



POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN AFRICA

PEDRO

The Niger Basin Authority: Reconciling upstream and downstream interests on the Niger River¹

This paper sets out to better inform stakeholders about why the Niger Basin Authority (NBA/ABN) and its national level stakeholders operate as they do around managing water related interests. It concludes with implications for support.²

Political traction, member states interests and potential

The Niger Basin Authority (NBA) builds on a long history of cooperation going back to the Niger River Commission, set up shortly after independence in 1963. In its current form, the NBA aims to harmonise and coordinate national water resource development initiatives around an integrated development plan for the basin, as well as facilitate and broker water and energy infrastructure development as part of a regionally agreed scenario.

Over the years, the NBA has seen various cycles of organisational decline and redynamisation. During one of the most critical periods for the Sahel countries (1970s to the early 1990s) it had largely failed to achieve its ambitions as a river basin authority, leading to loss of credibility and loss of member state and donor confidence in the organisation. This was partly due to the longstanding downstream opposition from Nigeria against any dam construction upstream. West Africa's powerhouse and swing state had primarily defensive interests in cooperation in the basin, and limited incentives to invest in regional solutions that could affect its water intake at the border with Niger. Guinea, Mali and Niger have long had a stronger stake in harnessing the Niger River flow for electricity generation, irrigation, or year-round flow-control. Given Nigerian resistance, plans for dam construction in all three countries have been dormant for decades.

Since the 2000s, the momentum has picked up again, and as member states dusted off their plans for large multipurpose dams, the need to coordinate around the downstream effects of these projects resurfaced. With external support and operating in a more conducive global environment for cooperation on a basin scale, the NBA and its member states managed to break through the longstanding upstream-downstream opposition that had led to an underdeveloped and under-regulated upstream section of the basin. The process behind the development of a shared

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² Other PEDRO papers related to regional water challenges include the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the Nile Basin Initiative, the International Congo-Ubangui-Sangha Commission and the Southern African Development Cooperation water paper.

vision for the Niger basin and an adapted scenario for upstream dam development illustrates the importance of sub-basin dynamics and regional facilitation in finding a compromise between conflicting upstream and downstream interests. Throughout the process, the role of the NBA as a knowledge broker was key in bringing the discussions to a concrete level, with detailed projections of guaranteed low water period discharge, profitability and environmental impact.

Moving on from this negotiated vision and compromise, the challenges remain great. The first major upstream dams are being built in Mali and Niger. Others (Guinea) are still at the stage of preparatory impact assessments. While major funding has been secured, all these national projects have suffered from major implementation delays and the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel in recent years.

In its current iteration, the NBA has been conceived as a River Basin Authority, in part inspired by the experience of the Organisation pour la Mise en Valeur du Fleuve Sénégal (OMVS) between Senegal, Guinea and Mauritania. That organisation operates jointly owned infrastructure on the Senegal River and its tributaries on the basis of a cost-and-benefit sharing arrangement. With technical and financial support from donor agencies, the NBA countries have adopted a gradual approach to empowering the regional organisation in this role, and in principle agreed on the possibility to delegate management of shared infrastructure to the regional level in the future.

On paper, therefore, the provisions that would enable the NBA to operate as a regional Authority are being developed. In practice, however, member states remain reluctant to empower or even equip the organisation beyond what strictly falls within the immediate sphere of national level interests. This leads to a chicken-or-egg situation in which the trust of member states in the capacity of the institution is low, while at the same time, the unpredictable financing and political support to the NBA is such that it hampers institutional development and trust building.

The international community closely observes developments in the severely water-stressed Sahel and in the Niger Basin countries. In recent years, the NBA performed a critical function as a regional fund-raising vehicle for climate finance. This reiterates the point that the external funding environment constitutes an important pull factor for cooperation under the NBA header. Climate finance may present an opportunity for the NBA to expand its role as a regional player. However, this is a crowded field and much depends on the role member states are prepared to give to the NBA.

Beyond a regional frame of reference to facilitate fundraising for national initiatives, the NBA has gradually established itself as a knowledge hub. Member states increasingly recognise its added value, particularly for analytical tools (modelling, observatory), for information sharing, and for coordinating possible corrective measures and critical impact assessments. The experience since the 2000s strengthened the NBA as sub-regional forum for member state coordination, creating a certain level of political momentum.

Considering the gradual integration model of the ABN, there is still a long way to go for it to fully play the role of an Authority. In the absence of a real testing ground, many of the more ambitious provisions (e.g. cost-benefit-sharing) risk to remain dead letter in the coming years. Given the large geographic scope and uneven interests between the basin countries, opportunities for strengthening regional coordination may be stronger at the bilateral and/or sub-basin level.

Implications for support

1. Continue core support to the NBA to maintain the momentum of the Shared Vision Process

- The NBA remains heavily reliant on donor support for its survival and for most if not all of its programmes. This support is indispensable for maintaining momentum in those areas where it currently exists.

- Core support to the NBA may help to move from an ad-hoc approach to a more proactive, objective-driven approach, and to establish itself as a regional facilitator of large investments. As dam construction in the region is picking up again, the NBA may be called on to play a more central role in convening member state positions and interests.
- Given the limited organisational and administrative capacity of the Executive Secretariat of the NBA, the multitude of institutional partners and the large volume of external funding operations including climate finance in the Niger basin, there is a particularly strong need for enhanced donor coordination and harmonisation behind a shared vision.

2. Recognise and understand the dominant interests at national level behind major infrastructure investments

- Despite the NBA's growing importance as a knowledge hub and coordination platform, member states remain reluctant to transfer competencies to the regional level, with many of the more ambitious provisions risking to remain dead letter in the coming years.
- Member states officially commit to regional coordination, yet also pursue their own interests unilaterally or bilaterally with neighbouring countries.
- Regional support and financing should go hand in hand with a more coordinated action at the national and subregional level, taking account of the particular interests of individual member states, particularly Nigeria, Niger, Mali and Guinea.

3. Prioritise sub-areas and problem-solving with traction among key member states and sub-groupings.

- To date, the FOMI project in Guinea, close to the border with Mali, is the only project that can really be considered as transboundary, benefitting and affecting both upstream and downstream countries. A deeper understanding of the drivers and constraints in this specific case could provide insights for assessing the traction of the traction of particular forms of regional problem solving and cooperation.
- Focusing on cost and benefit sharing in bilateral and/or sub-basin infrastructure development could allow the NBA to advance from paper-based integration to real-life cross-border cooperation on specific projects as it may alter the incentive environment for potential stakeholders.
- The NBA, along with several member countries, participated in global climate change conferences (UN Conference of the Parties 21 and COP22). River based organisations such as NBA are seen as key drivers for climate change adaptation, and increasingly function as channels or vehicles for climate finance.

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.