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The co-constitution of regional politics and massive infrastructures in the Transaqua water project

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ABSTRACT

Large-scale water infrastructure projects have seen a sudden surge to the top of the political agenda in many countries as a means of addressing developmental goals at both national and regional levels, despite a decline in funding for these projects in the 1990s and 2000s. The Transaqua inter-basin water transfer (IBWT) project, a 2400 km-long canal aiming to connect the Lake Chad and Congo River basins, has been recently hailed by the Lake Chad basin countries, international and regional organizations, and the private sector as the most feasible solution to revitalize Lake Chad's declining water levels. It has also started to reconfigure the regional politics of two of Africa's largest basins. This article focuses on this case study and analyses how regional features shape Transaqua and how it simultaneously reconfigures regional politics. Based on concepts such as 'region', 'regionalism' and 'regionalisation' within the international relations discipline and applying mixed methods of discourse, document and media analysis, we show how the project is influencing regional dynamics, alliances and power relations in the Lake Chad and Congo River basins, and how the Transaqua discourse evolves along with regional features such as droughts, water abundance and regional insecurities, despite being in the planning stage.

KEYWORD

regionalism; infrastructure; inter-basin water transfer; Transaqua; Lake Chad; Congo River; Central Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Water infrastructure development has become prominent in Africa since the turn of millennium. Major regional policy frameworks such as the Africa Water Vision for 2025 have deemed it as a priority area (UN Economic Commission for Africa, 2000). Since then, efforts to mainstream transboundary water infrastructures to facilitate regional integration, promote public–private partnership and foster socio-economic development at continental level, have become the dominant paradigm in regional agendas like the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063 (2015) and substantiated through the African Water Investment Programme (AIP) and Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) (AIP, 2021a). For example, 24 out of the 69 large-scale regional infrastructure investments this decade specifically relate to water infrastructure (PIDA, 2021).

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Such projects have implications for regional development and regionalism (Glass et al., 2019). Addie et al. (2020) emphasize the bidirectional relationship between regions and infrastructures. In this paper, we examine the relationship between regions and infrastructures by focusing on a transboundary inter-basin water transfer (IBWT) scheme, the Transaqua project, and how it shapes (and is shaped by) the regional politics in Central Africa and global political and economic trends.

The restoration of Lake Chad's declining water levels has become a hot topic in terms of socio-economic development. Bonifica's[1] Transaqua project aims to divert water from the Congo River to refill Lake Chad (Figure 1). In 1982, Bonifica's first draft of the Transaqua project outlined the construction of a 2400 km canal to carry 100 billion m^3 of water to Lake Chad annually (Bonifica, 1982). Benefiting from narratives around drastic impacts of droughts on people and the environment, regional security and socio-economic development, the project proposed to address developmental challenges and drought-led problems in the Sahel. For example, there is the vision of 50,000–70,000 km^2 of irrigation, hydroelectricity supply (30–35 TWh), and better access to international markets and trade networks for Lake Chad and Congo Basin states by connecting the project to the Trans-Africa and Trans-Saharan highway projects (Bonifica, 1982). During the late 1980s, the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) welcomed the idea and began to promote it at the global level. The project has dominated hydropolitics in Central Africa ever since (Figure 2). Currently, a smaller scale water transfer project to replenish Lake Chad by pumping water from the Bria Dam (Cameroon), located on one of the tributaries of the Congo River, Oubangi, was listed among the approved projects of the PIDA programme (AIP, 2021b). This project was proposed by the LCBC, based on CIMA International's work

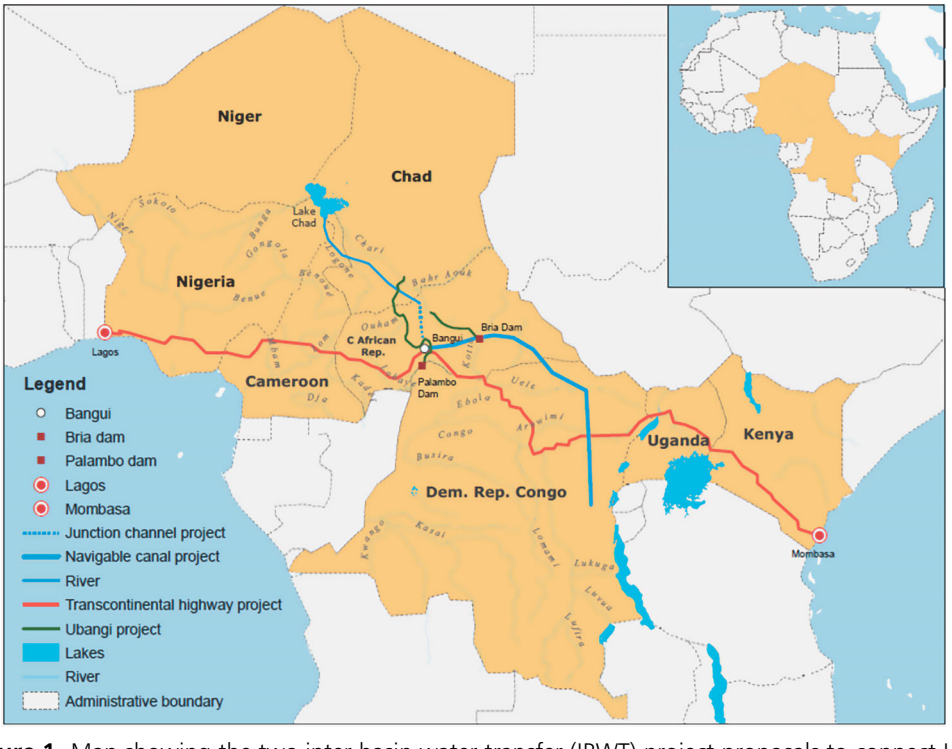


Figure 1. Map showing the two inter-basin water transfer (IBWT) project proposals to connect Lake Chad and the Congo River, presenting an (approximate) overview of the projects, along with the available information.
Source: Sayan et al. (2020, p. 755).

