
Dams, forests and people

When asked to name different causes of deforestation, few people will mention hydroelectric dams as being one of them. Even fewer will include them as a cause of human rights violations. However, dams constitute a major direct and indirect cause of forest loss and most of them have resulted in widespread human rights abuses.

This lack of awareness can be explained by the fact that for many years large hydroelectric dams have been portrayed as synonymous with development. Another reason can be that most users of hydro-electricity live far away from the impacted areas and that the sites selected for dam building have been often those inhabited by indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities and poor communities having little capacity of being heard by the wider national community.

The fact is that more than 40,000 large dams --those that measure more than 15 metres in height-- are currently obstructing the world's rivers, whose reservoirs cover more than 400,000 square kilometres of land --an area larger than the combined surfaces of the United Kingdom, Belgium, The Netherlands and Austria.

These reservoirs have inundated millions of hectares of forests --particularly in the tropics-- many of which were not even logged and trees were left to slowly rot. They have also resulted in deforestation elsewhere, as farmers displaced by the dams have had to clear forests in other areas in order to grow their crops and build their homes. Additionally, dams imply road building, thus allowing access to previously remote areas by loggers and "developers", resulting in further deforestation processes.

However, the dams' effects have included much more than forest loss and the major environmental changes have impacted on local people, at both the dam site and in the entire river basin. Not only are the best agricultural soils flooded by the reservoir, but major changes occur in the environment, where the river's flora and fauna begins to disappear, with strong impacts on people dependent on those resources. At the same time, dams imply a number of health hazards, starting with diseases introduced by the thousands of workers that are brought in to build the dam (including AIDS, syphilis, tuberculosis, measles and others) and ending with diseases related to the reservoir itself (malaria, schistosomiasis, river blindness, etc.).

In far too many cases, dam-building has resulted in widespread human rights violations. As most of us would, local peoples have persistently resisted the destruction of their homelands and their forced "resettlement." As a result, they have had to face different types of repression, ranging from physical and legal threats to mass murders, such as in the case of the Chixoy dam in Guatemala (see article in this bulletin).

But resistance, consciousness and solidarity have grown. Local people have increasingly been able to organize themselves and to establish local, national and international alliances with other concerned organizations. Major examples are the Narmada Bachao Andolan movement in India, the Bio Bio Action Group in Chile, the Coalition of Concerned NGOs on Bakun in Malaysia, the People Affected by Dams movement in Brazil among many others. It has now become possible to stop large

hydro dams. They are definitely not a symbol of development but one of economic and political power resulting in social and environmental degradation.