

Contributing Paper

A Case Study on the Proposed Epupa Hydro Power Dam in Namibia

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Dams, Indigenous People and vulnerable ethnic minorities

For further information see <http://www.dams.org/>

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1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of damming the Cunene River bordering on Angola in northern Namibia was suggested as far back as the era of German occupation prior to the First World War. Yet it was only in the late 1980s, motivated by forecasts about Namibia's increasing need for power, that NamPower (the public power utility) began to advocate the construction of a hydropower scheme in the Epupa area. Namibian independence combined with increasing political stability in Angola made the concept more feasible.

The proposed Hydropower Scheme on the Lower Cunene River, as it is officially referred to or the Epupa Dam project as it is colloquially known (because of the Namibian government's insistence on a site at the Epupa Falls on the Cunene River), will be the first of its kind on Namibian soil. There is accordingly no prior national experience of large dams and indigenous peoples and the process has thus drawn on regional and international experience.

Should the Epupa Dam be built on the Cunene River the consequences for the Himba pastoralists living in and around the inundation area would be severe. For this reason the Himba are unequivocally opposed to the construction of the Dam. This paper seeks to highlight the competing interests, which any such venture must inevitably, pit against one another – national development priorities and energy needs versus indigenous land and natural resource rights. An attempt is also made to sketch the Feasibility Study process and its findings.

2. THE FEASIBILITY STUDY

A 1991 agreement between the governments of Namibia and Angola gave the official go-ahead for an investigation of a hydropower project in the Epupa area, and detailed technical and environmental studies began in 1992. Because the Cunene River lies on the boundary between Namibia and Angola, both countries must agree any river development to. A “Permanent Joint Technical Commission of Angola and Namibia on the Cunene River Basin” (the PJTC) commissioned a group of experts (NAMANG) to assess the feasibility of a hydropower project on the Cunene River. The work of NAMANG was funded by the Swedish and Norwegian governments.

A team of experts compiled a Feasibility Study Report over a period of some three years. Because of public concerns about the negative impacts of dam construction in the vicinity of Epupa, the PJTC and NAMANG decided to expand the project by including alternate sites lower down the Cunene at the Baynes Mountains. NAMANG recommended that the Baynes Site should be the subject of the final round of investigation, because it would create fewer environmental and social problems while providing roughly the same energy potential. However, the PJTC was concerned about the fact that the energy output of the Baynes Site would only be comparable to that of the Epupa Site if the Gove Dam in Angola was fully operational. Since this factor could not be assured, the PJTC decided that the final stage of the feasibility study should also include the Epupa Site. The Feasibility Study Report has two major parts. Part A is an environmental assessment, which includes an examination of the impact of each site on the physical environment, the ecology and the social and cultural life of those who reside in the region. Part B is a technical assessment, which includes economic evaluations of each site, as well as a comparison with alternative energy sources.

3. ELECTRICITY NEEDS AND ALTERNATIVE ENERGY SOURCES

According to the Feasibility Study, individual consumers are the largest users of electricity, despite the fact that 70% of Namibia's population lives in rural areas, which consume only a small proportion of the nation's electricity. Mining was once the largest energy consumer, but as the mining industry stagnated, consumers who purchase electricity from municipalities began to outstrip the mines with their demands for power. Electricity distributed by municipalities now accounts for more than half of the electricity consumed in Namibia, with mines using about 40%.

3.1 Predictions of future demand for electricity

Energy consumption in the entire country has increased by an average of 3,7% each year from 1987 to 1995. It is difficult to make accurate projections about future electricity use. For example, household use depends on pricing policies - if the price of electricity goes up, there is more impetus for households to conserve energy. Demand by mines depends in part on world prices for a variety of minerals, as well as on whether or not new mining projects, which are on the drawing board, will actually materialise.

Under the most likely scenario for economic growth, the Feasibility Study predicts an average annual increase in electricity demand of 6,9% over the next ten years. Demand will not actually increase smoothly each year, but will move forward in uneven jumps as new mining or water pumping projects are established. The Feasibility Study anticipates that the increase in demand will level off to a steadier rate of about 4% each year after 2005.

