
Namibia: Uncertainty on the future of Epupa Dam

For over five years plans have been discussed by the Namibian and Angolan governments to dam the Kunene river, which runs through both countries, and construct a hydroelectric power station somewhere south of the Angolan border. The proposals have been dogged by controversy and delays from the outset and have developed into a saga, which has rumbled on and on without ever seeming to reach closer to a conclusion.

The controversy has centred on the impact of the dam on the indigenous tribal group of the Kunene region, the Ovahimba, who have successfully lived as nomad pastoralists in the area for the past five-hundred years. Of the two potential sites for the dam the most economically viable, at Epupa, is the least environmentally and socially attractive; a dam wall 163 metres high would create a reservoir covering up to 380 square kilometres. This would displace 1,100 Himba and affect 5,000 occasional users of the excellent grazing areas on the river bank. In addition, 95 archaeological sites and 160 Himba graves sites would be permanently lost.

The Namibian government has often come under criticism for excluding the interests of its many minorities, including the San Bushmen and Rehoboth Basters, and it can be of little surprise that it has always favoured the Epupa option, yet has made minimal efforts to consult the local population about the consequences for them of such a project and how they might be mitigated. In fact, a feasibility study commissioned by the respective governments carried out in 1999 concluded that “there has not been sufficient dissemination of information concerning the scheme, or local community consultation, participation and ... development of an acceptable social mitigation programme.” Fears that the disruption to the Himba and their grazing areas could lead to their urban migration and the demise of their way of life brought the response from the Namibian authorities that the project would bring much-needed jobs to the Kunene region --so in tune with the feelings of the local population was the government that it forgot that the Himba are nomadic farmers who neither need nor want jobs.

The second possible site, at Baynes, some 40 km south of Epupa, would cover just 57 square kilometres of land, drowning 15 grave and 45 archaeological sites, displacing one-hundred permanent users and about 2,000 occasional ones. However, this site is far and away the least economically viable and could only work with the benefit of the war-damaged Gove dam inside Angola. The Angolan government, which would like an excuse and funding to rejuvenate Gove, favours this option.

However, there are good reasons to question both sites. Apart from the serious disruption to the Himba population, creating a reservoir which would evaporate twice as much water as the country uses in a year seems to make little sense, especially in the desert and semi-desert landscapes of Namibia. In addition, in times of drought the power station could expect to see its output fall dramatically from 360 megawatts to 200 megawatts. The Himba themselves have suggested looking into solar and wind energy as alternatives, but have received short shrift from a government with an antipathy to any form of opposition and who is also “obsessed with building the dam, despite the fact that both the EU and the World bank have expressed strong reservations about its viability.”

(Stephen Corry, Director of Survival International, a group that campaigns for the rights of minority tribes).

Finally, will it ever happen? Sources close to the Namibian government have suggested that the plan has been shelved, partly due to adverse publicity and a resultant lack of investor interest. Certainly little progress has been made in the past few years and no decision has been made on which site, if either, would get the nod. Only last year in a July visit to Namibia, Luis da Silva, the Angolan energy and water affairs minister, declared that his government's pRiority was to rehabilitate Gove dam, suggesting that bilateral agreement is as far off as ever. Given that the Gove/Baynes option is contingent on the Angolan government securing the Gove area from UNITA rebels, if the two governments do agree on this plan it could not go ahead for the foreseeable future. However, this is largely immaterial as Namibia would agree to Epupa or nothing, which makes it difficult to believe that the plan will now go ahead at all.

By: Henry Dummett,