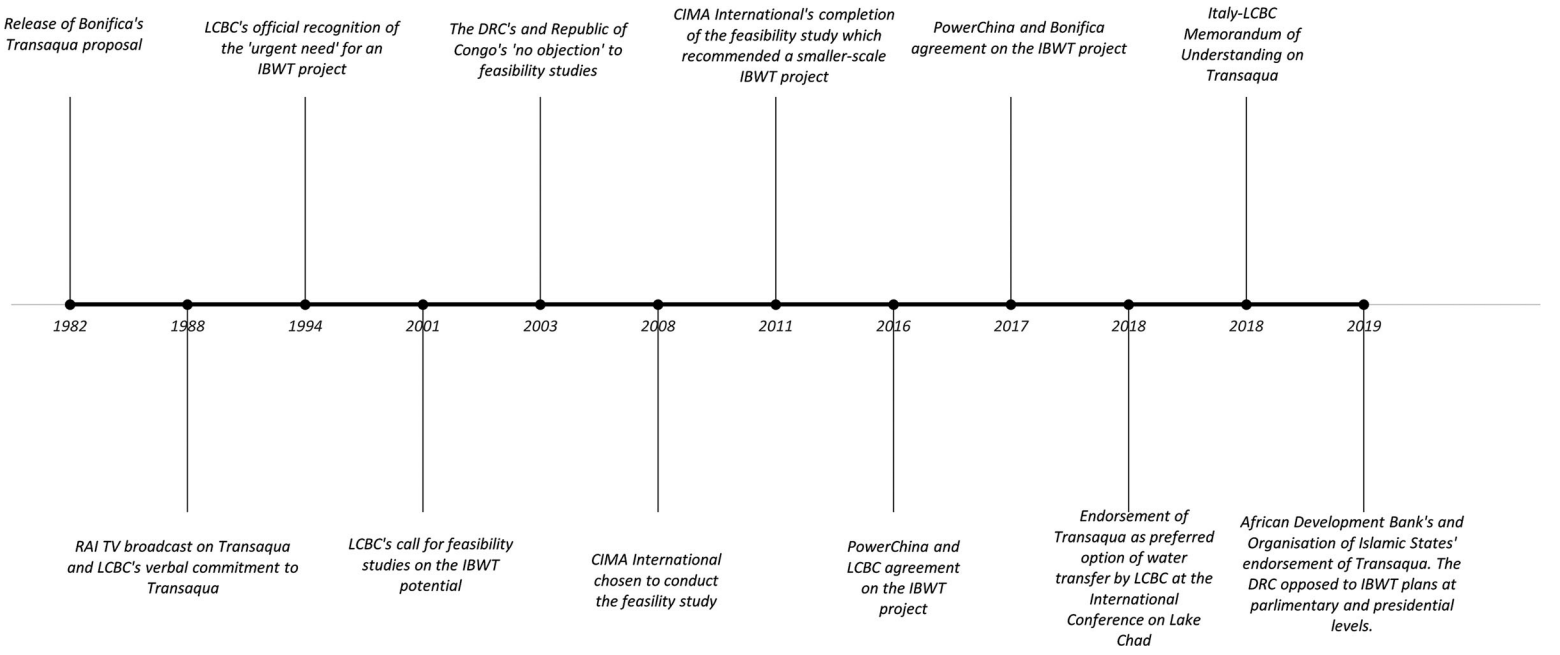


Figure 2. Development of Transaqua and the inter-basin water transfer (IBWT) ideas in the Central African region.
Source: Based on Sayan et al. (2020).

on the region (Figure 2), citing the Bria Dam project as an opportunity to 'give a concrete form' to the Transaqua project (LCBC, 2014, p. 28).

Unlike the growing literature on infrastructure and regionalism, due to the volume of the project, its transboundary character and the nature of the parties involved, our scale of analysis includes the national, regional, international and transnational. With this in mind, we will refer to the concepts such as 'region', 'regionalism' and 'regionalisation' within the scope of an international relations (IR) discipline. This may pave the way for infrastructure studies to focus more on macro-level analyses and transboundary projects.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We next examine the current trends in studies investigating the relationship between regionalism and infrastructure within the scope outlined above. We then present the first part of our analysis, illustrating how regional features of the Lake Chad and Congo River basins (such as water scarcity, water abundance and regional security conditions) shape the Transaqua project and introduce African regionalism. We will focus on how Transaqua makes regions by introducing the project and its proponents' aims to enhance Pan-Africanism and shape new regional dynamics; its potential implications on deteriorating relations between Lake Chad basin countries and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The final two sections demonstrate how Transaqua, as a transboundary infrastructure, attempts to merge two regions, create a mega-region and redefine regional politics with the involvement of several external actors. The conclusions highlight the need to focus on broader scales in regional infrastructure studies, especially when analysing transboundary infrastructures.

INFRASTRUCTURE, SCALE AND REGION(ALISM)

Infrastructure is a concept that goes beyond materiality. Star (1999, p. 377) defines infrastructure as a 'relational and ecological' entity, highlighting its embeddedness 'into and inside of other structures, social arrangements and technologies' alongside how it is taken for granted despite its potential to shape (and be shaped by) 'community of practices'. Steele and Legacy (2017, p. 4) describe 'critical infrastructure as a multidimensional and lived phenomenon' as being 'as much as about space, place, ecology and culture, as … about pipes, scaffolding, wire and concrete'. Dourish and Bell (2007, p. 417) point out the 'coextensive' nature of infrastructure and everyday life and see infrastructure as 'not just technological but also the social and the cultural structures of experience in pervasive-computing settings'. Gandy (2017, p. 1096) defines it as beyond 'a narrow sense of technological networks', which 'encompasses a range of developments including material and symbolic dimensions to state formation, the coevolutionary dynamics of different modes of governmentality, and the delineation of distinctive forms of public culture'.

Noting multidimensional aspects of infrastructures, critical scholars have begun to consider the relationship between infrastructure and regionalism in a way that illustrates how they simultaneously (re)make each other (Glass et al., 2019). In a seminal work on the topic, Allen and Cochrane (2007, p. 1172), in an analysis of infrastructural development in the UK, confront 'the idea of regions as fixed political spaces ordered by scale' and situate the key role of power relations between several actors at multiple scales in making and remaking regions. Jonas et al. (2010) investigate the relationship between urban and regional development and politics of collective provision, arguing how policymakers (re)made regions by providing local infrastructural services in Boston and Cambridge, UK. Glass et al. (2019) and Addie et al. (2020, p. 11) summarize this relationship as follows:

> Regionalizing the infrastructure turn involves the complementary but distinct projects of applying a regional perspective to the infrastructure turn (thinking about infrastructure through the region) and engaging infrastructure as empirical and conceptual problematic to interrogate regional processes (thinking about the region through infrastructure).

