OL’ MAN RIVER AND THE DAM STATE: Kenya’s misguided Big Water policy

By Paul Goldsmith

“Expect poison from standing water.” – William Blake, from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

Backdrop to the revival of High Grand Falls Dam project

The Kenyan government has quietly dusted off and renamed the Mutonga-Grand Falls Dam project the High Grand Falls Dam. The 200-billion-shilling tender awarded to a British consortium for the construction of the hydroelectricity project on the Tana River signals the revival of a project originally scheduled for roll-out during the mid-1990s. It was allowed to lapse by the government of Daniel arap Moi, ostensibly due to a combination of technical issues, finance, and social opposition. It resurfaced in the form of a series of reports in the press over the past two years that apparently escaped the notice of many observers, which explains the lack of discussion and publicity despite the contentious response to the project when it was unveiled twenty years ago.

According to the poorly-edited description on the Tana River Development Authority (TARDA)’s website, the main objective of the US$1.5 project is to provide 700 megawatts of electricity and a large-scale multi-purpose reservoir. The statement claims that the project will contribute to regional and national socio-economic development by catering for public water supply, irrigation, river regulation, flood control and power production. The TARDA webpage, which is otherwise short on
detail, states that it will displace over 4,500 households, open up 250,000 hectares for irrigation in Tharaka and Kitui counties, while providing freshwater supply for the proposed Lamu Port through intra- and inter-basin water transfer canals.

The High Grand Falls Dam, now rebranded as a Vision 2030 project, will be Africa’s second largest dam after Egypt’s Aswan Dam. The cost parallels the Uhuru Kenyatta government’s investment in the Standard Gauge Railroad project, but its negatives are much greater. The proposed construction of canals, the considerable distance between the project site and Lamu notwithstanding, explains why it is now linked with the larger Lamu Port and South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor. On closer inspection, both of these drawing board developmental blueprints invite a number of questions.

At the time of its formal launching in the mid-1990s, the original project flew underneath the national radar. It generated controversy and angst for residents facing displacement by the reservoir and the communities downstream when representatives belatedly learned of its impacts. The reservoir was to cover approximately one-third of the Tharaka Division in Meru District. Equally alarming was the news that water flow to the Tana would be cut off for some 32 months while the reservoir filled up.

I was a member of a delegation that included representatives of the minority communities affected that attended a week-long workshop hosted by the Kenyan consultants and their Japanese partners who authored the original feasibility study. The report documented the multiple negative impacts downstream, the displacement of a significant portion of the Tharaka population, and the planned resettlement and other mitigations to alleviate these problems. The issues were discussed openly and debated in a professional manner without bias.

The backlash that followed, especially from the Somali of Garissa and the Tana River’s Orma pastoralists – ostensibly prompted by their elected leaders who used their connection with the KANU government to oppose the project – explains why it was dropped without creating a public furore. As it turned out, the project remained on the drawing board but the measures taken to operationalise it have to a large degree proceeded without the participation of stakeholders as required by the 1999 Environmental Management and Coordination Act. In its current form, the project also disregards significant changes in the funding, policy support, and best practices for dams occurring over the last two decades.

“The disease of giganticism”

Over several generations, dam builders have changed the face of the planet by modifying more than half of the Earth’s major rivers. Some 57,000 large dams reportedly provide one-sixth of the world’s electricity and are important sources of water for irrigation.

But large dams are now being recognised for having caused more problems than they solved. One environmental advocacy organisation described the world’s efforts to control the world’s major river systems over the past century as a “massive experiment that has left the planet’s freshwaters in far worse shape than any other major ecosystem type, including tropical rainforests”. Other commonly acknowledged impacts include damage to unique natural environments and the destruction of
delicate ecological systems, increased impacts of water-borne disease vectors associated with linked irrigation schemes, poor returns to the capital investments, and the displacement of millions of people.

A series of recent studies show large dams to be uneconomical poor investments compared to the alternatives. The list of other issues compromising the cost-benefit equation includes the high incidence of corruption and mismanagement that make dams appealing to dictators and the kind of pork barrel politics in democracies responsible for the proliferation of unnecessary dams across the American West. In the case of river systems, the tendency is to expand once this method of water management is deployed. After the building of the Bhakra Dam in northern India was completed, Jawaharlal Nehru cited the project he had earlier praised as the “New Temple of Resurgent India” to lament the “the disease of giganticism.”

Problems associated with another Indian project, the Sardar Sarovar Dam, including the displacement of 250,000 mainly indigenous peoples, led to the formation of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), or the Save Narmada Movement in 1985. The NBA formed a coalition resisting the intervention operated at local, national, and international scales that resulted in the withdrawal of World Bank funding. Although the Bank later reversed its policy and now finances dam projects on a case-by-case basis, it refused to finance the three Gibe dams in southern Ethiopia due to the negative downstream consequences, including the estimated reduction of Lake Turkana water levels by twenty metres.

The dam industry is still a powerful player in the global political economy. The Chinese completed the massive Three Gorges dam despite sustained opposition from the international community. China is also involved in constructing a large number of big dams across the world even though an international consensus now supports the expansion of solar and wind power in their place. The imperative to promote renewable sources of power generation recently received added impetus from the dire warnings featured in the latest United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Hydroelectricity occupies an ambiguous niche in regard to this due to other environmental side effects like siltation, salinisation, waterlogging, and other factors that also compromise a dam’s life expectancy.

