
Congo, DR: The Inga hydropower project, a betrayal of social promises

In a continent still ravaged by more than 20 armed conflicts backed by foreign interests and financed through pillage of the continent's natural resources --oil, diamonds, gold, timber, copper, cobalt and coltan--, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, NEPAD, comes as a question mark for some. For others it is a "Marshall Plan" for Africa, expressing the imposition of capitalist neoliberalism: privatization, trade liberalization, export-led (de)-industrialization, structural adjustment programmes, encouraging Africans to pay unpayable debts, conservative fiscal and monetary policies and, indeed, the entire menu of the international financial institutions.

At the beginning of June 2003, in the presence of Presidents Thabo Mbeki (South Africa), Abdoulaye Wade (Senegal), Olusegun Obasanjo (Nigeria), Abdellaziz Bouteflika (Algeria) and Hosni Mubarak (Egypt), the world's eight most industrialized countries (G-8) renewed their support for the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

Within that framework, the Inga Dam in the Democratic Republic of Congo has been portrayed as a key for NEPAD's future success. Tender bids for the rehabilitation of the Inga I (350 MW) and Inga II (1,424 MW) dams will take place in mid-2004, with a total cost estimated at \$500 million. Most of the money --\$400 million-- will come from the World Bank, which has been highly active on Congo's electricity front. The Congolese authorities had earmarked \$80 million for the first phase of the Inga dam rehabilitation program. Several groups are struggling to get a good position for the Inga contract, among which South Africa's Eskom and Germany's Siemens.

Inga's next stage, Inga III (between 1,700 and 3,500 MW with an estimated cost of US \$4 billion) and the "Great Inga Final Stage" (39,000 MW), are also being piloted by the World Bank, plus the EDF Group (France), and Lahmeyer(Germany).

The building of a 3,500 megawatt Inga III hydropower station will be carried out by five Southern African Development Community (SADC) members to supply the Westcor Power Project --formed by South Africa's Eskom, the Botswana Power Corporation, Angola's Empresa Nacional de Electricidade (ENE), NamPower of Namibia and Societe Nationale d'Electricite (SNEL) of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Great Inga, at Inga Falls on the River Congo, where the river drops 100 metres, has a potential output of some 39,000 megawatts with an estimated cost of US\$ 6 billion. That's three times as much as any existing hydroelectric dam and more than twice that of China's controversial Three Gorges scheme. Supporters would say that because the river runs strongly all year, no large dams will be needed. Even though the power may be generated through "run-of-river" works at Inga Falls, one big unknown is the effect on fisheries and river ecology. Even run-of-river plants can eliminate fish migrations, and they can badly damage silt flows, which are crucial to river ecology.

The plan to build the world's largest hydroelectric project on the Congo river which will have the capacity of supplying the current electricity demands of the entire continent is challenged by groups from the civil society. They allege that the social promises made at the World Summit in

Johannesburg have been betrayed.

Connecting Inga to a continent-wide electricity grid for main population centres would cost more than \$10 billion. But power grids will not reach the hundreds of millions of Africa's rural poor. Besides, most African economies are based on subsistence and commercial activities involving small and micro enterprises with structural features that are often overlooked by policy makers.

The Inga project departs from the goal of small-scale sustainable energy projects discussed at the World Summit, where the talk was of bringing electricity to rural people through local wind and solar power projects. Megaprojects like this more than often imply social, economic and environmental disruption of people's livelihoods, lands and life.

Article based on information from: "Bidding Round for Inga in 2004", November 12, 2003; New Plant to Bring Regional Power On Stream, November 14, 2003, UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, sent by Ryan Hoover, e-mail: ryan@irn.org, Africa Program, International Rivers Network, <http://www.irn.org>; "Giant Congo hydroelectric project is a 'betrayal'", by Fred Pearce, New Scientist, <http://www.odiousdebts.org/odiousdebts/index.cfm?DSP=content&ContentID=5707>; "Impact potential of NEPAD, the new partnership for Africa's development, Ako Amadi, <http://www.cbnrm.uwc.ac.za/paplr/docs/Nairobi%20PAPLRR%20NEPAD%20Paper%20-%20Ako.pdf>; "Africa: 'Nepad? No thanks', say African activists", Patrick Bond, <http://www.greenleft.org.au/back/2002/497/497p14.htm>; and contributions from Fred Pearce, e-mail: PEARCEFRED@compuserve.com