

## PREVENTING CONFLICT

Throughout history, water has been a major force in the rise and fall of civilizations and a source of conflict and tension between nations. Many early civilizations arose on the banks of great rivers—the Nile in Egypt, the Tigris-Euphrates of Mesopotamia, the Indus in Pakistan, and the Hwang Ho of China. By the same token, civilizations have collapsed when water supplies failed or were improperly managed.

In the 21st century, the potential for conflict over water is unacceptably high. Scarce resources must now serve competing needs in agriculture, industry, and urban and rural populations across several nations, while retaining sufficient supplies in the environment to ensure long-term sustainability of ecosystems. The problems are especially acute throughout Africa, where many countries are balanced precariously on the edge of scarcity and survival. Recognizing the importance of preventing water-related conflict, the GEF is being asked to assist collaborating nations in their efforts to work together to address existing and potential water-related conflicts, both among nations and competing sectoral users. Two examples, in Africa and Southeast Asia, are highlighted below.

### **MOVING TOWARDS COOPERATION IN THE NILE BASIN**

Winding more than 7000 kilometers through ten countries, the Nile River is one of the world's great natural assets, rich in culture and history, and often referred to as the "River of Life." But the waters of the Nile are also in high demand in a semi-arid region with substantial population growth where the priorities of riparian governments have not always coincided.

As it drains an area of 3.1 million square kilometers, the Nile passes through six of the world's ten poorest countries, most of which are highly dependent on land and water resources for their income base. Cooperative management of the Nile River Basin provides a major prospect for riparian countries to realize significant transboundary economic and environmental benefits.

Nine Nile Basin countries are utilizing GEF project preparation funding to develop an international waters project aimed at improving transboundary management of land and water resources in the basin as part of the *Basinwide Shared Vision Program* of the larger *Nile River Basin Initiative*. With such collective action, riparian countries are positioning themselves for the future, recognizing regional cooperation, trade, and sustainable development as priority objectives. By doing so, they are striving to overcome decades-old cycles of food shortages, famine, extreme poverty, and environmental degradation.

The program under preparation includes broad-based participatory processes to identify, define, and mobilize resources for stakeholder involvement and awareness, water and environmental management, and applied training and institutional capacity building for transboundary water management. As the Shared Vision Program develops, policy reforms, programs, and projects in different sectors may contribute to synergies and linkages that would have been unrealized if discussions stopped at water allocation.

Complementing this project, specific subsidiary action programs will focus on such issues as water supply and sanitation, fisheries, and irrigation and drainage development. The project will require neighboring countries to make political commitments to work together, establish priorities, and decide on joint actions.

This coordinated approach to improving management of the Nile can already count some early successes. A Technical Advisory Committee has been established by the riparian states and the Council of Ministries of Water Affairs to help define priority actions. In addition, an International Consortium for Cooperation in the Nile River Basin has been created to serve as the focal point for decisions on the mobilization of national, international, and private sector resources—including GEF funding—for implementation of future efforts for the Nile. GEF will play a catalytic role in assisting the nine countries to utilize the full range of technical, economic, financial, regulatory, and institutional measures needed to eradicate poverty and promote sustainable development of this important shared resource.

## **PREVENTING WATER USE CONFLICTS IN THE MEKONG RIVER BASIN**

The heart of the Mekong Basin's ecosystem lies in the globally significant wetlands and flooded forests in the Tonle Sap, the Plain of Reeds, and the coastline ecosystem. The Tonle Sap (also known as the Great Lake of Cambodia) lies in the middle of Cambodia and is fed by runoff from its own subbasin and by reverse flows from the Mekong River during the wet season. During the dry season the Tonle Sap drains into the Mekong Delta, helping to combat seawater intrusion and maintain the delta's ecological balance, including extensive mangrove forests.

The 65 million inhabitants of the Mekong Basin depend to a great extent on the natural resources of the basin for their livelihoods. Few of the economic benefits of the extraordinary growth that occurred in the surrounding region of Southeast Asia in the last decade were experienced in the basin. As a result, exploitation of these wetlands is increasing, and in some cases they are being drained for cultivation. Increased water diversions and dam construction on the Mekong River and its tributaries represent competing water uses that may threaten the basin's aquatic ecosystem. Shifting cultivation and widespread logging in the sensitive upland areas are degrading the watersheds, increasing erosion, and modifying the hydrological regime.

Finding a means of supporting continued development of the basin in an ecologically sustainable way is central to the GEF's new *Mekong River Basin Water Utilization Project*. Supported by an \$11 million GEF grant and approximately \$7 million in cofinancing, the grant will assist the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in promoting and improving sustainable water management in the Mekong River Basin while protecting the ecological balance of the basin.

The MRC is an intergovernmental organization of the four lower Mekong Basin states: Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. The project aims to support the MRC in developing an integrated and comprehensive basin hydrological modeling package, as well as an integrated knowledge base on water and related resources to establish a series of "rules" regarding joint water management. The rules will establish guidelines for water utilization and ecological protection, including maintenance of sufficient flows in the dry season, measures to protect water quality, and procedures for monitoring and information exchange.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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