
Malaysia: Bakun Dam project once again relaunched

The Bakun Dam project --the largest in Southeast Asia-- was originally planned by the Malaysian authorities in the early 1980s, abandoned in 1990, revived in 1993 and reshaped in 1997. The Bakun Hydroelectric Corporation is the owner and future operator of the dam. Lahmeyer International from Germany, Harza from the US and Dohg-Ah Construction and Industrial Co. from South Korea have been involved in the supervising of the works and the construction of the tunnel for the diversion of the waters. The main construction package of this multimillion dollar initiative was first granted to the Swiss-Swedish multinational ABB and the Companhia Brasileira de Projectos e Obras (CBPO), but in late 1997 problems arose and ABB was sacked from the project. The expected and real impacts of the projected dam on the environment and local communities, and the controversy that such megaproject has brought with it, are in line with its gigantic scale.

According to the original plan of the dam, about 69,000 hectares of primary rainforest --which represents one third of Sarawak's remaining pristine forests-- were to be logged. Clearcutting could have catastrophic effects on the dam itself, increasing the chance of sediment build up, flood and slope failure. Fish stocks would be dramatically reduced following the loss of mobility and deoxygenation of river water in the flooded area, while 43 protected species of fauna and 67 protected species of flora could disappear because of flooding. The project's environmental impact assessment was never released to the public, although this is a legal requirement.

Local villagers, indigenous peoples, and human rights and environmental groups in Malaysia and abroad have repeatedly denounced the lack of transparency surrounding the project from the very beginning. The infrastructure needed for the works has facilitated the encroachment on Native Customary Rights lands. The forced resettlement of the Bakun residents --which sum about 10,000 indigenous people belonging to 15 longhouses-- is a major impact caused by the project. Indigenous communities of the Kayan, Kenyah, Lahanan, Ukit and Penan ethnic groups have definitely lost their lands and crops --including traditional rice varieties-- and were resettled in a location called Asap. The government promised to compensate them, as though the loss of their homeland and culture could be somehow repaired. But in fact they were only provided with modest houses in a new "modern" village lacking completely adequate infrastructure regarding roads, waste disposal and schools and where no job opportunities exist.

Because of the Asian economic crisis in 1997 the Malaysian government had to halt the project, as well as several other major infrastructure initiatives, in order to reduce public spending. However, Bakun's long and tortuous story is not over yet, since two years later the authorities raised the proposal of restarting the project, presenting a downsized plan according to which the original generation power of the dam of 2,300 megawatts was reduced to 500 megawatts. The Coalition of Concerned NGOs on Bakun (Gabungan), the Bakun Region People's Committee (BRPC), Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth) and other representatives of Malaysian civil society and academic circles consider nonetheless that the only real solution to the conflict is to definitely shelve the project. They advocate for a more realistic, sustainable, transparent and democratic approach to the issue of energy needs and supply in Malaysia.

