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Tribal Water Wars Could Be Looming for Africa

Poor resources management bigger problems than scarcity

By Kremena Krumova
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For many tribes and communities in Africa, Earth Day on April 22, is not a special time to think about green acts and water conservation; it is a day like the rest—a struggle to find enough water for their crops, livestock, and families. And that struggle can turn into a battle, as tribes that have lived in peace along riverbanks of Eastern Africa for generations are turning into enemies over access to water.

Farmers and herdsman with their cattle now need to cross longer distances in search of the precious resource, often infringing on other's traditional lands. Hence, conflicts break out, some ending in bloodshed.

According to the documentary "When the Water Ends" by the American photographer Evan Abramson published online last January, 8 million semi-nomadic people in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya survive by following water resources. For thousands of years their ancestors have roamed the grazing lands that stretch across 80 percent of Kenya and 60 percent of Ethiopia. Now, if they continue following their original lifestyle, it could cost them their lives.

Each year, at least 15 tribe members are killed in armed conflicts over water, Makambo Lotorobo, field officer at the Friends of Turkana, an environmental grass-roots organization in Kenya, wrote via e-mail.

According to Lotorobo, conflicts in Kenya spark mostly between the tribes of Turkana, Samburu, Rendille, Gabra, Dassanatch, Ammarkoke, and Toposa. He recollects an incident where warriors from the Rendille community were watering their animals at a well in Gas village during a severe drought.

"The village is inhabited by the Gabra community, and it happened that they came to try and confront the Rendilles demanding [an] explanation why they are using the well, which doesn't belong to them. This resulted in a shootout."

In the end, the local administration had to intervene by establishing peace talks facilitated by a council of elders from the local community in order to save the situation.

More often, people are left to their own devices to secure the life-sustaining resource.

“Since security is crucial for the nomadic people and the government is unable to ensure it, they are forced to buy their own arms for self defense and protection of their livestock,” wrote Lotorobo.

Lake Turkana is a major stage in the story of African water conflicts. Ninety percent of its waters come from the Omo River and more than 500,000 tribesmen in Ethiopia and 300,000 in Kenya depend on it for cultivation, grazing, and fishing, according to Abramson’s documentary.

For the last 40 years, the lake has been shrinking due to rising temperatures in the region. Lake waters have receded so much that the water now sits only on the Ethiopian side of the border. Making matters worse, the Ethiopian government is building a dam on the upper Omo River.

A group called Friends of Turkana is at the frontlines trying to stop the project, although it is currently suspended due to a lack of funding.

“The dam will have a catastrophic impact on the fragile ecosystem of the Turkana basin,” according to Lotorobo. “It will reduce the Omo River flow into Lake Turkana causing the lake level to reduce by 10 meters [32.8 feet].”

The environmentalist points to yet another grave consequence: If the dam is built, the lake’s salinity will increase making the water undrinkable, which will also harm the local fish industry. Conflicts will surely ensue.

“The local community will not sit back and perish knowing that there are other territories where life can be easier, therefore their last resort will always be fighting for their survival,” says Lotorobo.

Critics say official policies and programs in Kenya and Ethiopia are exacerbating the water conflict, instead of finding solutions.

“Pastoralists have been encouraged by government policies or well-meaning NGOs to raise nontraditional breeds of cattle ... because they produce more meat and milk. But these animals are not well adapted to [a] lack of water, high temperatures, or to some of the diseases in Africa. They are not able to walk that far for water,” said Danielle Nierenberg from Nourishing the Planet, a project of the Worldwatch Environmental Institute.

Nierenberg says that herders are often considered backward and that a lot of African nations, including South Africa where she is, are trying to push agriculture into the modern era by promoting land ownership versus nomadic grazing, among other things.

According to Nierenberg, in the long term this attitude toward cattle breeders, combined with the

increasing scarcity of natural resources, might lead not only to economic conflicts, but also to large-scale social protests.

“If African nations don’t find a way to figure out and solve the water crisis, we will see more unrest, not only in Sub-Saharan Africa but all over the world.”

The water crisis in Africa also negatively impacts lifestyles of indigenous communities. Nierenberg says African elders are nostalgic to the past and are afraid their children will lose their connection to nature and the land. And there is more.

“By losing their access to water and land, they are very worried they are losing their cultural and religious tradition, and their food. Especially with the rising food prices they don’t have enough money to buy food anymore and are not able to produce enough to feed themselves.”

Katherine Cross, Regional Water and Wetlands coordinator at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), says that talking to communities about the future can be a challenge because of their strong belief that it is all in God’s hands.

“But if you speak to them in the context that water has been changing during the last few years, this can be effective. It is because they see there are less rains and more droughts,” she said.

Scarcity is Not the Problem

According to UNESCO, 62.2 percent of the African continent is covered by water. Thirteen percent of the world’s population lives in Africa and uses 11 percent of the world’s water resources. That puts Africa in a more favorable position compared to Asia for example, where 60 percent of the world’s population has access to only 36 percent of global water resources.

“So Africa does not have a real problem with lack of water, if it is managed well,” said Léna Salamé, project coordinator at Division of Water Sciences of UNESCO.

According to Salamé, the real problem in Africa, when it comes to water, is the lack of capacity and resources to deal with the conflicts in a cooperative way.

The “Strategic Plan 2008–2013,” a study by UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education, technical, managerial, and scientific water capacities will have to be raised by up to 300 percent in Africa to meet Millennium Development Goals. That compares to a 50 percent rise in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 200 percent in Asia.

“You need to train people, to give them the tools to deal with the conflict on their own,” she said.

Salamé also points out that Africa is not using its whole potential to develop its water resources. She quoted a study by UNESCO that shows that in North America, the capacity to store water is 217,185 cubic feet per capita per year. While in Ethiopia it is only 1,519 cubic feet. In South Africa, the most developed African country, it's 26,345 cubic feet.

As water resources in Africa are not handled well at the national level, it carries problems downstream. People find themselves with no other option other than to fight for water on their own.

International donors carry some of the blame, says Salamé, because many bring money to solve a problem, and then they leave with nothing left for the local people. Locals don't have the capacity to follow up with the solution or to implement it in the long term.

“A long-term perspective is missing. Investments must be made in education and capacity building, in order [for] the donors' money to bring long-term development.”

The need for a common strategy on solving the water crisis in Africa seems to transcend the warm continent and to echo around the globe.

Lester Brown, president of the D.C.-based Earth Policy Institute, says that overall, solutions are not obvious because little is known about this problem in general. Nonetheless, the problem is real.

“Water will become a far [more] major issue in the future than it is now. What we need is a worldwide effort to raise water productivity. Right now we still don't have it,” warns Brown.