3.2 Namibia's Current Sources of Electricity

There are four major sources of electricity in Namibia at present. The primary source of power is the Ruacana hydropower plant. The output of this plant depends upon the seasonal river flow and has dropped to virtually nil during drought periods. The inadequate operation of the Gove Dam in Angola makes it impossible for the flow of the river to be regulated as planned, to offset the effects of irregular rainfall. Part of the electricity produced at Ruacana is exported to South Africa, at times when Namibia is not able to absorb the total output.

A significant proportion of Namibia's electricity is imported from South Africa, with imports accounting for 38% to 55% of Namibia's total supply during 1994-1996. NamPower has almost completed the construction of a higher-capacity transmission line from South Africa, which will make it possible to ensure an adequate energy supply well into the next century. However, according to the Feasibility Study, this is incompatible with the goal of greater energy self-sufficiency. The major concern is that the price of importing electricity from South Africa will rise in future once South Africa no longer has power to spare, even though the tariff is already set by agreement up until the year 2005. Eskom itself (which is the South African equivalent of NamPower) plans to utilise excess power generation capacity in the region (such as relatively cheap power from Cahora Bassa in Mozambique) and anticipates that it will have no need to invest in new power-generation capacity before 2010.

Even if a hydropower plant were built at Epupa or at Baynes, this would not be sufficient to meet Namibia's power needs at all times. Either of the proposed hydropower projects would have to be supplemented by other supply sources. This means that a careful consideration of all the options is important no matter what decision is made on the Epupa Dam.

3.3 Kudu Gas

The Kudu Gas Field offshore of Oranjemund on Namibia's west coast was discovered in 1973. It is a large deposit by international standards, and the gas is of a high quality. Natural gas is an efficient, clean-burning energy source, which causes minimal pollution. The discussion of Kudu Gas in the Feasibility Study has already been overtaken by events. In November 1997, an agreement was signed between NamPower, Eskom and Shell Exploration & Production Namibia (the lead company in an investment group, which also includes Texaco Inc USA and Energy Africa). The agreement committed these partners to going forward with a feasibility study for a gas-driven power plant. This commitment was reconfirmed as recently as June this year, particularly in the light of further discoveries which revealed the gas reserves to be in excess of 20 trillion cubic feet – up from the initial estimate which put the gas reserves at a maximum of 5 trillion cubic feet.

The envisaged power plant, predicted to be operational by 2005, will have a power generation capacity of 750 MW (megawatts) -- as compared to 240 MW for Ruacana and 360 MW for both of the proposed hydropower projects. In other words, the maximum output of the Kudu power plant will be more than twice that of the proposed Epupa hydropower plant at its peak. Only 320 megawatts of power generated by Kudu would be consumed by Namibia, whilst the remaining 430 megawatts would be purchased by Eskom for industrial use in South Africa, particularly in the Western Cape.

3.4 Other alternative energy sources

3.4.1 Solar power

Namibia receives an average of 3300 hours of sunshine each year, more than almost any other country in the world, making it a strong candidate for solar power. The ability to draw on a local source of natural gas (from the Kudu Gas Field) also makes solar thermal generation a particularly suitable option for Namibia. However, the Feasibility Study concludes that solar thermal power generation would not be cost-effective for Namibia at this stage.

3.4.2 Wind power

Windmills have long been used for water pumping in Namibia. The high wind speeds along the coast open the door to the possibility of electricity production with wind turbines in these areas. Wind power already makes substantial contributions to the power supply in other countries, such as Germany, India and Denmark, where 10% of the total national demand for electricity will be met by wind power by the year 2010. Among the attractions of wind power are its renewability and its low environmental impact. Almost the only environmental hazard from wind-generated power is the need to consider danger to birds in the siting of wind turbine installations. The technology is well advanced, and there are numerous international examples to draw on. However, the Feasibility Study concludes that wind power is not economically attractive at present but should be further investigated.

3.5 Energy conservation

The Feasibility Study assumes that there is little potential for reducing electricity demand through conservation measures because per capita energy consumption in Namibia is already low by international standards. However, the report by its own admission does not consider the possibility of stimulating conservation through awareness campaigns or credit schemes to encourage the use of more efficient appliances such as energy-efficient refrigerators and energy-saving lights. Conservation could also be encouraged by an increase in the rates charged for electricity, which are presently low in comparison to those elsewhere in the world.

4. THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The total volume of the dam at Epupa would be about 4½ times larger than the dam at Baynes – 11,5 billion cubic meters, as compared to 2,6 billion cubic meters. As a point of comparison Namibia's largest existing dam contains just under 300 million cubic meters of water when full.

The Epupa site would flood a much larger area – 380 square kilometres at the high water level, compared to 57 square kilometres at Baynes. This means that the Epupa site would take 6½ times as much land out of use as the Baynes site. In practical terms, the difference is even larger because the land at the Epupa site has a greater use value than the land at the Baynes site, being currently utilised by the Himba for homes, gardens, seasonal grazing and access to water as well as being the location of culturally-important gravesites.

Expanses of barren land will be exposed at both sites when the water level is low, with this area being about 5 times greater at Epupa – 22000 hectares, compared to 3900 hectares at Baynes. This land, which is called the “draw-down zone”, will not be attractive or useful, but it is not considered to be environmentally critical in either case.

4.1 Epupa Falls

One significant difference between the two sites is easy to understand. Epupa Falls will be lost forever if a dam is built at the Epupa site, but preserved if the Baynes site is chosen. The loss of such an imposing natural feature is immeasurable, and so is valued at zero in the cost comparison between the two sites.

Another important aspect of the potential plant loss at the Epupa site would be the destruction of about 6000 palm trees, which are a source of “omarunga nuts”. These nuts are a key food resource for the local Himba in times of drought. If the Baynes site is chosen, only a few of these palm trees will be lost.

4.2 Cost of impacts

According to the Feasibility Study, the Baynes site is more expensive. The total cost for Baynes is US\$551,52 million, as compared to US\$539,40 for Epupa. The costs of dam construction, power transmission facilities and slightly longer access roads are the components, which make Baynes more expensive. However, the costs of the necessary waterways and environmental mitigation are higher for Epupa.

When the costs of the two projects are compared, it must be noted that some of the human costs are impossible to quantify fully. The financial implications of the various social and cultural factors are quantified in the report, but this does not capture the entire “cost” to the affected community or the nation. For example, how can one place a monetary value on the loss of human life due to increased health risks caused by the Dam? It may be possible to measure the amount the person would have earned during his or her lifetime, or the cost of the health care involved. The Feasibility Study measures the possible loss of life in terms of the costs of the steps, which will be taken to minimise the negative health impacts.

There are other impacts, which are even harder to measure. The Report points to a number of key factors which cannot be adequately valued in monetary terms:

- (1) the loss of Epupa Falls;

- (2) the loss of biodiversity in the form of two critically endangered fish species at both sites, with the additional endangerment of a new species of fish at the Baynes site;
- (3) the loss of ancestral graves, which will be ten times greater at the Epupa site; and
- (4) the impact on the social environment. This is more minor and can be mitigated at Baynes while “for the Epupa Project these impacts in the shape of changed identities, lifestyles and production systems cannot be fully mitigated”. Thus, the values, which are considered to be immeasurable, are all weighted against the Epupa option.

This means that there is no objective way to decide on the relative merits of the two sites. In the words of the Feasibility Study, “the final decision will have to rest on a subjective valuation by decision-makers and is thus in the realm of politics”.

5. THE IMPACT OF THE DAM ON THE HIMBA

5.1 Pastoral production

Before 1920, Himba pastoralists were engaged in various forms of economic diversification. They traded with Portuguese and Ovambo communities, fought as mercenaries for the Portuguese colonial army, and entered wage employment with traders, hunters and farmers. It was the restraints imposed by the South African regime, which blocked this trend. Restrictions on the movement of livestock cut off opportunities for trade. Opportunities for wage employment disappeared when the government refused to allow the Himba to cross the river for work in Angola and then ignored them in the official labour recruitment systems for "South West Africa". The economic activities of the Himba on the Angolan side of the river were similarly constrained by the Portuguese government. Thus, the subsistence economy, which characterises Himba communities today, was artificially created and enforced.

