
Malaysia: the "progress" brought by the Bakun dam in Sarawak

For years the Bakun Dam Project has aroused great concern among environmental and social NGOs and indigenous peoples' organizations in Sarawak and worldwide, which have opposed this megaproject since it is detrimental to Sarawak's remaining primary forests that lie in the catchment area and to the indigenous people that inhabit them (see WRM Bulletins 2, 9 and 24).

The forced resettlement of the Bakun residents -which sum about 10,000 indigenous people belonging to 15 longhouses- is another negative consequence of this "development" project. Together with the extinguishment of their Native Customary Rights over their ancestral lands, thousands of indigenous peoples from the Kayan, Kenyah, Lahanan, Ukit and Penan ethnic groups have been uprooted from their homes and resettled in Asap, about 30 kilometres from the dam site.

Not only the traditional cultivation systems of the indigenous peoples have completely disappeared -since each family has been given just a small plot to work on- but also arbitrariness and irregularities reign regarding the government's promise of compensation for their lost lands. Many of them claim that they have been grossly undercompensated or of not having received any money at all. Moreover, most of the compensations did not even reach the price of the new modest houses they are now obliged to live in. Even low cost houses in other parts of the country are much cheaper and higher quality. Additionally, instead of involving the natives in the construction of the new homes, Bucknalls -a UK based multinational- was contracted to build the longhouses and infrastructures. Last but not least the "modern" village lacks completely adequate infrastructure regarding roads, waste disposal and schools.

With this resettlement the indigenous communities have lost their land and are in a rapid process of aculturation produced by the conversion of their self-sustainable economy into a full cash economy. At the same time their land and forests -which have been their home for centuries- will end by being submerged by the Bakun megaproject. Can we call this "progress"?

Source: Mohamed Idris, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, 26/11/99;