Based on this understanding, they call for studies investigating this relationship to understand how 'new spatial imaginaries and political subjectivities', spaces and societies are created by infrastructures and vice versa (p. 12) and 'how investment … in infrastructure reveals the vital discursive and material elements through which regions worldwide are produced, structured and struggled over' (Glass et al., 2019, p. 1652).

Existing literature on the interlinkage between regionalism and infrastructure is predominantly cited in the disciplines of urban studies, geography and political anthropology and infused by the tradition of political ecology, with the issue of scale inevitably emerging as a central theme, when defining the boundaries of regions, describing them or confronting their territorial fixation at policy circles (Keil, 2003; Williams et al., 2019). For example, most of the literature cited in this section (and bibliographies of the cited articles) perceive regions beyond their administrative boundaries and territoriality, rather showing that regions are (re)produced by interactions and power struggles between several actors at multiple scales. These studies examine the relationship between infrastructures and regionalism and handle 'region' at the urban scale or city level. Notable exceptions include, but are not limited to, Schafran's (2014) focus on Northern California as a mega-region (though within the context of amalgamation of large cities); Webber et al.'s (2017) focus on China at national level in their analysis of the South–North Water Transfer Project and its implications on regional politics in China; and Wiig and Silver's (2019) global-scale analysis of ongoing developments on transboundary Central Corridor between Uganda and Tanzania within the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Mansfield and Solingen (2010, p. 146) have reviewed the evolution of the concepts of 'region', 'regionalism' and 'regionalisation' in line with the theories of IR, which define regions as: '[G]roups of countries located in the same geographic space; but where one region ends and the next begins is sometimes unclear'. Fawcett (2004, p. 432) 'likens a region to a nation in the sense of an imagined community: states or peoples held together by common experience and identity, custom and practice'. Hettne (2005, p. 544), borrowing Joseph Nye's definition, highlights that 'the minimum definition of a world region is typically a limited number of states linked together by a geographic relationship and a degree of mutual interdependence'. Regardless of the definitions, IR scholars, therefore, perceive regions as macro- and supranational entities.

In a broader sense, IR scholars define regionalism as 'a political process marked by cooperation and policy coordination' (Mansfield & Solingen, 2010, p. 146). Fawcett (2004, p. 433) conceptualizes it as both 'policy and project' which ultimately aims to enhance interstate cooperation and regional integration with the involvement of states, sub- and supra-state actors. Aligning to this approach, regionalization is perceived as a process, 'which may either be "driven by private actors – economic and otherwise – is often reinforced by states" or that 'bottom-up efforts (domestic and transnational) may lead to regionalism as the intended product of pressures on states' (Mansfield & Solingen, 2010, p. 147). For this study, we will perceive regionalism as a project; more specifically as 'the body of ideas, identities and ideologies that are aimed at creating, maintaining or modifying the provision of security, wealth and other goals within a particular region … usually associated with a formal programme and regional project' (Hveem, 2005, cited in Otele, 2020, p. 514); regionalization as 'a process that encompasses an increase in region-based interaction and activities' (Fawcett & Gandois, 2010, p. 619). Such approaches help to reveal the relationship between infrastructures and regionalism facilitated by nation-states, private sector, international and regional organizations, and media at a broader scale and demonstrate how Transaqua is an externally driven regionalism project, mirroring the mainstream understanding of regionalism.

Regionalism, as a project, has been integral to the political debates in Africa since the 1960s. Following the decolonization process, newly independent African states engaged in the creation of regional organizations in the form of trade blocs, which also aimed at facilitating political and military cooperation (Aniche, 2020). The East African Community (EAC), Economic

Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Southern African Development Community (SADC) and South African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) are just a few examples of such initiatives. In a broader sense, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was established as a Pan-Africanist initiative to achieve 'an Africa that was united, free and in control of its own destiny', which in 2002 was transformed into the AU with a view to harmonize and coordinate activities of several sub-regional economic communities in Africa (AU, 2021).

Despite these attempts for regionalization, African states have not been able to unite or be free; be in control of their destiny; harmonize their political economic activities; or establish fully functioning regional regimes. African regionalism has not been a successful political project (Basiru, 2016). The main reasons for this failure are largely externally driven (facilitated by the European Union (EU) or former colonial states and donor interests) and it follows the Eurocentric logic, that is, the ultimate belief that cooperation over economic issues will spill over into other policy domains and result in full regional integration, by adopting the European experience as the ideal model (El-Affendi, 2009; Taylor, 2011). El-Affendi (2009), for example, argues that African regionalism has always prioritized the creation of regional organizations with a view to integrate African markets into the global economy and promote institutionalization. Zajontz and Leysens (2015) exemplify that the attempts to establish regional customs unions in Africa have essentially followed the European Economic Community's (EEC) footsteps. Since the 1980s, particularly after the establishment of the AU in 2002, the regionalization efforts have been based on the goal of attaining socio-economic development in African states by implementing and institutionalizing mechanisms such as free-trade areas, customs unions, the African Common Market and a monetary union in line with the EU integration process, with the support of the EEC and (later) EU (Okafor & Aniche, 2017).

However, these experiences, by promoting the favourable trade relations for the former colonial powers, have led to the further marginalization of the African economies and the continuation of colonial structures in African states (Basiru, 2016). Okeke and Aniche (2012) show that regional organizations created in the postcolonial era mostly reflect former colonial structures. For example, members of the organizations, such as the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) and Western African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) of the ECOWAS mostly comprise of former French colonies and Francophone countries, using a common currency, the Central African franc. Similarly, the South African Customs Union (SACU) consists of countries formerly colonized by the UK. The LCBC, for example, was founded in 1964 to ensure the effective use of water and natural resources in the Lake Chad basin and three out of four founding members (Niger, Chad and Cameroon) were Francophone countries. Basiru (2016, p. 102) highlights that such organizations, and explicit supervision of former colonial powers in Africa's regionalization, have led to the continuation of colonial structures; the increased dependency of African states to the former colonial powers (particularly in the case of France); and decay of African regionalism by institutionalizing underdevelopment and risking Pan-African unity and development efforts. Gibb (2009) and El-Affendi (2009) also emphasize that these colonial legacies pave the way for the emergence of weak state structures run by strong authoritarian regimes, which also block regionalization efforts, and as strong leaders do not seek to share their power or give up sovereignty for the sake of regional integration, which is the opposite of European state structures and regionalism.

