

Why the UK
Government must
support the

UN Watercourses Convention

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a lead on international
water management
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United Nations Convention
on the Law of the
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This paper is supported by

End Water Poverty

LSE / KCL London Water Research Group

UNESCO Centre for Water Law, Policy & Science

World Development Movement

Water Aid

WWF

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There are 263 rivers worldwide which cross international boundaries, many of which are being significantly degraded through poor and uncoordinated management. These river basins cover half the Earth's land surface, are home to 40% of the world's people across 145 countries, and contain 60% of global river flows. The Stern Review of the economics of climate change has highlighted that many of the economic and development consequences of climate change involve reduced access to freshwater: glacial melt, drought and rising sea levels. Coordinated efforts by the international community to meet this challenge are best set in the context of international law.

The UN Watercourse Convention clarifies the rules of international law governing all non-navigational uses of 'transboundary watercourses' (mainly rivers shared between two or more countries). The UN Watercourse Convention balances the interests of upper and lower riparian states, and provides a basis for negotiation of regional and bilateral agreements. In sum, the Convention aims to: avoid conflict over water resources; minimise degradation of a river by promoting cooperation in the sustainable use of the entire watercourse; and – through the principle of equity – accounting for the special situation and needs of developing countries.

Being party to the UN Watercourse Convention would contribute to UK foreign policy, international development objectives, global environment leadership and the long term food supply to the UK:

International security

Tensions over international rivers coincide in a number of areas of high political stress. These tensions are fuelled by unresolved water conflicts and poor cross-border water management. The equitable water sharing principle promoted by the Convention can lead to more stable relations, and ultimately to greater regional security.

Development

The impact that water security will have on the world's poorest, cannot be underestimated and will only be exacerbated by the impact of climate change. Water is a critical requirement for livelihoods of the poorest people in developing countries, not only for drinking water and domestic use, but also critically for agriculture. Securing the integrity and sustainable management of rivers and their associated ecosystems will therefore help towards meeting several of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

Environment

Improved international river basin management will support the progress made through global treaties on biodiversity, desertification and climate change. In particular it aims to ensure minimum essential flows to sustain biodiversity along the entire course of a river basin system.

UK domestic food supply

Reduced water access in affected countries could, in the long term, threaten UK imports of water intensive foods such as sugar, coffee, maize and beef. By contributing to sustainable international river basin management, the Convention may significantly prevent disruption in food production, resulting in a greater assurance of supply of these foods to the UK.

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Examples of international tension caused in the absence of the UN Watercourse Convention

We urge the UK government to:

- Support the UN Watercourse Convention, and commence the accession process through parliament.
- Champion the UN Watercourse Convention with Commonwealth Countries, within the European Union and at the United Nations General Assembly
- Ask the UN Security Council to debate this issue, as a priority issue for regions of the world where political tension is already high.
- Use the UN Watercourse Convention to support and compliment DFID's work on freshwater, and support DFID's intentions to expand its freshwater programme

MP action

- Please support our proposed EDM on accession to the UN Watercourse Convention.
- Write to the Foreign Secretary, Rt Hon David Miliband MP and Development Minister, Gareth Thomas MP asking them to start the process for UK accession to the UN Watercourse Convention.
- Raise the issue of tension over international waters in parliament.

More Information

A full briefing document and consultation on the issue is available from:

WWF: Penny Evans,
01483 412376,
pevans@wwf.org.uk

World Development Movement:

Leila Deen, 020 7820 4900,
Leila@wdm.org.uk

Below are just a few examples of situations where significant dispute has arisen over shared waters. The UN Watercourse Convention is designed to reduce such dispute, to provide an international legal system under which bilateral agreements between countries can be made, and a system of arbitration to facilitate conflict resolution between nations.

Continued conflict and increasing political tension

- **Middle East:** The Jordan River states of Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority are under pressure to share the limited waters of the River Jordan. Turkey and Syria came close to war in 1998 due to Turkey's plans to dam the Euphrates River, as have Iraq and Syria in the past. Relations on this river are improving, offering a chance at an enduring treaty based on the principles of the Convention.

Poverty and livelihoods impacts

- **South Asia:** Pakistan accuses India of violating the 1960 Indus Water Treaty by its plans to build a dam on the Jhelum River, one of the three western tributaries that flows into the Indus River. Already the impact of dams and diversion of waters in upstream states has affected millions of poor people in places like the Indus River delta in Pakistan. Livelihoods are lost to coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion and collapsing fisheries.

