to assess whether the presence or absence of pluralist structures explains the missing involvement by nongovernmental organizations in the decision-making processes of Ethiopia's NBI project. That assessment was driven by two hypotheses: One, nongovernmental organizations have not been a central element in the NBI decision-making; two, pluralist structures lead to greater involvement by stakeholders. The following conclusions are made with respect to the research questions, stated earlier in the article, and the two hypotheses.

With respect to the first research question, "What are the characteristics of the power structures of the Nile Basin Initiative as they relate to stakeholder involvement in Ethiopia?", the study concludes that the existence of contradictory power structures, pluralist and elitist, do not make it any easier for stakeholders to get involved in decisions. This is because the elitist power structures privilege those at the top with decision powers, while the pluralist structures serve as instruments of political window dressing. Consequently, NGO representatives are invited only as observers and not

As to what constraints prevent NGOs from getting a 'seat at the table', this study concludes that politics is at the top of the list of deterrents. With Ethiopia's NGOs viewed with suspicion and hostility by the government, it is often difficult to bring the two actors to the table. The limited space thus provided only allow for observers with no significant influence. Moreover, the government views decision-making as her prerogative. As one NBI senior official quipped: "We cannot invite NGOs to the management meetings, there is no way." To further constrict the political space, Ethiopia's government has, under the immediate past President Meles Zenawi, made it bureaucratically difficult for organized groups to get registered, in addition to the passage of a 2008 law that demarcates between a regular NGO or "a foreign agent" based on the sources of funding. This kind of approach to dealing with NGOs as enemies and not as allies, whether in pluralist or elitist structures, defeats the purpose of collective responsibility in the management shared water resources.

As to whether pluralist structures in Ethiopia relate to pluralism, evidence supports the conclusion that while the constitution and national government structures mandate pluralism, the functions of those structures are guarded by political and bureaucratic elites through non-inclusive rules and procedures. The irony of this trajectory is that the expectations for involvement are laid down by the structure but in practice function differently, thereby limiting involvement. And whether the conditions in Ethiopia are compatible with prerequisites of pluralism, evidence support the inference that internal pluralism is simply a style of government. But because the NBI is an extension of government within Ethiopia's power structure, the question that must be asked is, "whose interests are being represented?" In the pluralist view, right now only the interests of government leadership are being considered.

Do the results of this study support the hypotheses? The premise that NGOs have not been a central element in the NBI decision-making processes is validated by the informant data. However, the study does not confirm the second hypothesis that pluralism leads to greater involvement. As stated at the beginning of this article, pluralism as a theoretical framework has been previously employed, at least by Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman (1960), Robert Dahl (1961), Floyd Hunter (1963), and Aaron Wildavsky (1964), to successfully determine the positive relationship between pluralist structures and enhanced stakeholder involvement. However, as the case of Ethiopia illustrates, the efficacy of pluralist structures as the mechanism for enhanced stakeholder involvement requires more than the constitution or the rules and procedures. Instead, such level of involvement is influenced by contextual variables such as past history of involvement, the nature of NGO-government relationships, and the attitudes of water agency officials toward the NGOs.

Therefore two important implications of this study to research and water governance can be drawn. First is the misplaced body of literature that situates pluralism at the core of enhanced universal stakeholder involvement. Substantively, pluralism is a procedural theory concerned with the decision-making processes and how they work. Therefore it is insufficient for a government or a public agency to declare that it has met the pluralist requirement by simply establishing laws that allow groups to form. Additionally, the creation of pluralist structures does not by itself guarantee stakeholder involvement. Instead, what is critical is the access to the 'seat at the table' that those structures provide. In the NBI situation where bureaucratic inertia and

heavy political handedness are the norm, democratic openness, simplified rules for participation, and incentives such as information availability, funding, and capacity building can remedy the dismal levels of involvement. Another study outcome that can contribute to involvement is the change of attitude towards NGOs. Development, and in particular the management of shared water resources, requires collective action. Therefore the water agency officials should work with NGOs as partners rather than view them with suspicion and as enemies. Moreover, it is not sufficient to invite NGO representatives as observers to the decision-making processes. The unintended consequence of the observer status is the increased level of mistrust and the omission of invaluable input from the grassroots level that have the potential to improve decision outcomes.

Lastly, there were two limitations to this study. The qualitative approach to the collection and analysis of data, while useful, narrowed the depth of analysis as well as the results that a survey approach would have produced. For example, the results of a survey data would have made it possible to determine the statistical significance of “politics” as the top constraint to involvement vis-à-vis other impediments. Another limitation was the application of western-based prerequisites and indicators of pluralism in a developing country context. Such “foreign” lenses, when used in a country such as Ethiopia, have the potential to skew the reality on the ground. These limitations can form the basis for future research.

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Simon H. Okoth, PhD, is assistant professor and director of the EMPA Program at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. His research interests are in international water rights, the role of ordinary citizens in emergency response, public management, and public policy analysis. He is the author of *A 'Seat at the Table': Constraints to Stakeholder Involvement—The Case of the Nile Basin Initiative in Ethiopia* (Lambert Publishing 2010).