



UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG

*Ignite Speech: A Regional Approach to Water Diplomacy*

# The Politics of Regional Water Diplomacy

*Fredrik Söderbaum*

Water Diplomacy Symposium, 16-17 November 2016



# Regions are socially constructed

- We need regional approaches — many challenges and collective action dilemmas are transboundary
- Forget ‘natural’ regions — all regions (including transboundary waters) are constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed by social actors
- External and internal actors often endorse different regional imaginations, spaces & governance mechanisms (for different purposes)



# Power and Politics Matter

- A Regional Approach to Water involves winners and losers
- Win-win & positive-sum solutions difficult in practice
- Benefits often asymmetric and uneven
- National interests & national sovereignty may prevent regional cooperation & implementation
- Don't idealise Water Diplomacy & Regional Cooperation & Regional Organizations (ROs)
- Don't ignore 'the dark forces' of regional cooperation and integration — powerful actors instrumentalize ROs, RBOs and other actors



# Institutions and Organizations Matter — but knowledge gap about what works and why

- Big “implementation gap” in intergovernmental ROs and RBOs
- Multipurpose ROs & RECs good for diplomacy and agenda-setting but not for implementation
- Some ROs and RECs deliberately rhetorical to preserve status quo and/or national interests
- Many multipurpose and ROs poor at involving non-state actors
- RBOs and sector-specific organizations (i.e. the functional-technocratic ‘unit’) often lack political leverage and relevance
- Forget subsidiarity and finding the perfect ‘unit’ — functioning governance is often multi-scalar and ‘complex’ (possibly context-specific)
- Align regional with national — strengthen capacities for national & local implementation



UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG



01  
2016

SUPPORT TO REGIONAL COOPERATION AND  
INTEGRATION IN AFRICA - WHAT WORKS AND WHY?

Fredrik Söderbaum, Therese Brolin

“External Funding of Regional  
Organizations in Africa” (EFRO)

4-year project at the University  
of Gothenburg funded by the  
Swedish Research Council

Contact:

fredrik.soderbaum@globalstudies.gu.s  
e