Wage employment remains rare among the Himba, but they have excelled in pastoral production. They herd sheep, goats and cattle, a combination, which makes the most of the available resources by utilising different layers of vegetation. This mixture also provides a buffer in times of drought, since grasses are generally more susceptible to decreased rainfall than trees and bushes. So, for example, during the catastrophic drought of 1981, goat herds could be maintained even though cattle herds were reduced by up to 90%.

The Himba have developed a range of techniques, which minimise economic risk to individual households while at the same time advancing the interests of the entire community. Examples are the cattle post system, which provides an avenue for poorer relatives to gain access to the herd of a rich family member, the practice of livestock exchange and the communal management of grazing areas.

The reality of Namibia's Himba people has been obscured by inaccurate stereotypes. The tourist industry portrays them as unspoiled remnants of an ancient Africa, while the Namibian Government and various development agencies have presented them as a primitive and under-developed community with a lifestyle that should be upgraded. In fact, the Himba are the most successful and economically independent subsistent farmers in Africa – a relatively healthy and wealthy community with sound strategies for food security which have proven successful even in times of severe drought.

5.2 Loss of land

The Epupa site will flood 110 permanent dwellings, as opposed to 15 such dwellings at Baynes. Although the Himba are nomadic, there are families who are very well established in certain areas as well as others who visit these areas on a regular basis. The Epupa site will have an impact on about 1000 "permanent users" and 5000 "occasional users", as compared to 100 "permanent users" and 2000 "occasional users" at Baynes. The land, which will be flooded at Epupa, is also more significant in terms of seasonal gardening and reserve grazing during periods of drought. A dam at Epupa will result in the loss of two traditional river crossings, which will constitute a major social impact, while the Baynes dam would not interfere with river crossings.

5.3 The loss of riverine resources

The inundation of the Cunene basin at Epupa will destroy the riverine forests, which are a crucial source of grazing and browsing in dry seasons and in times of drought. It will result in the loss of an annual crop of hundreds of tonnes of the palm nuts, which are so crucial in drought periods. The dam will bring an end to gardening in the fertile soils along the riverbank.

5.4 The loss of grazing resources

These losses will produce a ripple effect, which will multiply their impact. Bollig estimates that the cattle displaced by a dam at Epupa on the Namibian side of the river alone will require some 17 500 hectares of grazing elsewhere at all times, and an additional 70 000 hectares of grazing elsewhere in times of scarcity – without even taking into account the needs of the small stock, which also use the river basin. The pressure placed on other grazing areas will be enormous. So, although only about 1000 people will actually be displaced if the river basin is flooded, the dam will affect the drought strategies of about 10 000 Himba (on both sides of the river) and place additional strain on countless others who will be squeezed in the search for alternative grazing. One possible result is an increased dependency on the state for economic and social security. A dam at Baynes, on the other hand, would have little effect on herding patterns and drought strategies, because the steep terrain of the riverbank means that the area bordering the river there is little used.

5.5 The loss of gardens

About 75% of Himba households engage in some agricultural activity during the course of the year to produce supplementary food, with the alluvial soils along the Cunene being prime garden spots. Maize is typically intercropped with various types of pumpkins and melons. There are no cash crops. These gardens are particularly important for poorer households, which find it difficult to survive off of the resources from their herds.

5.6 Drought strategies

During times of drought, several survival strategies come into play. Restricted grazing areas are opened up, and many households shift closer to the riverine forests along the Cunene. Grazing may be bad there as well, but the river provides a reliable water supply, which decreases stress on the livestock and reduces their food requirements. The *Faidherbia albida* trees on the riverbanks also provide an abundance of pods, which serve as nutritious fodder for goats. The palm trees along the river, which are not very susceptible to low rainfall, provide a crucial source of “omarunga nuts” which are a crucial food resource in lean times. Food sharing also increases in times of scarcity, meaning that many people gather to share in the meal when an animal is slaughtered.

These strategies proved to be successful during the 1981 drought. Even though herds were devastated, few families dropped out of pastoralism, there were few famine-related deaths, and herds were slowly restocked without government support or subsidy.

