



Beyond the Music: Nile Project Strikes a Fresh Chord in Water Conflict Transformation via Student Engagement in the Nile Basin

Cross-cultural, co-created music can be entertaining or beautiful. It can also have great impact. It can spark very personal, long-lasting interest in other cultures, which can come in handy when those cultures aren't seeing eye to eye. Build on the interest by providing structures, outlets, and platforms for exploring, sharing and acting on ideas—especially among energetic, open-minded university students—and you have new channels for addressing conflict and generating solutions.

For The Nile Project, music is a driving force for real transformation of seemingly intractable conflicts. “Music can make people curious,” explains Nile Project President / CEO and co-founder Mina Girgis. “Curiosity is key, because it in turn urges people to learn about each other. The more you know, the more likely you are to be empathetic, and thus listen more closely and sympathetically to one another.”

Listening, first to music, then to people you once believed were strangers or adversaries, can move the needle toward calm in potential conflict situations. Before tension erupts into violence, there is a moment when communication can shift the discussion in a crucial way. What happens among a diverse group of musicians on stage—the give-and-take within a composition, the attentive listening, the mutual support—suggests other modes of interaction to audience members. “It’s a blueprint for what’s possible outside of the concert venue,” notes Girgis.

“When you look at the crowd for a Nile Project performance, you see an audience you won’t see anywhere else,” says Nile Project Vice President for University Programs Cindy Quezada. “It’s really interesting. In Cairo, for example, you’ll get the more bohemian young crowd, who are very environmentally and socially engaged. At the same time, you’ll see very traditional families, as well as regular professionals and everyone else you can imagine within a social spectrum. It’s such an eclectic crowd from different sectors of society that don’t usually mix, yet they all come together to listen to Nile Project music.”

But pleasure and curiosity need fertile soil to sprout and bear fruit. The Nile Project is preparing the ground for these new shoots through a set of university-based programs to nurture this new crop of ideas and relationships emerging from its music. In a region challenged by increased demand for water and by a long history of complex river-related interactions, the project hopes to transform potential conflict into innovative cooperation throughout the Nile Basin.

“There’s this perception, not just in the region, but generally,” relates Girgis, “that water is a zero-sum game. Yet it’s not. Water is a resource that can be viewed in a radically different way.”

The Nile Project hopes to shift the discourse regarding the Nile’s resources and generate an array of alternate possibilities and approaches, some deeply rooted in the region, some quite novel. Many of

these alternatives can bubble up from musical activities. “Music speaks to the heart and has the ability to make you think and act differently,” reflects Quezada. “The project will use music to inspire student engagement in their Nile River environment in innovative ways.”

This engagement is crucial to the region. With around 400 million people (as of 2012) set to more than double in the next forty years, the great river will see an ever increasing demand for its waters. And water is tied to all aspects of life – from the food on tables to the electricity that powers homes. Even now, people living along the Nile are vulnerable to water-related hardships. Many communities are already facing water shortages. Seven of the eleven Nile countries continue to suffer from undernourishment rates higher than 30%. Less than 10% of basin residents have access to electricity. The core issue that may decide their fate is how to peacefully allocate a fixed amount of Nile Basin water among eleven nations, with different needs and priorities, whose populations are all skyrocketing.

With the increasing burdens on the river, communication, cooperation, and action are vital, yet the basin has never had a comprehensive agreement governing its water. In the early 20th century, the British worked out a water treaty, and its framework remained in place for decades. However, as a product of colonial power, the treaty came under fire, especially once many of the former colonies in the basin gained their independence midcentury. The potential for conflict remains acute, and water resources are often viewed as limited, scarce, and connected to national identity and worth. In one recent example, tensions escalated between Ethiopia, whose government envisioned a large dam, the Grand Renaissance Dam, as the key to the country’s further development, and Egypt, where fears of water shortage led to stormy reactions.

The Nile Project offers alternative ways of interacting and resolving these complex problems. The project looks to the dynamic, hopeful ranks of the region’s universities—while opening channels of communication internationally among students—to help usher in a new era of Nile citizenship, beyond national or ethnic borders. Among its diverse activities (including workshops, online courses, and seminars) designed to usher young audience members from spectators to active participants, the project has established a fellowship program to build Nile student leaders.

“We want to harness the energy and creativity of youth, along with the power of music,” explains Quezada, “to catalyze transformational thinking and action for a peaceful and sustainable Nile Basin.”

In its initial year (2015), the program will tap a total of twenty creative, entrepreneurial, and academically strong students, four from each partner university in Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. The 12-month fellowship is designed to build a regional network of young, action-oriented student leaders working with local communities to create a socially, culturally, and environmentally sustainable Nile Basin.

Fellows will participate in unique learning experiences at the intersection of music, the environment, community, leadership, and conflict transformation, connecting them to their peers, local communities, and to mentors. They will first come together at a Nile Gathering during the summer of 2015 to deepen their understanding of the Nile ecosystem, build their skills to find common ground, and form a strong peer network inspired by a shared sense of purpose connected to the Nile River. As Nile Fellows engage in an intensive leadership and professional development program, they will be learning by doing.

The inaugural 2015 fellows class will establish Nile Project Chapters on their respective campuses, offering music, community development and innovation programs to the broader university student community. Nile Fellows, along with Nile Chapter student members, will identify and build relationships with communities along the river in their areas via Nile Expeditions, trips to meet with and work with people outside the academic world. Together, they will engage in projects such as creating a Nile Choir, when people gather and discuss the issues they face related to the river and its resources, then collectively craft lyrics and music from the discussion—no singing experience or skill required.

“This kind of interaction can be a powerful tool,” says Quezada. “It can help everyone understand how people view the environment they live in and help grasp their priorities, yet because music is involved, the understanding comes from a more personal place.”

Choirs and other fellow-initiated projects will follow the same participatory leadership model as the Nile Project’s music collective. “Our musicians all contribute to the creation of music by working together in different ways- sometimes by leading, other times by following,” reflects Girgis.

These compelling musical components are the draw, and fellows are the leaders sparking meaningful community involvement in Nile issues by a broad sector of society. Through the Nile Project Chapters, the Nile Fellows will lay the groundwork for a university-based network that channels the resulting energy from Nile Project music and concerts into tangible action for the sustainability of the Nile Basin. Fellows will be creating and mobilizing a community of people who share a common interest in the Nile, in caring for the river and the people living along it.

This pilot fellowship year will build toward another important pillar: the Nile Prize. The first round is due to take place in 2016. With a focus on the food and water nexus, the prize will serve as further impetus for students and other engaged Nile Citizens to generate innovative approaches to one of the region’s most pressing challenges. Within the basin, agriculture alone makes up more than 75% of the total labor force and contributes to a third of GDP. The policies governing water and agriculture are intricately intertwined, as more than 80% of the Nile Basin’s water resources are allocated to agriculture. Yet despite agriculture’s prominence in the region, current food systems are failing to satisfy the needs of Nile communities.

Through the Nile Prize, the Nile Project is putting out a call to connect the brightest minds to the Nile’s most meaningful challenges. It may be an adapted agricultural practice based in an environmentally astute tradition. It may be an innovative campaign for the conservation of water. Solutions can come from anywhere or anyone. The goal is to attract ideas from different disciplines, to make new associations between fields, and to redefine what Nile Citizens can solve together.

“For many projects, music is the end result,” notes Girgis. “But for the Nile Project, it is just the beginning. The integration of music with youth leadership and innovation, we hope, will create a driving force that will change the way Nile Citizens relate to each other and their shared ecosystem.”