
Kenya: Resistance to the Sondu Miriu Dam project

The Sondu Miriu River is one of the six major rivers in the Lake Victoria basin, which drains 3,470 square kilometres in the western part of Kenya. The company responsible for managing all public power generation facilities in Kenya --KenGen-- is planning a dam project to be located about 400 kilometres from Nairobi. Water from the river will be diverted through a 7.2 kilometre long tunnel into a one million cubic meter reservoir and a 60 megawatt hydro power station.

This megaproject is being financed by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation together with KenGen. Kenya is the largest recipient in Africa of Japanese official "aid": in 1999 Japan devoted more than US\$ 57 million under the form of grants and loans to this aim. The civil works are being carried out by Konoike Construction JV, Viedekke Heavy Construction Company of Norway and Murray & Roberts Contractors International of South Africa.

Even though the power station is scheduled to be operational in 2003, some of the works --like the construction of camp sites, roads, a bridge, and communication facilities-- have already started, and together with them the fears over the environmental and social impacts of the project.

According to the NGO coalition Africa Water Network, the diversion of the river will cause the disruption of the whole hydrological basin, with negative consequences on wildlife. Colobus monkeys and hippopotamus, for example, which are dependent on the river will be forced to seek a source of water at the lower populous Nyakwere plains disturbing their habitat. KenGen is not taking responsibility on the issue, arguing that this is the competence of governmental agencies. The company even claims that a part of the river's flow will keep on running on the original channel. Nevertheless, similar river diversion projects for the Turkwel Gorge and Masinga hydropower dams resulted in the permanent or seasonal drying up of the courses. The blasting needed to build the tunnel will alter the geomorphology of the area, and the entire water table may be also affected by the construction.

Social impacts are already taking place. Since health precaution measures have not been put in place to handle the effects of the great dust clouds that come off the construction project, most members of the community are already suffering from eye and respiratory problems. The diversion of the river will provoke a shortage in the supply of water, which is a vital element for domestic and agricultural use by 1,500 local households. Additionally local communities have denounced that KenGen has not kept its promise of providing them electricity and irrigation facilities, as stated in the initial project documents. Now the company says that such activities are beyond its mandate. Last but not least the project has so far displaced 1,000 households through forced resettlement. In March 2000 KenGen admitted lacking plans to relocate people who will be affected by power transmission lines from the dam.

Resistance to the project is on the rise and so is repression by Kenyan authorities. Last December Argwings Odera --an activist of the Africa Water Network who works with dam affected people-- was arrested, beaten and shot in an arm by the police. He is now facing criminal charges for holding meetings and trying to share information and raise awareness about the project.

