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Beyond the River: The Benefits of Cooperation on International Rivers

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Description / Abstract

International rivers can elicit cooperation or conflict. The choice between the two will in large part be determined by perceptions of their relative benefits. In this paper, we explore the dynamics that drive the choice between conflict and cooperation, and present a simple framework for examining the extent of potential benefits that could underlie these choices. The paper seeks to broaden the range of perceived benefits, as some are obvious and some are much less apparent. The framework categorizes four types of cooperative benefits. First, cooperation will enable better management of ecosystems, providing benefits to the river, and underpinning all other benefits that can be derived. Second, efficient, cooperative management and development of shared rivers can yield major benefits from the river, in increased food and energy production, for example. Third, cooperation on an international river will result in the reduction of costs because of the river, as tensions between riparian states will always be present, to a greater or lesser extent, and those tensions will generate costs. And finally, as international rivers can be catalytic agents, cooperation that yields benefits from the river and reduces costs because of the river can pave the way to much greater cooperation between states, even economic integration among states, generating benefits beyond the river. While each of these four types of benefits could potentially be obtained in all international river basins, the extent and relative importance of each type will vary greatly between basins, reflecting a wide range of political, geographic, economic and cultural circumstances. In some cases, the scale of benefits may not justify the costs of cooperative actions, in others the sum of benefits could be very high. The paper concludes that identifying and understanding the range of often inter-related benefits derived from the cooperative management and development of international rivers is central both to better management of the world's rivers, and to relations among the nations sharing those rivers.

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