While efforts to achieve an EU-like economic and monetary union in the continent persist, African states and international actors have deemed 'development' and 'infrastructure' key pillars to fostering Africa's regional integration, especially after the formation of the AU (Aniche, 2020). Shaw (2018, p. 321) calls this phase of regionalism a hybrid (driven by African states, external actors and multinational companies). It depends on developmentalist discourses, is 'defined by "private" interests and rules' and is generally substantiated through mega-

infrastructure projects. Regional and international agendas, such as the AU's Agenda 2063 and PIDA programme, all prioritize infrastructure development to facilitate Africa's regional integration and foster its socio-economic development (Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). Furthermore, with the financial commitment and supervision of China, the EU, international donors, development banks and multinational companies, mega-infrastructure projects have been revived on the continent (Moyo, 2020). Transaqua cannot be divorced from such developments.

The definitions of regions, regionalism and regionalization and this brief introduction on African regionalism enable us to examine Transaqua at a broader scale. Our intention is not to disregard long-standing debates on regions, regionalism and territoriality within the geography discipline and political ecology tradition, nor to promote Transaqua as a means to achieve regional integration in Africa or provide a detailed account of the history of regionalization in Central Africa. Instead, we wish to show how dominant discourses and narratives promoting Transaqua are grounded in a Eurocentric vision of regionalism. Using Transaqua as a case study, and benefiting from IR perspectives on these concepts, we aim to introduce a useful approach to the relationship between transboundary infrastructures and regionalism to show how infrastructures make regions, and regions make infrastructure, at international and transnational scales. As a mega-infrastructural ambition, Transaqua, ostensibly, aims to connect two interrelated regions in the Lake Chad and Congo River basins, involving multiple states sharing similar political, economic, social and historical conditions. Therefore, when we refer to the Sahel region, these basins and the Central African region, we perceive these as groups of states sharing similar political, economic, social and historical conditions in the same geographical space that Transaqua plans to physically connect (Figure 1). In the following sections, an analysis of Transaqua's main objective (to promote regionalism and achieve social, economic and political integration of the region by facilitating regionalization driven by private actors, states and regional/international organizations) is presented within the context of the definitions and framing of regionalism and regionalization outlined above.

Because the project is still in the planning stages, there are limited academic sources on the topic, and we do not have a chance to observe its impacts at smaller scales. Therefore, to explore these points, we apply discourse, document and media analysis of policy statements, project proposals, media reports and organizational documents. Our sources are confined to what is available online. By analysing the discourses and narratives in these documents, we will show how regional features such as droughts, water abundance and security conditions are strategically framed to promote Transaqua; and how Transaqua is purposefully presented as a tool to reconfigure regional dynamics by national, regional, international and transnational actors.

REGIONS MAKE TRANSAQUA: DROUGHTS, WATER ABUNDANCE AND REGIONAL SECURITY CONDITIONS

The discourses and political processes promoting the Transaqua project are influenced by a mix of environmental, socio-economic and political characteristics unique to the Sahel region and Congo Basin such as the persistent Sahelian droughts and the water abundant Congo Basin. Regional security, particularly regarding the resurgence of Boko Haram, is also frequently cited by several actors, including Bonifica, international and regional organizations, heads of states and media to justify the need for Transaqua. Since the 1970s, these actors have been discursively framing Sahelian droughts and Lake Chad's disappearance as existential threats to the region – a campaign that attracted significant global attention. Lake Chad's 'disappearance' and recurrent droughts indeed translate into policy action, paving the way for infrastructural heavy interventions such as Transaqua.

Bonifica presented Transaqua as a solution to the Sahel droughts and Lake Chad's shrinkage. Early project documents (Bonifica, 1982, 1984, 1985) and Italian engineers of the project

frequently refer to droughts and their detrimental impact on socio-ecological systems. Such sources single out Transaqua as a means to save the lake before it is too late (Vichi, 1992).

While promoting Transaqua in the 1980s, Bonifica identified the Congo River basin as the water source of the project due to its water abundance. The Congo is the second largest river in the world (in terms of discharge) and the Congo River basin is the wettest region in Africa. Von Lossow (2020, p. 165) explains how, during the colonial era, Belgium and France framed the river as an abundant water source and designated the basin 'as an international zone … to ensure free access [to raw materials] and navigation'. The water abundance notion inherited from the colonial era has resulted in the international community's chronic negligence of the Congo Basin's water management issues. In fact, this mentality has been largely used by international actors such as the EU (states) in institutionalizing the Commission Internationale du Bassin Congo–Oubangui–Sangha (CICOS) (an equivalent of the LCBC in the Congo Basin) as a regional organization aiming to manage navigable waters of the Congo River and use from its untapped potential (Von Lossow, 2020).

It seems that water scarcity tends to draw more attention at regional and international levels, as seen in the case of the Sahel and Lake Chad, while the water abundance of the Congo River has been cited by the Lake Chad basin countries and Bonifica as a reason to promote and justify the construction of Transaqua (Sayan et al., 2020). For example, a short video produced by Bonifica in the 1980s uses dramatic drought-related footage from the Sahel region immediately followed by the footage displaying free flowing rivers, abundant rainfall and jungles of the Congo Basin right before proposing Transaqua to address the Sahel's tragedy (Sayan et al., 2020). This understanding still prevails, as understood from Franco Bocchetto's, the foreign director of Bonifica, presentation which introduced the project as one that would save 'the thirsty Chad region'. In that statement, he highlights the large volume of the Congo River's water discharging into the Atlantic Ocean in vain while describing the basin as 'immense' and 'scarcely populated' in contrast to the Sahel (The Schiller Institute, 2017).

Since the 1980s, the LCBC has actively framed Sahel droughts and Lake Chad's declining water levels as an existential threat to the region. Despite being regarded as ineffective (its members are among the world's most socially, economically and politically unstable countries[2]; Asah, 2015), the LCBC countries have been tightly knit to each other in raising awareness of the Lake Chad 'crisis' and the Sahel droughts and promoting Transaqua at all levels (Adeniran & Daniell, 2020). For example, then-President Bukar Shaib appeared as a guest on Italy's RAI television station in 1988 and stressed the urgent need to restore Lake Chad's water levels as a drought response strategy, while reaffirming the LCBC's commitment to stop the humanitarian crises in the region through Transaqua (Sayan et al., 2020). In the broadcast, he lends his unconditional support to Transaqua, which, according to him, would be the main initiative to stop 'the spread of the desert … cross[ing] the Sahel Zone into Central Africa' (p. 761). However, the project made no progress due to its high costs, political and economic instabilities in the region, and Bonifica's domestic issues (Sayan et al., 2020).