5.7 The loss of ancestral graves

A dam at Epupa would flood 160 graves, while only 15 graves would be flooded if the Baynes site is chosen. According to the Feasibility Study, this loss “is highly significant and cannot be valued in monetary terms”.

Himba in the Epupa area frequently name the destruction of ancestral graves as their major objection to the proposed dam. While Himba leaders say that their culture will be at risk if the ancestral graveyards along the Kunene are inundated, advocates of the dam maintain that the graves can be relocated, pointing to the relocation of the remains of Samuel Maharero from Botswana to Okahandja in 1923 as an example. But the Himba asserts that relocation will destroy the significance of the graves just as much as flooding them would.

The debate stems from different understandings of what a grave signifies.

For the Himba, a grave is not just the location of the physical remains of a deceased person - it is a focal point for defining identity, social relationships and relationships with the land, as well as being a centre for important religious rituals.

All places, which are permanently used as settlements have at least one graveyard, associated with them. People are generally buried in the place where they feel most at home – most often the place where they were settled during their last years, but sometimes the place of their birth, or simply the place they loved most during their lifetimes.

Graveyards are usually located near a watercourse, often under a large bush or tree. The preference for riverine locations is partly a practical one – alluvial soils are usually deeper and easier to dig. But riverine areas are also heavily loaded with emotion, as the points where communities congregate, the starting points of annual cattle migrations, the places where people have struggled to survive droughts, and the sites of graves of other family members. The river courses and the stories, which are associated with them, are common subjects of Himba praise songs.

Because graves demonstrate a continuity of settlement, they determine the influence of the “owner” of the land. The “owner” of the land will found his claim for political power on the numerous graves of generations of ancestors in the area. Those who can demonstrate the longest connection with the land will have the strongest say over land-related matters such as rights of access and control over resources. Because graves are so important in the land tenure system, senior elders can recall the location and identity of even the most ancient graves. For example, in debates about taking a stand on a development such as the Epupa dam, the Himba will point to the number of their ancestral graves as the major indicator of their right to influence the decision. Speakers will ask rhetorically, “Whose ancestral graves are older, ours or theirs?” The key point is not the physical fact of the graves themselves, but the connection between the graves, the family’s history and the community’s system of land tenure and decision-making. This nexus cannot possibly be preserved if the graves are relocated. When told that the Epupa dam will flood large numbers of gravesites, many Himba have asked, “Who will then know who owns the land?”

The multiplicity of meanings and functions centered around ancestral graves explains their great significance in Himba society. As Dr Bollig puts it, to the Himba “graves are not simply an accumulation of stones under which some bones rest, they are places laden with emotion

and memories". The bones and stones could be relocated, but the meaning of the graves within the Himba worldview would inevitably be left behind and destroyed.

5.8 Threats to health

The Epupa site is expected to produce higher incidences of malaria and bilharzia (schistosomiasis), a disease caused by a parasite associated with still or slow-flowing water. The influx of a labour force from other areas will probably lead to the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases, including HIV, which has been up to now absent from the local Himba communities. However this problem is likely to arise regardless of which site is chosen.

6. THE IMPACT OF THE CONSTRUCTION PHASE

Construction of a dam at either site will require about 1000 workers (450 drawn from Namibia, 450 from Angola and 100 expatriates). Family members, traders and an informal sector will increase their numbers. A reasonable estimate is a construction town of at least 5000 inhabitants on the Angolan side of the river.

The impact of this sudden and enormous new market for food is likely to be an uneven one. Richer households will be able to profit by selling substantial numbers of cattle. They will then be able to buffer themselves against risk by diversification into other forms of economic activity, such as agriculture or trade. But households with smaller herds will be unable to compete, and the livestock exchange networks, which they rely on, will shrink. Another possible result is that some of the newcomers will want to invest in livestock herds of their own, increasing local pressure by competing for scarce grazing. It is the abruptness of the monetarisation, which will be particularly harmful, as there will be no time for the evolution of alternative economic and social strategies to accommodate the change.

Aside from trade in cattle, the benefits of the increased demand for consumer goods will most likely accrue to businesses based in Opuwo rather than to the Himba in the immediate vicinity of the project. And those who do profit may well go from "boom to bust" since the rise in demand is unlikely to be sustained once the dam is completed.

