

The Merowe Dam: controversy and displacement in Sudan

by Ali K Askouri

The Merowe Dam, now under construction on the Nile in northern Sudan, is a huge and controversial project that promises intensified social unrest and misery for the tens of thousands it will forcibly displace.

The idea of constructing a dam on the Fourth Cataract of the Nile, 350 km upstream from Khartoum, was first proposed by British authorities in the early 20th century. Due for completion in 2007, the massive dam will be 65 metres high, 9.2 km long and will create a reservoir approximately 170 km in length and 4 km wide. More than 50,000 small-scale farmers living along the Nile will

be displaced. Project planning has been non-transparent and people who will be directly affected by it have not had their voices heard. Dissent against this and other controversial dam projects in Sudan has met with harsh government repression. Resettlement procedures are in violation of the recommendations made by the World Commission on Dams.¹



Local protests have led to gross violations of human rights. Sudanese police dispersed a peaceful protest of men, women and children at Korgheli village with tear gas and live bullets. Organisers were arrested, detained and tortured. After 200 Hamadab families were forced to leave their riverside lands and relocate in the inhospitable Nubian desert Sudanese television showed government agents posing as affected people, agreeing to move peacefully and receiving money as compensation. The reality is that eking out an existence in completely barren land threatens the survival of the Hamadab people.

The Merowe Dam project was proposed, designed and implemented by an influential group within Sudan's autocratic military government who are promoting the privatisation of the country's electricity sector. It is hoped the dam will double Sudan's generating capacity. Project funds of \$1.5bn are to be provided by Middle Eastern financial institutions² and the Chinese and Sudanese governments. The state-owned China International Water and Electric Corporation is the main contractor for the dam, along with other Chinese firms and the German firm Lahmeyer International. The ten turbines are being supplied by the French firm Alstom. Merowe is the biggest international construction contract ever awarded to Chinese companies. All the foreign companies and funders are turning a blind eye to the fact that internationally accepted standards on human rights, resettlement and the environment are being ignored.

Social impacts

Some people are already being resettled, with poor results. Proposed resettlement sites are barren, windswept places with no groundwater supply – quite different from the villagers' current situation along the Nile. Soils in the resettlement area are poor.

"I belong to the Hamadab area. My people are now in the desert, except for those who were fit and moved to a shanty town on the outskirts of Khartoum. They have no water, no health services, no hope. It is a disastrous situation."
Dr Alfadil Mohammed Osman

In September 2003, a group of farmers returned from the resettlement site to their original villages when they realised how poor the area was for farming. The government met them with unprovoked violence, using live bullets and injuring many; they were forced back to the resettlement site by the police and security agents. Resettlers also expect to meet resistance from host communities. Earlier experiences in northern Sudan, where land on the river bank is extremely scarce, demonstrate that the movement of one group of people to a land owned by another community inevitably triggers social unrest. Over the years the affected population has offered to negotiate but the government has refused to meet their representatives. Instead, the government appointed its own agent to represent the affected people.

Within the government bureaucracy everything related to this project is decided by one man alone: the State Minister for Irrigation. Calls to ensure participation by affected people in the resettlement process have been rejected, and the individuals or organisations making the requests have been suppressed and prosecuted. Other affected people opting to take their grievances to court have been denied access to justice; a number of them have been arrested, detained and tortured.

A health impact study for the dam³ identified 20 major negative health impacts. The dam is expected to introduce or exacerbate such serious deadly diseases as malaria, schistosomiasis, river blindness and Rift Valley fever. The effects of the dam on the downstream population have been ignored. Thousands of small farmers living downstream will face difficulty in irrigating their plots due to lowering of the level of the Nile. Farmers will also be affected by a reduction in annual siltation.

The area where the dam is located is one of the oldest inhabited areas in northern Sudan. According to the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project "Very little archaeological work has ever been undertaken in this region but what has indicates the richness and diversity of human settlement from the Palaeolithic period onwards."⁴ The Sudanese National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums says that the project

will destroy archeological sites both directly through engineering and construction works and indirectly through environmental changes in the region.

Conclusions

Sudanese civil society groups and individuals have argued for years that this project should be postponed until peace is achieved, human rights and democracy are restored and the project's cultural, social and environmental impacts have been fully evaluated. The affected population is not asking for the project to be scrapped but only for a more equitable, transparent and participatory process in line with the recommendations of the World Commission on Dams. They call for:

- postponement of the project until it has been subjected to rigorous scrutiny and until its effects on both people and the environment have been thoroughly investigated and assessed
- the project design to be upgraded to match internationally accepted resettlement standards
- an updated review – by an internationally reputable firm – of the project's most troubling components and work already completed
- resettlement in one site in order to preserve community unity.

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For more information, see the April 2004 issue of World Rivers Review (www.irn.org) and www.sudantribune.com/article.php?id_article=2714. An online petition to the President of Lahmeyer International is at www.petitiononline.com/hamadab/petition.html

¹ See www.dams.org and FMR12 Dilemmas of development-induced displacement www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR12/fmr12contents.pdf

² Primarily the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development and also the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, the Saudi Fund for Development, and the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development.

³ See William Jobin *Dams and Disease: Ecological Design and Health Impacts of Large Dams, Canals and Irrigation Systems*, 1999, 544pp, Routledge, ISBN 0419223606.

⁴ See www.sudarchrs.org.uk/page31.html