In the 2000s, global media and international organizations focused on the shrinkage of Lake Chad, representing the Lake Chad issue as a 'crisis' and 'catastrophe' by piggybacking on the emerging climate change discourse. As Magrin (2016) argues, this situation was catalysed primarily by the influential publication of Coe and Foley (2001), endorsed by NASA (Chandler, 2001). That study highlighted the dramatic decline of the open water coverage of Lake Chad between 1973 and 2001 and blaming the 'crisis' on climate change and agricultural water withdrawal. The study was frequently cited by the media and international organizations to underscore the interface between water and climate change in the Lake Chad basin. The BBC (2006), for example, covered the story with a title referring to the 'Slow death of Africa's Lake Chad' and highlighted NASA satellite images that backed global warming as one of the main reasons for the lake's 'disappearance'. Reuters (2007) claimed 'climate change shrinks Lake

Chad' in its coverage and the BBC (2007) offered a depressing account about the lake's future saying: 'the lake, which was once Africa's third largest inland water body, could shrink to a mere pond in two decades'. During this decade, similar points also featured in the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) coverage on Lake Chad's shrinkage (Magrin, 2016). While such climate crisis narratives have been dominating news reports, French scientists have sought to disprove the lake's shrinkage by calling it a 'myth', and disdained Transaqua at the international level (Lemoalle & Magrin, 2014; Magrin, 2016).[3]

In the 2010s, media coverage on the Lake Chad 'crisis' prioritized humanitarian and security aspects of declining water levels, while highlighting the role of climate change in worsening the crises. Reuters (2018) underlines how '[t]he region … is suffering from … climate change-induced shrinking of a Lake that … once sustained millions', while DW (2016) describes 'the crisis' as 'epic' in scale. Both emphasize climate change's role in deepening the humanitarian crises in the region. Al Jazeera (2018) highlighted this issue, as well as 'the urgent needs of about 17 million people who depend on Lake Chad'.

These portrayals have also been used to explain the rise of the Boko Haram threat and regional instability. As Agbiboa (2017) argues, the lake's decreasing water levels have increased competition over water access, particularly among the border communities, and triggered mass migration in the region. International organizations, LCBC countries and the media have repeatedly underlined this as a climate crisis transforming into a humanitarian crisis, if left unattended (Agbiboa, 2017). Omenma (2019), furthermore, demonstrates that the newly surfaced islands, forests and dense vegetation bound to the lake's shrinkage have made the region inaccessible and enabled Boko Haram to base around the lake; intensify its attacks at the shores; and increase their local recruitment among the vulnerable communities there. Thus, the Multi National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram has been created under the mandate of the LCBC, which is actually a natural resource management organization, with the participation of all riparian states and the Boko Haram issue has been handled as part of the climate crisis (Tar & Mustapha, 2017).

Based on these developments, in the 2010s, high-profile representatives of international and regional organizations have continued to frame Lake Chad's shrinkage as a threat to human security and political instability (particularly in the context of Boko Haram) while seeking global support for Transaqua, which has been framed as a project to address those security challenges. For example, in interviews and statements at the highest levels during his presidency, the former Executive Secretary of the LCBC, Sanusi Imran Abdullahi, repeatedly framed the shrinkage as an existential threat and security matter for the region. In his speech to the European Parliament (2017), he said:

> The continuous shrinkage of the lake, compromises all activities on which the livelihood of Lake Chad people depend and by extension a threat to the food security and stability of the whole region. The drying-up of the Northern half of the lake causes migration to the Southern shores, intensifying pressure on resources … breeding in the rest of the lake area and related conflicts.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' recent statement (UN, 2018b) includes all such familiar elements and explicitly calls the Lake Chad crisis an existential threat and security matter and calls for support for the Transaqua project in the region:

> Lake Chad was once a major source of livelihoods for millions of people. … [T]he lake's water level has shrunk 90 percent compared with what it was in the 1960s … .
>
> [T]his environmental tragedy has had a deep impact on the area's socioeconomic outlook and has led to increased insecurity in a region already affected by violent extremism. More than 10 million people

> currently require humanitarian assistance, including 2.3 million people displaced due to continued insecurity and violence.
>
> Our common efforts to counter Boko Haram must include a regional strategy that addresses the root causes of instability, including environmental degradation and socioeconomic marginalization.

Such statements frequently feature in the speeches of high-level politicians from Lake Chad basin countries. Mahamadou Issoufou (Krinninger, 2015), the then-President of Niger, stresses that 'Lake Chad is dying'; and Muhammadu Buhari, President of Nigeria, repeatedly calls attention to how the lake's shrinkage dramatically affects the region's people and causes security problems:

> The Lake was a major source of livelihoods to more than 45 million inhabitants of the region. Its shrinkage meant loss of livelihoods and they are now rendered poor and vulnerable to the extremists and terrorist groups [referring to Boko Haram]. The instability thus caused in the sub-region intensified internal displacements … . (UN, 2018a)

This framing prepared the way for political agendas to promote the IBWT idea in the 2000s, and the Transaqua project in the 2010s (Figure 2). Transaqua has been revived as a policy response to the Sahelian droughts and Lake Chad's shrinkage in the 2010s especially. For example, following those alarmist depictions of the lake's shrinkage, high-profile actors such as Buhari, Issoufou, Abdullahi and Guterres explicitly called on the international community to support the Transaqua proposal. Abdullahi (2018, emphasis added) said this project is '*not an option; but a necessity* … [to prevent] the possibility of Lake Chad disappearing … that would be catastrophic for the entire African continent', while Issoufou similarly claimed that '[t]he irreversible degradation of the lake leaves us with no option but to implement decisions taken at this conference [referring to Transaqua] which others consider too ambitious, but are indispensable for the survival of the lake' (African Business, 2018).

