

Lessons on sharing water resources

The frosty relations between Egypt and Ethiopia over water resource are threatening to evolve into what experts have termed a “water war” as both countries claim monopoly of the resource and are getting prepared to engage in armed conflict to stake their claim.

The bone of contention is water and the main players are Egypt and Ethiopia, with Sudan in the mix attempting to play a referee in an ugly spat between the two countries.

Water is, indeed, a matter of life and death, and people will resort to all means necessary to attain this precious resource.

Central to the flexing of muscles between the two states is the water flowing through the Nile River basin that is said to benefit 11 other countries on the continent.

In 2011, Ethiopia launched the construction of the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam to the annoyance and disapproval of the Egyptian government.

The dam is said to have a capacity of 74-billion cubic metres and Egypt argue that this will have a huge impact on water supply for almost 150-million Egyptians and Sudanese people.

From this, a lot of comparison can be drawn with SA and its neighbouring states.

Lessons can be learnt on how to be cordial and manage all shared water sources fairly without any hostilities.

SA, through the department of water and sanitation, shares water sources with states such as Lesotho, Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, to mention just a few.

The management of these water sources is through official and signed agreements entered into by these countries in an effort to equally benefit from this crucial resource.

Botswana, SA, Mozambique and Zimbabwe have a shared water resource through Limpopo River basin and a Limpopo Watercourse Commission was subsequently established after the four states signed an agreement on how



MASSIVE PROJECT: A handout satellite image shows a close-up view of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the Blue Nile River in Ethiopia earlier this week Photograph: MAXAR TECHNOLOGIES VIA REUTERS

this basin can be managed.

Similarly, the Incomati and Maputo River basins are shared fairly by SA, Mozambique and Swaziland and this trans-boundary co-operation was signed more than 50 years ago.

These river basins take care of the needs of these riparian states to avert any possible wa-

ter shortages in times of drought.

The Orange-Senqu River basin is evenly used and shared by SA, Lesotho, Namibia and Botswana.

A lot can be learnt here.

States can work together to evenly share water sources through co-operations and

without bullying each other over who ought to benefit more.

Such attitudes do not help Africa's developmental agenda, but are bound to lead to innocent people suffering a great deal.

In 1929 and 1959, there were signed treaties giving

Egypt powers to monitor how the countries upstream use the Nile River water sources.

The treaty also gave them powers to veto any projects that would present a risk to its water security.

But that agreement is seen as invalid and unfair by Nile basin countries, as it was

drawn up under the auspices of British colonialists.

Countries such as Ethiopia never put their names to the agreement.

As these countries battled it out with a war of words over the decades, the infamous 1979 declaration made by the then Egypt president Anwar Sadat stated that “the only matter that could take Egypt to war again is water”.

Meanwhile, Ethiopian General Birhanu Jula recently said: “Egyptians and the rest of the world know too well how we conduct war whenever it comes.”

While the UN Security Council is still deliberating on this looming “water war”, let us hope that sanity will prevail so that war is averted and the countries upstream and downstream the Nile river basin benefit equally.

If countries face off like this, it can only mean that water is not only a matter of life and death but an essential for life and our survival and we cannot live without it.

Water is central to many of our needs, agriculture, domestic use, economic development, employment creation, electricity generation and many other essentials.

No country can be comfortable with a single source of water with all the competing needs and the demand for water and SA is not oblivious to this fact as water is a scarce resource particularly now that the world is faced with effects of climate change.

Let us work together — from politicians, to businesses, to civil society organisations and water users — by protecting and saving this precious resource and ensuring that there is equal share for everyone to benefit.

The people of Southern Africa have looked beyond narrow self-interests and promote the bonds of solidarity within our global community by sharing water resources.

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