
Ghana: What's hidden behind the Bui Dam Project?

Dams constitute a major direct and indirect cause of nature destruction and disruption of local population's lives worldwide. Even though international concern on this issue is on the rise, national governments, together with transnational consulting and construction firms and with the aid of international financial institutions continue going ahead with this kind of megaprojects. They are usually surrounded by corruption and almost always result in widespread human rights violations against local communities.

The African continent is not an exception to the rule. The same as in the cases of Kenya, Namibia and Uganda (see WRM Bulletin 42), dam megaprojects in Ghana have caused and are about to provoke severe impacts on people and the environment. In 1965, 80,000 farmers of the Volta River valley were forced to move from their lands because of the construction of the Akosombo Hydropower Dam, which flooded more land than any other dam in the world: 8,500 km², almost 4% of the entire area of the country. The dam also set in motion waterborne diseases, especially bilharzia and malaria. Later on, between 1978 and 1981, the Kpong Dam in Ghana displaced 6,000 people and despite assurances that the mistakes of Akosombo would not be repeated, the resettlement programme actually caused problems worse than those of Akosombo.

Nevertheless, the Ghanaian government pretends to ignore reality. Presenting the country's annual budget to Parliament on March 9, 2001, the country's Finance Minister, Mr. Yaw Safo-Marfo reiterated his government's commitment to construct a new dam on the Black Volta River, at the present site of the Bui National Park, "to further augment power generation capacity in the country and in line with the pledge contained in the government's agenda for positive change". The 400Mw Bui Dam hydroelectric project is scheduled to start producing hydroelectric energy in 2006. The construction of the dam by a consortium led by Brown and Root of the United Kingdom, is supposed to start in 2002 at a cost of US\$ 900 million. The 660 km² reservoir would flood all the riverine forests of the Bui National Park, considered the last pristine wilderness in the entire Volta System. The park is home to the largest of two groups of hippos left in Ghana, and of a variety of primates, leopards, ungulates, lizards, butterflies, birds, fish, fruitbat, rodent, dragonflies and other fauna.

A recent decision by the country's authorities concerning this polemic issue has given place to harsh critics: the British zoologist Daniel Bennett, who had been conducting biological research in the Park since 1996, has been banned from it. Nick Ankudey, director of the Wildlife Division of Ghana's Forestry Commission, said that the area is now politically sensitive and that his studies are no longer in the national interest. His decision was backed by the Ministry of Lands, Forestry and Mining. The argument for such an arbitrary decision is that the country's authorities had found "unacceptable" the conclusions that Dr. Bennett published in his web site (see <http://hippo.50megs.com/>). The British zoologist had stated that were the dam built, the rich flora and fauna of the Park would disappear, and the feeding grounds of the hippos would be destroyed, thus forcing the hungry hippos to move north of the park into inhabited areas. In such situation, Dr. Bennett stated that there might be "no choice but to destroy the vast majority of them in the interests of people's safety."

"The intention seems to be to ensure that nothing challenges the results of the recently

commissioned environmental impact assessment of the Bui Dam Project, to be conducted by the Canadian company ACRES under contract from the Volta River Authority. An assessment paid for by the organization constructing the dam does not constitute an acceptable level of research if the area is to be destroyed," said Bennett.

Members of the local and international environmental community reacted denouncing the Wildlife Division's decision as "arbitrary, capricious, excessive and unnecessary". For them, the "decision is utterly illogical and an insult to democracy and justice". In the same line Mr. Joshua Awuku Apau of the Green Earth Organisation in Ghana said the decision could taint the image of the country.

Many questions remain to be answered. Why have independent scientific activities regarding the conservation of a wilderness area to be affected by a dam megaproject been banned? Why has this decision been taken just before ACRES, a firm contracted by the dam developers presents an Environmental Impact Assessment of the project? Is this not contradictory with the declared intention of the Ghanaian government to combine development with the protection of the environment? What's really hidden behind the Bui Dam Project?

Article based on information from: Mike Anane, 3/5/2001