

The Policies and Politics of Dams in Africa

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Introduction.

- In Africa, hydro-dams have been developed in the guise to eradicate poverty and spur development. These dams usually built for water supply, irrigation and hydropower. However, over the years these dam have had little or no impact on poverty eradication and development. Poverty still rages on the continent; communities are continuously displaced and impoverished; the dams themselves have failed to provide the badly needed water and electricity and have drastically degraded the environment and peoples' cultures and livelihoods.
- Dams are not only being looked at as the magic energy solution for Africa by African governments alone, they have also been pushed by regional blocks, continental initiatives and global trends.
- These dams are usually financed by International Finance Institutions (IFIs) e.g. the World Bank, African Development Bank, European Investment Bank and others all who are out to make money not necessarily to alleviate poverty. Now, China and Japan have joined the scene with greater negative impacts on the continent.

Introduction cont..

- The IFIs have internally embedded safeguard policies, which if they were to be adhered to would have great positive impacts, but often times this is not the case.
- Governments who are usually the beneficiaries of IFI's support also have operational policies and guidelines for dam building, which unfortunately are always flouted and/or ignored e.g. environmental impact assessments; constitutions and other laws and Acts;
- Often, government fall victims of the dictates of IFIs regarding dam development, because they do not have explicit and effective guidelines on dam building;
- All this has contributed to Africa's remaining poor, hunger stricken and undeveloped, despite being endowed with rich natural resources.

Legacy of Dams

- Dam structures are characterized with enormous costs and consequences that are usually passed on from generation-to-generation;
- Naturally Rivers are created to flow freely and choosing their course. But what we see today is restricted and over dammed river flows, a phenomenon that has negatively affected upstream and downstream life;

Legacy of dams cont..

- For a long time the process of dams construction in many African countries has been entirely dependant on a top-down decision making processes by governments who single handedly assess the need for the dams, the location and identify the dam developers. The decisions are not participatory neither are they questionable.
- Hence there is need for considering the World Commission on Dams (WCD) recommendations as a basis for developing policy guidelines for dams development in Africa where a variety of stakeholders can be brought to table when large dams are being considered.

Climate change and dams

- Climate change in Africa is becoming an important risk factor for energy development and water supply, though it is an important issue, many planners continue to under rate it.
- Major lakes on the continent have already been affected by climate change, resulting in the recent loss of water volume and declines in lake levels. Lake Victoria in East Africa, Lake Chad and Lake Akosombo in Ghana are some of the examples of water level declines.

Climate change cont..

- The declining lake level is affecting energy production at Uganda's and Ghana's hydroelectric dams, triggering frequent power cuts and load shedding in the country. Some studies have shown that operations of hydropower stations, particularly in Uganda, have contributed to the recent decline in the volumes of water bodies. This is a clear indication that options must be explored in order to guarantee a sustainable energy and water supply for African countries.

Civil society concerns

- There is fear that African governments, in collaboration with large infrastructure (hydropower dam) builders, donors, and international organisations or financing institutions shall lobby for an agenda to promote large infrastructure projects for regional integration, and encourage increased resource exploitation for export markets at the expense of individual poor countries' needs and aspirations.

Concerns cont..

- Large infrastructure developers, such as hydropower builders, shall continue to seek subsidies that undermine other potential alternative development options for energy & water supply.
- The frequent absence of adequate and informed civil society involvement in decision-making regarding development initiatives continues to undermine the needs of society, protection of the public interest and lead to adverse ecological and economical impacts.

1. Political Accountability:

- To be seen having done something significant – historical. The name of big person in that land appearing on the structure as having laid the foundation stone.
- To be used as mile stones of achievement and development brought by that government when seeking re-election for another term of leadership.

2. Corruption:

Some key individuals who are directly concerned will expect big kickbacks from developers for having offered them the contract / tender.

(In most cases agreed upon before)

- Compromises the quality of work and therefore viability of the project.
- Leads to over pricing of the dam construction thereby making it not cost effective

Corruption cont..

- Leads to disregard of environmental and social issues and regard them as nothing or useless.
e.g Displacing the community without due compensation
- **Business secrecy;** The concerned people will connive with the developer to make unrealistic promises so as to uproot the communities from the sites.
- Puts on the nation a heavy tax burden on the citizens

3. Business deals for the banks:

- The international financial institutions (IFIs) are doing business. The more projects they fund the more money they get and credits as having promoted development, this goes a head regardless of whether projects achieve their objectives or not

4. Masses ignorance of the real issues of;

- Dams cost effectiveness
- Environmental concerns and factors of hydrology as influence by climate change.
- Limited knowledge of Cost – benefit analysis
- What will they lose what will they gain?
- Fear and silence.
- Limited knowledge on compensation issues

5. Politicization of Dam development issues:

- Whenever real concerns (social, economical and environmental) arise, some government leaderships hide behind the cover of opposition when they cannot find answers. They allege the opposition is trying to fail them in order to be discredited of development, there by covering the real concerns.

6.Trading falsehood:

- That the electricity availability will curb down the environmental degradation. This is used as a catch word implying that;
- Electricity will be available for cooking and therefore reduce the need to use Biomass fuels in form of;
- Firewood
- Charcoal
- This is not true because;
- Power is now very expensive to use not affordable even by well to do in terms of Uganda

7. Loan Policies safeguarding the actors from being held responsible

- There should have been a 'polluter pays' principle like in the Dams Development, where those who act against public outcries are held responsible. This would involve the three; the government, the developer and the financiers.

10. EIA policy approach faulty – encourages compromise

- The developer pays the EIA consultant
- Boss-subject relationship of Yes Sir ensures
- Analysis of issues and quality of work compromised
- Reason for unforeseen challenges during and after project implementation.

EIA miss use

- EIA used as a rubberstamp; dam decisions already made (environmentalising decisions).
- EIA as a formality to reduce civic pressure
- EIA used to hoodwink of the public to cause them to endorse the project.
- EIA to clear the way for funding (symbolic EIA) undesirable projects.

Miss use cont..

- EIA as a plot against citizens/communities (developer selects EIA consultant, World Bank approves consultant, sometimes with business links to the developer, and Government provides the public cover

Way forward

- Use of some multistakeholder dialogues
- Use of complaint mechanisms available in the
WB and AfDB.- ie.

World bank inspection panel

Compliance Review Mechanism Unit of AfDB.

The end

Conclusion

- The politics of dams in Africa has been the reason why large dams have been and are likely to continue to be built despite their failure to deliver.
- The failure of African governments to have adequate policies in place or even adhere to them, has led to politicization of dams as a means to justify their construction.
- As such these dams do not live to their expectations thus causing untold suffering to the would be beneficiary communities hence raising public concern and outcry.