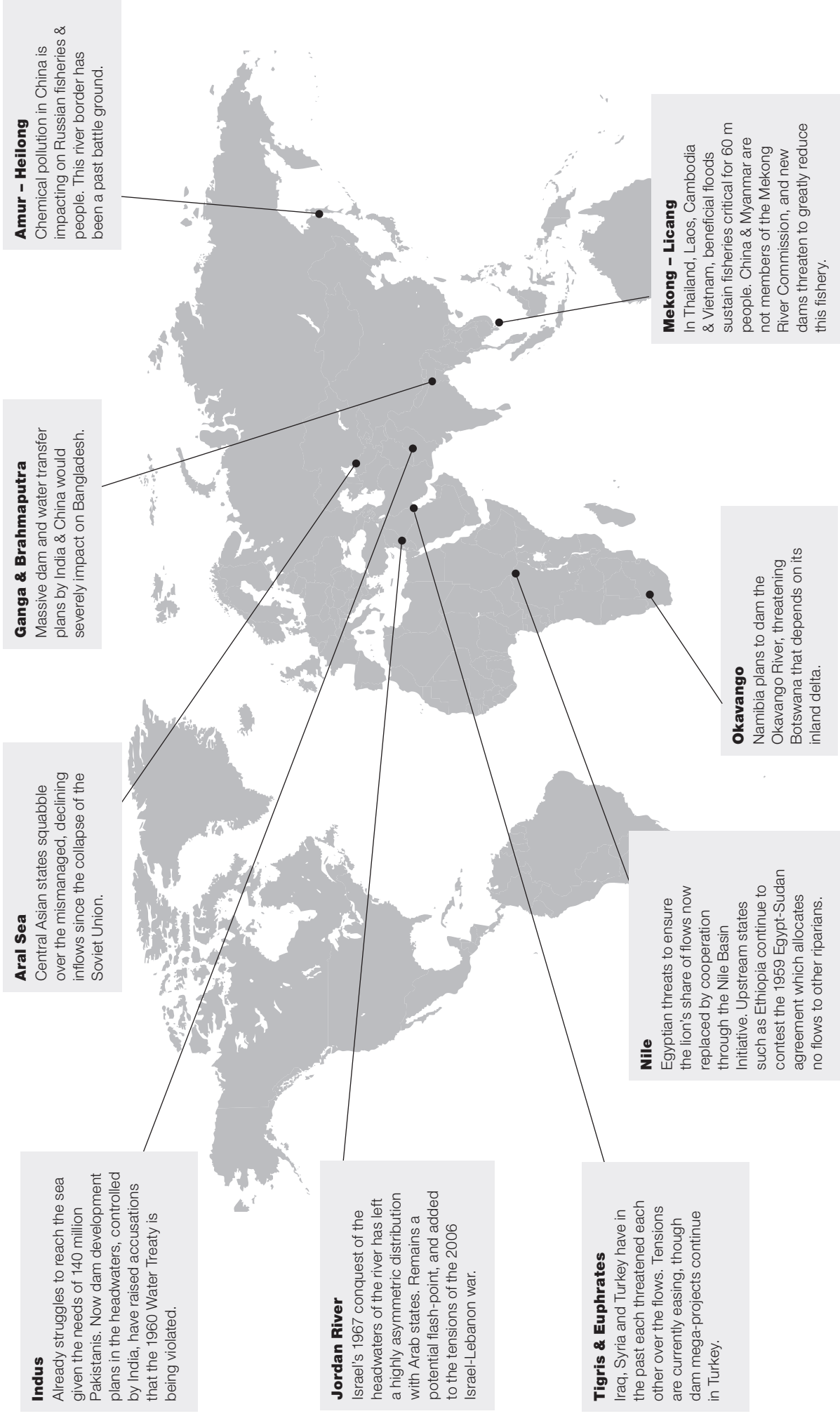
Inequitable partners in negotiation

- **Africa:** As populations increase in Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and the Lake Victoria basin states, competition for the Nile's water is heating up. Egypt's threats to take military action against upstream states that divert water have been replaced by negotiations at the Nile Basin Initiative. If the negotiations are not set within the context of the Convention, tensions and threats may return.

Further south, drought has led to disputes between Botswana, Namibia and Angola over Namibia's plans to transfer water from the Okavango River to provide water to its capital.

- **Bangladesh:** As lower riparian country in Ganges-Brahmaputra river system, India has constructed dams and hydroelectric projects on 50 of the 54 international rivers that come to Bangladesh from India. India is planning to construct Tipaimukh hydroelectric multipurpose project the Barak River in northeast India that may permanently damage the Barak-surma river system and will seriously harm north-eastern Bangladesh and affect up to 10 million people.
- **Paraguay** shares several important rivers with its neighbours in Brazil, Argentina and Bolivia. Yet, as a country, and together with all the local communities in the region, it is currently at the losing end of powerful interests that want to dam and widen the rivers. Paraguay has signed the UN convention and local campaigners SOBREVIVENCIA believe that it will eventually give Paraguay "a better position to negotiate fair and equitable agreements with neighbouring countries, towards sustainable management of the rivers in the Rio de la Plata basin."

Ongoing conflicts over transboundary waters



Indus
Already struggles to reach the sea given the needs of 140 million Pakistanis. Now dam development plans in the headwaters, controlled by India, have raised accusations that the 1960 Water Treaty is being violated.

Jordan River
Israel's 1967 conquest of the headwaters of the river has left a highly asymmetric distribution with Arab states. Remains a potential flash-point, and added to the tensions of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war.

Tigris & Euphrates
Iraq, Syria and Turkey have in the past each threatened each other over the flows. Tensions are currently easing, though dam mega-projects continue in Turkey.

Aral Sea
Central Asian states squabble over the mismanaged, declining inflows since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Ganga & Brahmaputra
Massive dam and water transfer plans by India & China would severely impact on Bangladesh.

Amur - Heilong
Chemical pollution in China is impacting on Russian fisheries & people. This river border has been a past battle ground.

Nile
Egyptian threats to ensure the lion's share of flows now replaced by cooperation through the Nile Basin Initiative. Upstream states such as Ethiopia continue to contest the 1959 Egypt-Sudan agreement which allocates no flows to other riparians.

Okavango
Namibia plans to dam the Okavango River, threatening Botswana that depends on its inland delta.

Mekong - Licang
In Thailand, Laos, Cambodia & Vietnam, beneficial floods sustain fisheries critical for 60 m people. China & Myanmar are not members of the Mekong River Commission, and new dams threaten to greatly reduce this fishery.