It is unlikely that many of the Himba in the project area will secure formal employment during the construction phase, given their low level of marketable skills and their lack of proficiency in English. But they may be part of the informal settlement which will probably grow up around the construction town, with attendant problems such as crime, alcoholism, prostitution and the spread of AIDS.

It is also possible that the sudden influx of outsiders may threaten budding community-based initiatives for women who harvest plants which are marketable in the international perfume and cosmetic industry, through uncontrolled access and harvesting.

7. ANALYSING THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Both dams will result in the upgrading of existing gravel roads on the Namibian side of the river, along with 5-21 kilometres of new gravel roads, although no new tarred roads are contemplated on the Namibian side. Improved road access could have positive spin-offs for the local Himba in the form of increased livestock marketing opportunities and better access to social services. But improved transportation alone will not bring improved services. For example, many of those interviewed cited a need for better veterinary support services to combat stock disease, but problems experienced in the past reportedly stemmed from shortages of vehicles and medicine rather than from road conditions.

Easier access to the region may increase the number of tourists - depending on whether or not Epupa Falls is destroyed - but this will not necessarily benefit the local people, as most tour operations are run from Windhoek. An increased influx of visitors could also lead to environmental degradation, which then reduces the attractiveness of the area for tourism.

The introduction of more schools and clinics has been often cited as a local benefit of the project, but this is more complex than it seems on the surface. For example, the existing school and clinic at Okongwati are under-staffed and ill equipped. While about 29% of those interviewed would like an additional school closer by, 12% were opposed to all schooling. One perception is that a low level of schooling may lead to dissatisfaction with the Himba way of life while not equipping youth with marketable skills - with the result that a school-leaver ends up as a low-paid wage labourer rather than a self-employed and relatively wealthy herder.

There is also an inherent conflict between a nomadic lifestyle and a sedentary model of education. For example, English language skills are more likely to be acquired by means of mobile English teachers who travel with a group of households for several months than through English courses in a fixed place.

Some local people fear that improved hospitals, schools and shops would simply attract outsiders who would then compete for local resources. Furthermore, there is a strong feeling in the area that the provision of services such as hospitals and schools should not be conditioned on the acceptance of a dam.

The electricity which will result from a hydroelectric project is locally perceived as something that may be beneficial for others, but not of much use to a pastoral lifestyle. However, electrification may improve the efficiency of local schools and clinics, as well as stimulating business in the region. The same is true of improved telephone services.

8. HIMBA ATTITUDES TO CHANGE

Himba opposition to the dam does not stem from a blind rejection of all forms of change, or from a lack of understanding of the project. Himba people living in the vicinity of the proposed dams engage in detailed discussions about various prospects for development, and have shrewd opinions about the costs and benefits of a dam as far as they are concerned. There is intense local resentment to the allegation that local opposition to the dam is something, which has been engineered by outside groups.

The opposing viewpoints about the dam within the Cunene Region are understandable. Those who are for the dam tend to be businesspeople, merchants, regional government officials and politicians – those who have nothing to lose if a dam is built, but see it as an entree into a western-style market economy. On the other hand, the Himba pastoralists in the project area see no prospect of tangible benefit from the dam, but only the loss of resources, the loss of control over their land and the erosion of socio-economic structures which have sustained them in a successful and independent existence for decades. This loss “is highly significant and cannot be valued in monetary terms”. The Feasibility Study assigns costs to this item, but these represent only the costs of physically relocating the graves or taking other practical steps to appease the affected Himba. No cost is assigned to the cultural impact on the affected communities.

9. THE PROCESS OF CONSULTATION AND PARTICIPATION

9.1 General

The method of consultation has ranged from the President and government delegations visiting the affected Himba at Epupa, to public consultations in the capital, Windhoek, attended by the Himba leadership. There have also been in-depth studies undertaken by anthropologists as part of the feasibility study to document Himba attitudes and fears in regard to the dam. The Himba's lawyers, the Legal Assistance Centre have also held regular and extensive consultations with the Himba leadership to explain to them the process, their legal rights, advised on strategy and ensured that they were able to attend all important public meetings.