TRANSAQUA MAKES REGIONS: PAN-AFRICANISM, NEW ACTORS, REGIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL TENSIONS

Transaqua's overarching objective is to (re)make regional space in Central Africa. Bonifica's (1982, pp. 4–5) initial project proposal explicitly refers to this potential by underlining its objectives as to do the following:

- Revitalize the shrinking Lake Chad.
- Place Transaqua at the heart of Lagos–Mombasa Trans-African Highway to connect the Sahel and northern Congo Basin to the ports of Lagos and Mombasa to open these regions to international trade (Figure 1).
- Construct a series of hydropower plants to meet the region's energy demand.
- Establish a free trade zone in the Central Africa.
- Improve irrigated agriculture and increasing export of the region's agricultural, livestock and forestry products.
- Transform the broader Central African region into a self-sufficient one.

By achieving these, the project is: 'undoubtedly a decisively propulsive element for the practical start-up … of the African post-colonial dream of the international economic and productive integration of the continent, an indispensable condition for true economic autonomy and political independence' (Bonifica, 1982, p. 5). In addition to such ambitious tangible objectives, Transaqua is expected to reconfigure regional dynamics at an international level by promoting Pan-

Africanism, enabling the access of new international actors to the region, changing regional leadership, and altering security dynamics between the riparian states of Lake Chad and the DRC.

The more recent political commitments of the Lake Chad basin countries, the LCBC and the African Development Bank (AfDB) in promoting Transaqua are justified based on their potential toward a regional integration in Africa and are shaped by the Pan-Africanist vision. For example, after decades-long debates between differing factions of the IBWT, Transaqua was officially chosen and endorsed by the LCBC as the 'preferred feasible option' at the International Conference on Lake Chad (2018a, p. 5). At the Conference's Roadmap (2018a) and its Abuja Declaration (2018b), the parties explicitly endorsed it as 'a Pan-African project' and urged the AU to recognize it as such. Right after this endorsement, vocal supporters and campaigners of the project (and regular attendees to political processes related to the Transaqua) such as Lawrence Freeman (who is associated with the LaRouche Movement, a staunch supporter of the IBWT ideas in the region since the 1980s; Sayan et al., 2020), and Horace Campbell have begun to stress Pan-Africanism and the regional integration aspects of Transaqua as the project's overarching goals. Freeman (2018a), for example, describes Transaqua as a 'transformative infrastructure project', which 'would be the largest infrastructure project in Africa connecting a dozen of African nations in a super economic zone of development'. He also links it to the vision of Kwame Nkrumah, the pioneer of Pan-Africanism, by stating that 'there is little doubt in my mind that … Nkrumah would have enthusiastically endorsed and supported … Transaqua' (Freeman, 2018b). Campbell (2018, pp. 3–4) explicitly labels it a 'Pan-Africanist canal' and argues that:

> This massive project cannot be conceptualised outside of a new approach to Pan African unity: the shared water resources along with the principle that the wellbeing of peoples in one part of Africa should be the concern of those in other parts of Africa, and indeed Africans everywhere. From this Pan-African principle, … the Lake Chad Basin and the Congo Basin as two key resources at the heart of Africa … should be working together [for Transaqua] for the health and rejuvenation of Africa.

These Pan-Africanist features of Transaqua have also become visible in the AfDB's agenda. The bank (AfDB, 2016) has been active in supporting the LCBC as a regional organization (and its members separately) in their bid to save Lake Chad to facilitate regional integration, as part of the bank's agenda to transform Africa (AfDB, 2016). The AfDB (2021) has prioritized 'building regional infrastructure' and 'boosting intra-African trade & investment' within its High 5s Agenda (AfDB, 2021). Transaqua fits within this ambitious agenda, enabling the bank to perceive it as a transformative infrastructure through which regional integration can be achieved. Therefore, it is not surprising that AfDB's President Akinwunmi Adesina has begun to commit to the fundraising activities for Transaqua and become a vocal supporter of the project (Daily Trust, 2019).

Transaqua has enabled relatively new international actors to play key roles in the region and redefine regional politics. Prior to the Transaqua proposal, France and the UK were the main external forces in the region as colonial powers. However, recent political developments revolving around Transaqua have allowed China and Italy to increase their presence. These two countries, through their relative corporations – PowerChina and Bonifica – have become key actors in the revival of the Transaqua debates of the mid-2010s, when they financially committed to the project and collaborated over planning and feasibility issues (Sayan et al., 2020). Their involvement is mainly due to the project's fit to their broader national agendas, which eventually aim to increase their access to the Central African region at large. Indeed, Transaqua represents a window of opportunity for these countries to realize their individual agendas. For instance, considering China's commitment to its BRI and its expanding investment in Africa's infrastructure development (Han & Webber, 2020), it is not surprising to see Beijing linked to the project. As indicated by Wiig and Silver (2019, p. 913) on a different BRI infrastructure in Africa, if Transaqua is

constructed, China will be able to transform regional dynamics in a space, miles away from its mainland, with a direct access to the broader Central African region along with the BRI's overarching vision to expand China's national space and promote common development at global level.

Italy, on the other hand, perceives Transaqua as a project that will improve socio-economic and security conditions in the Sahel and eventually help manage migration flows to Italy. Its support aligns with its understanding of regionalism. Italy historically prioritizes Mediterranean security and has recently begun to contextualize the Sahel within its Greater Mediterranean vision. In its recent policy documents, terrorism and migration are deemed the biggest threats to the country's security and the Sahel is singled out as a source of large migration flows to the country (Ministry of Defence, 2015; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2017). These documents recommend the Italian government increases its presence in the region in a way that ensures socio-economic development and regional security as a means to cease migration to Italy (Sayan et al., 2020). These points have been recently raised by the Italian prime minister and Bonifica's Bocchetto. For example, then-Italian Prime Minister Conte states that Transaqua 'means laying the basis of development of those territories and therefore better controlling migration flows' (Freeman, 2019), while Bocchetto describes one of its objectives as the prevention of 'hundreds of people dying in the Mediterranean Sea' (France 24, 2018). Thus, by committing to Transaqua and its regional aspects, Italy has emerged as an influential actor in the Central African region.

