



POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN AFRICA

PEDRO

The International Congo Ubangui Sanga Commission (CICOS): Going with the flow - from navigation to climate finance in less than 20 years?¹

This paper sets out to better inform stakeholders about why the International Congo-Ubangui-Sanga Commission (CICOS) and national level stakeholders operate as they do around managing water and climate change related interests. It concludes with implications for support.²

Political traction, member states interests and potential

Compared to the drought and climate-change affected Niger and Lake Chad basins to the North, the Congo-Ubangui-Sangha basin stands out as an area of hydrological abundance. The sheer size of the largely unexploited basin has long sparked the imagination of engineers and politicians alike, looking to harness the power of the Congo river and its tributaries for ambitions of often continental proportions.

However, the basin straddles an area with a troubled past in terms of regional integration and cooperation. The track record of transboundary water cooperation in the Congo Basin illustrates the difficulties of overlapping forms of regionalism in Central Africa. The International Congo-Ubangui-Sangha Commission (CICOS) was set up in 2000 as a specialised agency of the Economic Community of Central African States (CEMAC). The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has a dominant, geographical position in that it controls no less than 62% of the basin. It is a member of CICOS, yet it is not a member of CEMAC. The “forced marriage” between DRC and its CEMAC neighbours has long defined the DRC position with regard to the (shared) waters in the Congo basin and the Congo river in particular. DRC houses the CICOS secretariat, and is expected to play a leading role in its functioning, yet the country has long remained non-committal, both in ratifying and implementing legislation and in upholding its commitments to finance the institution.

Initially set up to address the legal ambiguity and general decline of international river transport in the basin, CICOS was conceived as a regional organisation with a narrow mandate to facilitate and regulate navigation at a time when river basin organisations (RBOs) worldwide were exploring the approach of Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM). In the early 2000s, RBOs moved to the centre stage as potential key drivers of sustainable development, environmental protection and conservation. As a result, CICOS’ short history has been one of agenda expansion.

¹ Based on a March 2017 background paper by ECDPM, available at www.ecdpm.org/pedro/backgroundpapers. The Policy Brief and background paper were prepared under the BMZ-financed project on the *Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations (PEDRO)*. Author: Alfonso Medinilla (ame@ecdpm.org). Project team leader: Bruce Byiers (bby@ecdpm.org).

² Other PEDRO papers related to regional water challenges include the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the Nile Basin Initiative, the Niger Basin Authority and the Southern African Development Cooperation water paper.

By 2017, CICOS had agreed on an addendum, giving it an IWRM mandate (2007) and embarked on a participatory planning process to develop a shared vision and integrated programme or basin ‘master plan’ of fundable “measures”.

The external funding environment has had a profound effect on the development of African RBOs, and CICOS is no exception. In less than 20 years CICOS developed from a narrow technical organisation to essentially a dual-mandate organisation. It adopted the standard model of a contemporary transboundary RBO, thus allowing it to absorb a broader range of donor funding. CICOS has been identified, alongside the Central African Forestry Commission,³ as a key actor to drive climate change adaptation in the basin, and has developed its shared vision and “programme of measures” accordingly. Though funding is being made available, it remains unclear how strong the CICOS capabilities are and the political traction it has to play a meaningful role in facilitating climate finance in the basin, as compared also to the numerous agencies and players active in the basin.

The Congo basin is at the heart of planetary concerns of climate change, biodiversity and conservation. It is the second largest river basin in the world, yet has only developed a fraction of its hydroelectric and economic potential. Several Congo basin countries are in the process of conceiving or developing major infrastructure works, including projects that could have large-scale effects on a regional or even continental level (e.g. the Grand Inga Dam, Palambo and possible Inter-Basin transfer). Some are more concrete than others, and some are highly contentious and conflict-prone and require regional coordination or even inter-basin mediation.

A closer reading of the inter-state dynamics and political interests in the basin illustrates that the linear and progressive model of river basin management may be at odds with the national political interests of certain CICOS member states. At present, member states see little to no interest in empowering the regional or basin level any more than is strictly necessary to maintain the organisation. Member states are adamant in rejecting any form of transnational authority, which would give CICOS more than a coordinating or facilitating role.

Some advances have been made since 1999, particularly in normalising the position of the DRC. In the area of navigation, important steps have been taken towards reforming the sector, combatting obstructions to navigation and promoting cross-border cooperation through bilateral and trilateral arrangements between DRC, Congo and the Central African Republic. Lack of evidence, however makes it difficult to assess the real political traction of CICOS in implementing the IWRM mandate.

Implications for support

1. The rapid expansion of CICOS into Integrated Water Resource Management risks resulting in ‘agenda inflation’ and associated implementation challenges, the more so as member states hesitate to empower the organisation or to allow it to develop institutionally beyond the bare minimum capabilities

- The adoption of IWRM and more recently the development of a regional master plan and programme of measures for the development of the basin were to a large extent externally driven processes with a strong fundraising component.
- CICOS’ strategic objectives call for much stronger regional coordination, including on water resource governance. This may turn out to be at odds with those member states that eschew any form of supranational authority over national priorities and resource allocations.
- All this means that the regional level does not fully represent the various national priorities and interests even if close coordination of national programmes and investments, with the broader, regional narrative will be crucial in managing the shared resources.

³ COMIFAC, see separate PEDRO report

2. Continued, yet focused, support may allow CICOS to play a stronger facilitating role in the politically charged and highly volatile context of the Congo Basin.

- The main perceived added value of CICOS lies in facilitating or supporting sub-basin or bilateral arrangements, particularly in supporting the management of shared navigable waters.
- As Basin related infrastructure development projects by member states pick up momentum, the need for regional facilitation and knowledge brokerage to navigate competing interests and claims on the Basin's resources becomes more urgent, a potential area for CICOS.
- Regional water mediation hinges on the capacity of CICOS to produce reliable data and analysis. Therefore, strengthening the technical and brokerage capacity of CICOS is one condition sine qua non for the regional organisation to play its role in this mandated area.

Behind the formal structures of regional organisations is a messy world of regional power and politics. This messiness is often difficult to capture in the language of development cooperation and institutional development. Working with regional organisations and their programmes therefore implies engaging with complex, multi-level power and interest dynamics.

PEDRO, the Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations, is an ECDPM project that looks at the politics behind regional organisations, and the structural factors, institutions and incentives that ultimately define the way in which countries and different stakeholders engage at a regional level. PEDRO covers 17 African regional organisations and 11 policy areas. For each of these, ECDPM has applied a political economy approach to help understand the dynamics and their effects in different regions and policy areas.

The studies are framed around three key questions: the first relates to the political traction of the regional organisation as this helps assess whether the regional organisation has enabled regional decision making and if it has contributed to implementation. The second focuses on the member state interests in engaging with the regional organisation, especially the more resourceful and powerful ones (the so-called 'swing states'). The third looks at the areas with most traction where regional and national level interests seem to be most aligned for regional outcomes.

The reports aim to present information and insights that can help regional stakeholders navigate the obstacles and better respond to reform opportunities. Rather than providing specific operational recommendations, the political economy approach encourages more reality-based discussions among practitioners and reformers about feasible ways to address regional challenges. It is hoped that this may help tailor the ambitions and approaches of donors and reformers and help identify ways to support national or regional champions or coalitions to take regional cooperation and integration forward.