9.2 Problems with the process

The first phase of the of the consultation process commenced in 1991 when Nampower and government officials visited the affected community in the Epupa area. This visit created misunderstandings and most of the Himba were left with the impression that the Epupa dam would be a very small dam for livestock water consumption (in other words, the only concept of a dam that they were familiar with). The crucial issue of the inundation area was either not addressed or misrepresented. It was accordingly left to the social scientists attached to the feasibility study to inform the Himba about the size of the dam, the inundation area and other important impacts. Not surprisingly the Himba considered that Nampower and the government had tried to trick them into agreeing to the project.

This raises questions about the government's commitment to genuine "informed consent". The government further sought to undermine Himba opposition to the Dam by claiming on unsubstantiated grounds that only a minority of Himba were opposed to the project. However, the reality is that in February 1998 26 out of the 32 traditional leaders from the Kunene Region, in which the project is situated, signed a petition stating "we do not believe that the project is in the best interests of Namibia nor the communities we represent in the Kunene Region, while we believe that the project will be particularly damaging to the livelihood and economic subsistence of the Himba people living in the project areas which would be flooded should the dam be built". Government has furthermore attempted to explain, again without substantiation, the Himba's opposition as a consequence of manipulation by foreign environmental lobbyists.

There were several further problems with the manner in which the process was conducted. The social investigation had to be suspended after statements made by the Deputy Minister of Mines and Energy at a public hearing on 8 March 1997 in Opuwo gave a strong impression that the decision to build the dam had already been taken. The arrogance with which the Himba leadership was treated and the perception that their views were ignored strengthened their resolve to oppose the construction of the dam.

As a result, members of the Himba communities most directly affected by the dam felt that their input was irrelevant. They refused to continue with the household, water and health surveys, which were still in progress. They also refused to discuss mitigation, which was intended to cover all aspects of compensation to persons who would be adversely affected by the construction of the hydropower scheme. Senior Nampower officials reiterated the Minister's views more recently.

9.3 Harassment and intimidation

In addition, field staff who were conducting these portions of the study reported harassment and intimidation by government officials in the Kunene region. In July 1997 heavily armed personnel from the Namibian Police broke up a private meeting between the Epupa community and their lawyers from the Legal Assistance Centre and refused to allow it to continue. The purpose of the meeting was primarily to give feedback on the social aspects of the Feasibility Study to the community and to discuss their response thereto. It was only after the Legal Assistance Centre obtained a court order from the High Court that the Epupa community were able to meet with their lawyers without fear of intimidation and harassment from government agents.

These events exacerbated an existing lack of trust on the part of the Himba community that the Government was, firstly, not serious about objectively assessing the findings of the Feasibility Study before taking a decision as to whether to proceed with the project, and secondly, whether the Government was serious about wanting to hear what the community wanted to say about the project or instead was rather bent on suppressing their views.

9.4 Inadequate communication

Another complicating factor was the Government's failure to follow through on a promise to appoint a credible liaison body to facilitate communication between Government and the Epupa community. The Legal Assistance Centre was approached by the project in February 1997 to fulfil this function but after delays of some four months the Ministry of Mines and Energy indicated that they had the capacity to do so themselves. In reality this role was never performed by government due to their lack of credibility with the Himba leadership.

The University of Namibia was then appointed in this role and also to discuss mitigation with the Epupa community, effectively bypassing the feasibility team. The leader of the UNAM team only spoke directly to the Epupa community as late as October 1997 and was informed by Chief Kapika speaking on behalf of the Epupa community that they did not consider it appropriate to deal with a new group of consultants as they had confidence with the existing field team consisting of Dr Michael Bollig and Dr Margaret Jacobsohn. Despite this decision by the Epupa community the UNAM team went behind the back of Chief Kapika to try to persuade one of his councillors to attend a meeting with them through offering him money for transport to attend a meeting with the UNAM team. This attempt to undermine the authority of the Himba traditional leadership effectively ended UNAM's role in liaising with the Himba. However, despite this the UNAM team continued with their study parallel to the Feasibility Study and presented a report to the Ministry of Mines and Energy, which has never been made public. What is clear is that the report cannot directly reflect the Himba's views in regard to the dam issue since they were not consulted.