Transaqua also has a potential to reshuffle regional dynamics in the broader region. As clearly indicated in the project proposals and political processes, LCBC countries will be the main beneficiaries of water from the Congo River, without bearing socio-economic and environmental burdens associated with the project's construction, as the project will be constructed at the Congo Basin. Transaqua is expected to increase Nigeria's power in the LCBC. Nigeria, the most well-off country in the region, seeks to consolidate regional power by leveraging Transaqua (Adeniran & Daniell, 2020). As summarized by Asah (2015), Nigeria contributes more than half of the LCBC's budget and is designated to 'receive the lion's share of the transferred water if … [Transaqua] ever completed, which will further increase Nigeria's power in the region' by solving one of its main problems: water scarcity (Sayan et al., 2020, p. 769). The recent statement of the Nigerian President confirms the country's intention to establish itself as a regional power through Transaqua: 'I've been engaging with the relevant stakeholders in Africa and beyond, on why we need to recharge Lake Chad. Nigeria will benefit more, but it is also advantageous to everyone' (Channels Television, 2021).

While the Transaqua project has been attracting international actors to revive Lake Chad and the Sahel region, the project has not been welcomed with the same enthusiasm in the Congo Basin. In the 1980s, the former president of the DRC, Mobutu Sese Seko, verbally supported the project as a Pan-Africanist initiative (Interview with Mobutu Sese Seko, 1988). Considering Mobutu used the DRC's natural resources to consolidate power by giving external actors access to the country's raw materials and monopolizing relevant income within his family and close circle (Nzongolo-Ntalaja, 2004), his initial support for Transaqua is not surprising. The DRC, along with the Republic of Congo, also did not object to feasibility studies in the 2000s (Kombe, 2009). However, as of November 2021, the Congo Basin countries and the CICOS had still not formed a common stance against the project. CICOS' lack of a common stance can be explained through its formation and structure: It was created in 1999 as a sub-organization of CEMAC (of which the DRC is not a member) with the support of the international community and was designated for managing the river's 'abundance', navigation potential and mainstreaming of the integrated water resources management principles in the basin (Medinilla, 2017; Von Lossow, 2020). Thus, it does not have mechanisms to collaborate over the water allocation issues nor do the riparian states have a history of collaborating over the river. As the

country controlling around 60% of the basin, and politically framing the river as a national waterbody, the DRC has traditionally distanced itself from the CICOS, also partly due to the organization's association with the CEMAC, and traditionally favours bi- and trilateral negotiations over the Congo River (Medinilla, 2017).

As Transaqua gained momentum at the international level in the 2010s, the DRC began to firmly object to the project as it expected to oversee most of the construction work within its borders.[4] The DRC's exclusion from the political processes endorsing Transaqua, and the project's perceived security implications for the DRC, are the most cited motivations for their objections. The LCBC facilitates the political and diplomatic processes to promote and endorse the Transaqua project, and the DRC only has observer status in the commission, hence no involvement in the commission's decision-making processes despite the project's direct relevance to DRC sovereignty. Congolese politicians, such as Ami Ambatobe (then Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development) and Jose Makila (then Minister of Transport and Communications of the DRC), highlighted the need for DRC involvement in the discussions (Agence d'Information d'Afrique Centrale (ADIAC), 2018), the former saying:

> The expectations of the DRC are such that we must play an important and vital role, since when we harness water resources in the Congo Basin, the DRC alone has more than 40% [of the Basin]. So we are in the first place and so in terms of challenges and needs, we must first take into account the DRC. (France 24, 2018)

Felix Tshisekedi, President of the DRC, referred to the Transaqua project as a 'risk for the stability of the country' (The South World, 2018). He also called on the international community and the LCBC countries to look for other solutions to Transaqua in March 2019 (Interview with Felix Tshisekedi, 2019).

Given the commitment of the LCBC countries to realize the Transaqua project (and political momentum achieved to materialize it) and the DRC's firm objection to Transaqua, the tension between the LCBC countries and the riparian states of the Congo Basin (particularly the DRC) is expected to increase. The first instances of political implications of Transaqua and the nature of diplomatic relations between the concerned parties have been noticed immediately after the International Conference on Lake Chad. In April 2018, rumours were spread that the President of Chad had declared to take water from the DRC 'by force' if the DRC refuses to give its consent for Transaqua. These rumours led the DRC to consolidate its opposition and question the LCBC's decision to create 'a sub-regional army to support the realization of … [the] project' (Tchad Pages, 2018). The existence of such a declaration was immediately denied by the Chadian authorities (Tchad Infos, 2018). Nevertheless, this incident still hints at the potential political problems to be caused by the Transaqua project across the broader Central African region.

DISCUSSION

Within the scope of regionalism and regionalization introduced earlier, Transaqua has been perceived as part of Central Africa's regionalism agenda and increased regionalization and vice versa. Transaqua increases regional interaction in the broader Central African region, with the active involvement of several actors, particularly states, private sector and international and regional organizations, and aims at revitalizing Lake Chad and providing socio-economic development and regional security in the Sahel as a regionalist project. Political processes promoting the Transaqua project reflect on the main drivers of mainstream African regionalism studies, substantiated in the continent's recent water infrastructure agenda: externally driven, with an emphasis on Pan-Africanism, and the utmost belief that the project will solve socio-economic problems in two regions. This is how Transaqua has been discursively promoted as a tool to accelerate regional integration by external actors, LCBC countries and regional organizations,

along with dominant global and regional agendas, based on the assumption that the project will flawlessly strengthen regional ties.

As briefly discussed above, African regional integration has been an unsuccessful process due to several reasons, summarized by Aniche (2020, p. 83) as:

> neo-colonial ties, export-oriented primary products of African states; disparity in size and development of African states; fear of domination or monopolisation of benefits; unwillingness of some African leaders to surrender their sovereignty; adverse activities of multi-national corporations … ; externally historical, political, economic and vertical linkages of African economies to Western economies; structural dependence … ; internally vertical linkages of weaker African economies to regional economic hegemons (like … Nigeria …); intractable civil strife and … refugee crises and internal displacements.