The case for building a given dam is situation-specific, and involves trade-offs that are often not reducible to black-and-white factors. Opposition to the Turkwell Gorge Dam, a vehicle for political forces opposed to the KANU government at the time, provides a cautionary example. Objections focused more on the tendering process than on the dam’s environmental ramifications, and ignored the downstream impacts for the Pokot and Turkana communities, who in any event remained in the dark after its construction.
The Turkwell Gorge Dam was completed in 1991 and subsequently added a critical boost to the country’s electricity supply during a time of extended power shortfalls and blackouts. If some controversial investments are worthwhile over the long run, large dams no longer get a pass. And although the Turkwell project may have helped fill an energy gap, it also created a model for milking infrastructural projects that continues to bleed the nation.

Methodologies for screening and ranking dam investments are now standard procedure in most countries. Reviews facilitate participation and feedback, and the need to build in safeguards as a minimum requirement for international funding. In a comparative study of the social impacts of large-scale dams, the authors stress that identifying the potential impacts in advance of a large dam project enable agencies and policymakers to make better decisions about which interventions should be undertaken, and how. It is ironic that China ignores this protocol. The world’s largest generator of greenhouse gases, China is leading the development of alternative energy sources at home while at the same time pursuing a different policy abroad by building 330 dams in 74 countries, many of which are built without reference to international environmental and social standards, according to the International Rivers Organization.

The sum of all these factors also remind us that a new matrix of technological, environmental, and policy drivers is in the process of replacing the conventional thinking supporting large-scale dams and other projects impacting the global commons. Size is one of the primary issues in this case. The counter-argument points to how the benefits can be reproduced through a series of smaller-scale projects that will minimise the large costs that projects like the High Grand Falls Dam will incur.

The need for a long-term policy framework

For decades international experts have been warning of the impending crisis over access and control of water sources. While conflicts over water are endemic in many parts of Kenya, the need for circumspection over any issue involving the control and use of water was underscored by the recent clash between the governors of Nairobi and Murang’a over the modalities governing the capital city’s water supply.

The conflict over who gets to use or control a water source was also highlighted after the 40 deaths and destruction caused by the collapse of the unregistered private dam in Solai during the past rains. The management claimed that the collapse was caused by deforestation followed by massive rains. They told a Parliamentary Committee that they had “processed” the required documents, and that they were also victims of the disaster.

The Solai disaster and the government’s response in its aftermath focused attention on the problems of water grabbing, which refers to public or private entities taking control of precious water resources at the expense of local communities and the ecosystems their livelihoods depend on. Yet the 2002 Water Act calls for reforms, including the incorporation of public consultation for catchment management strategies and stakeholder participation at the community level in decision-making processes.

These events, including the example of county activism signaled by the Nairobi-Murang’a spat, encapsulate the spectrum of interlinked water issues in Kenya. Kenya is classified as a water scarce country; sanitation is poor in many areas, and 59 per cent of Kenyans get their water from unimproved sources. Young girls and older women walking long distances weighed down by heavy jerry cans of water is still a common sight in many areas, a reminder of the gender dimension of unequal access.
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The events cited above focus attention on basic problems of water rights and public sanitation that have persisted for so long that they are often taken for granted. The HGF project provides an entry point for sober discussion of the long-term policy framework and the need for approaches to water conservation, management, and allocation adapted to Kenya’s five major catchment basins.

The High Grand Falls Dam project is located at the intersection of state policies that promote the expansion of water supply in support of a strategy for enhancing national food security through a massive increase in land under irrigation. Downstream communities and their elected leaders are only peripherally aware of the new developments. One professional colleague based in the Tana delta area told me that there is little awareness of recent developments, and the different names in circulation are confusing; she asked me if there is more than one dam being planned in addition to the “Mutonga” project.

Although policymakers present the strategy as a case of affirmative action designed to benefit the inhabitants of historically marginalised Arid and Semi Arid Lands (ASAL), many of the ostensible beneficiaries will see the state’s prioritisation of Big Water as a case of water grabbing that subsumes many of the issues driving the struggle between the centre and the periphery since Kenya’s independence in 1963.

In 2017, the press reported that the government had completed arrangements for the High Grand Falls Dam with a Chinese contractor with financing provided by China’s Exim Bank, but it appears the contract was not finalised. Details about the project available in public records are not clear, and sometimes contradictory. Subsequent reports of the tender signed with the UK’s GMB engineering consortium do not specify where the finance will come from. This indicates that construction may be delayed again.

China’s influence in Africa has grown through funding large projects, and this has prompted the Trump government in the United States and the Japanese to rejoin the game. Increased competition is likely to favour the prospects for questionable projects like the High Grand Falls Dam in the future.
The present hiatus is an important opportunity for public discussion on big dam projects in Kenya. The High Grand Falls Dam project provides an entry point for a comprehensive rethink of the current strategy of investing in dams, reservoirs and large irrigation schemes to promote food security. This will require an evaluation of the financial costs, the long-term environmental impacts, contribution to the wider policy objectives, and local ramifications for the diverse stakeholders. Discussion of these issues, including the larger regional historical context and its implications for alternative scenarios, are also in order, especially because the Vision 2030 mindset behind the project remains unchallenged.

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