9.5 The current state of the process

The final feasibility report was released in November 1998. Government was of the opinion that the question of mitigation as regards the Himba could be concluded by the UNAM team referred to above. However, the feasibility study team took the view that the mitigation process had to include interaction with the communities involved. Since this interaction was not possible for the political reasons referred to above, the Feasibility Study is incomplete and according to the report "the details for compensation will have to be negotiated with the communities concerned, if and when circumstances change, in accordance with the generally accepted criteria for bankability".

No further negotiations have taken place between government and the Himba community to date. The debate has also quietened down with focus now being given to the possible development of the Kudu gas fired power station in the south of Namibia. Nevertheless, a few months ago the Namibian Minister of Mines and Energy has been reported to be in favour of holding a referendum in the whole

Kunene Region (the region in which the dam site is situated, but most of whose inhabitants are not directly affected by the proposed project) to get a mandate to proceed with the scheme.

The Namibian government has taken the view that the Epupa project “is the best possible way of meeting the country’s need for electric power and fulfilling the aspirations of the Namibian people for higher standards of living and a better quality of life...” (Deputy Minister of Mines and Energy, 8 March 1997).

The Deputy Minister, furthermore, indicated that the affected people would be fairly compensated “for any loss of livelihood or income that may result from the Dam” or “for any loss of domicile or shelter”. Interestingly no direct mention is made of expropriation or of the loss of land by the Himba. Government has also been on record as saying that the cost of compensation would be included in the total cost of the Epupa project and be borne by the project promoters.

9.6 Angolan attitudes to the dam

Several meetings of the PJTC, one as recently as 8 July 1999, have been postponed at the instance of Angolan officials. The official excuse proffered by the Namibian Minister of Mines and Energy for the latest postponement, a meeting which was to have made a final proposal on the Dam site, was the preoccupation of the Angolan government with the renewed war against UNITA.

However, reliable unofficial sources suggest that the more immediate cause is the fact that the two countries are at odds over the Dam site. The Angolans favour a smaller dam in the Baynes Mountains since this site is more dependent on the regulation of the Gove Dam in Angola’s central highlands. The Epupa scheme is accordingly being used to canvas for funding to repair Gove, which was damaged in Angola’s civil war. Namibia is still standing firm on its position that the Baynes site is too small, prone to drought conditions and too dependent on the Gove Dam. There is unlikely to be a resolution of this dispute without intervention at presidential level.

10. CONCLUSION

The Feasibility Study Report remains incomplete. Both international law and recognised professional standards require an elaborate investigation of the impact of projects such as Epupa on the people who are directly affected. The Feasibility Study itself calls attention to the fact that it is “incomplete” because it fails to include information on social mitigation, which refers to methods for minimising the detrimental social impacts.

Experience with dams in other parts of the world shows that mitigation and relocation schemes have a history of failure, leaving indigenous peoples with shattered cultures and shattered family structures, as well as high rates of alcohol and substance abuse, crime and prostitution. This aspect is not adequately addressed in the Feasibility Study. Himba land tenure rights are also not given prominence, whilst the issue of relocation is addressed superficially with no discussion of where the Himba might be resettled given the fact that there is no more vacant grazing land available in Namibia. There is also no assessment of the social meaning of such relocation for the people in question. All this serves to trivialise Himba rights and must be seen as a reflection of their marginalised position in Namibian society.

Perhaps one unintended result of the Epupa project has been the growth in the leadership of the Himba opposed to the Dam. The project and the discussion has brought Himba together to discuss strategy and to look at different options for development. In this process it has been important to reflect on where they are going as a people and how a range of strategies – from community mobilisation, to face-to-face interactions with government, to national lobbying through public meetings, to legal interventions to protect their rights to meet and organise, to international lobbying - can play a positive role in the advancement of their case. Nevertheless it still remains to be seen how successful these approaches will be in effectively putting Himba views on the Government agenda when a final decision is taken as to whether or not to proceed with the project.

11. REFERENCES

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