Transaqua does not offer any prescriptions to address these chronic problems. Conversely, it has a potential to deepen them and further hinder African regionalism. For example, it may not harmonize the relations between the Lake Chad and Congo basin countries; it may deepen the regional tensions, as evident in the DRC's opposition and tense diplomatic exchange between the DRC and Lake Chad basin countries and the DRC's exclusion from diplomatic processes promoting Transaqua. Furthermore, the project documents (and political statements) overemphasize Transaqua's role in promoting self-reliance of African countries. Yet even in its planning stages, the region heavily depends on foreign investment, as evident in Chad's then-President Deby's and Cameroon's Biya's statements underlining that 'there is no shortage of projects [referring to the IBWT debates] but it is the funding' (FranceInfo, 2015). Nor is it clearly presented how benefits associated with the project will be distributed in the region, given Nigeria's commitment to benefit more from water transfer (Asah, 2015) and the region's long history of authoritarian regimes/leaders maintaining their power through natural resource-based revenues (associated backing they receive from the developed world), which are never used to improve socio-economic and security problems in their countries (see Fah, 2007, on how Deby used oil revenues to further consolidate his power with the support of France and the United States). Moreover, it is not a Pan-Africanist initiative as imagined by Nkrumah and other Pan-Africanist scholars; it is not an endogenous process. Instead, it is planned and promoted by external actors by using Pan-Africanist language and the project is discursively presented as a Pan-Africanist dream to foster African cooperation and development. However, such imagination and the project's historical development show that Pan-Africanist notions are used as a façade and, like other large-scale infrastructures in the region such as the Chad–Cameroon Oil Pipeline, the project inherently endures the disproportionate relationship between African states and richer actors (Murrey & Jackson, 2020). In addition, it has a potential to further complicate the migration and internal displacement issues at the expense of vulnerable ethnic communities and escalate conflicts at multiple levels in the Lake Chad and Congo River basins (Nagabhatla et al., 2021).

Results of this paper also echo the general scope of the critical literature interrogating the relationship between infrastructure and regions. Transaqua is more than a pipeline or block of concrete; it is a multidimensional and living entity about space, place, culture and ecology. It shapes (and is shaped by) the interplay between socio-economic, political and environmental processes mediated by multiple actors at multiple scales; has been (re)making regions.

However, the scale of this analysis (regional – as understood in IR discipline, international and transnational) differs from critical infrastructure studies. It has demonstrated how an infrastructure project is used as a tool to reconfigure regional and IR and dynamics and how such relations and dynamics shape the planning and promotion of the project. Such an analysis, infused by the IR discipline, helps to grasp the background of impending regional transformations at lower scales which would be the focus of critical infrastructure scholars. Transaqua has already had political implications (in form of changing regional dynamics, alliances and

power relations) despite being in the planning stage. Using IR approaches to regionalism and conducting a larger scale analysis substantiate socio-economic and political changes triggered by the promises of a project yet to be constructed and how these changes affect its planning. By doing so, this paper also builds on Abram and Weszkalyns (2011) and Weszkalyns (2014) works on temporalities and promises of infrastructure by extending their analyses beyond the national scale.

Finally, the presentation of a comprehensive analysis on relatively underexamined regions (Lake Chad and Congo River basins) and a deconstruction of diverse narratives on a regional infrastructural project (Transaqua) can also be considered as a contribution to both regionalism and infrastructure studies literatures.

CONCLUSIONS

By focusing on a relatively under-researched infrastructure project and region, we reflect on how regions have been created through the Transaqua project and Transaqua has made regions, with reference to a diverse set of key policy documents, discourses and media sources. The regional characteristics of the Lake Chad and Congo River basins, in terms of droughts and water abundance respectively, as well as the unique security challenges posed by groups such as Boko Haram, have been systematically raised by several actors in shaping the political agenda regarding the project. Furthermore, pushed forward by external actors, Transaqua is knitted to the regional politics of Central Africa as a project that has potential to provide benefits for limited actors such as Bonifica, China and Italy; reinforces Nigeria's role as a regional power; and worsens the relationship between riparian states of Lake Chad and the DRC. As a result of our IR-based approach to regions, regionalism and regionalization, this paper contributes to the literature in terms of further investigating the links between regionalism and infrastructure – an area that has otherwise been dominated by critical geography, political anthropology and urban studies scholars – at a larger scale. We have proposed an alternative approach to analysing this relationship by perceiving regions as a group of states and regionalism as a project, enabling us to reveal socio-economic and political implications of the project which have already started to be perceived at regional and international politics.

The Transaqua context draws attention to the need to analyse critically how new transboundary regimes are constructed in the region, with the private sector and business interests also playing a key role. Transaqua is not a standard case of interstate discussions in transboundary water governance settings – in the sense that its mandate involves agencies and states from both the basins, all of whom remain involved in the matter directly or indirectly to either support or oppose the creation of such a mega-infrastructure project. As a transboundary infrastructure, Transaqua aims to merge two regions physically and unleashes a range of potential political crises over water sharing arrangements, security and socio-environmental impacts. Therefore, discourses on this project should be followed carefully to enrich the scholarship on this complex agenda.

There are several opportunities to further our research. First, Transaqua may be analysed within the context of modernization and resurgence of monumental water infrastructures at regional level. Such an analysis would substantially contribute to the conceptual discussions on the rise of modernity and re-emergence of hydraulic mission when planning and implementing water policies in low- and middle-income regions, and by examining the relationship between infrastructure and regions, have a potential to enrich the literature. Second, this case can also be examined within the framework of hydro-hegemony, that is, a bid by countries in the Lake Chad basin to assert themselves as dominant power in the region in terms of resources. Additionally, it would be insightful to apply the framework of hydro-hegemony separately to these basins to better understand the power relations and existing patterns of water sharing. Finally, the

relationship between water and society should be explored empirically at a community, local, national and basin level, although this may be complicated due to long-lasting socio-political and security problems in both regions. The direction of future research can benefit from the framing of political ecology, water justice and the hydro-social cycle toward an enhanced understanding of inequalities embedded in water and water policies surrounding these two basins.

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NOTES

1. Bonifica is an Italian engineering firm that was a state-owned company until its full privatization in 2002.
2. Members of the LCBC: Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, Algeria, Sudan, Central African Republic and Libya. Observers: DRC, Egypt and Republic of Congo.
3. France is a dominant actor in Central African politics and maintains its influence in the region through its cultural, economic and political ties inherited from the colonial era. Surprisingly, Transaqua debates have always been ongoing without France's involvement, despite its influence in the region. France had no role in shaping Transaqua proposals. Following the political momentum of the mid-2010s to substantiate the project (Figure 2), French scientists have started to ridicule the project by claiming it is detrimental to the lake's ecosystem due to its traditional shallowness and seasonality (Lemoalle & Magrin, 2014). Campbell (2018) argues that they oppose the project and produce such counter-arguments on the Lake Chad crisis, because Transaqua was developed and promoted without France's involvement; France has missed the chance to join in the process; and it shows its declining power in the region at the expense of China.
4. Bonifica foresees the construction of 1600 km of the proposed canal within the borders of the DRC.

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