

Session Title: *Challenges to growth from the South: commodity frontiers, conflicts and alternatives*

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Contours of Environmental and Water Justice; anti dams movements and resistance challenging politics and imaginaries

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SHORT ABSTRACT

Socio-environmental conflicts around dams are mounting around the world, as dam construction has been fuelled by green energy investments and is still promoted as technically efficient solution to tackle energy demand and climate change. Groups opposing such projects have been fighting for several decades now and are building networks with other movements and scholars. They first focused on fair rehabilitation of affected people, but are now incorporating more comprehensive analysis and reflections. This article explores the current politics of major anti-dam groups and networks with a special focus on critics towards the energy production model and the interconnections with other relating issues (water management, farming, etc). We aim at presenting major anti-dam movements as political movements, quite different from NIMBY movements or localist groups. We draw on the Atlas of Environmental Justice of the EJOLT project and apply a post-structural political ecology approach, relying on activist-led research and activist knowledge.

LONG ABSTRACT

In 2000, the World Commission on Dams (WCD) inventoried 45,000 large dams, built on over the half of world's major rivers, and a tentative estimation tells us of 40 to 80 million people displaced in the last decades. The World Bank Environment Department's (WBED) accounts that worldwide 40% of development induced displacement is caused by dams and related projects like canals. Today, dams, either large or small, are promoted as sources of clean energy and have seen a renewed interest by international banks and financial institutions, as well as national and regional governments. After a hold on dam construction in the '90, due to social unrest and undeniable evidences of socio-environmental impacts, in 2009 the World Bank noted that despite "overwhelming environmental and social risks", African and Asian countries will need to reconsider hydropower for providing dependable electricity to those who still have no access to it (World Bank 2009).

In the academic literature related to dams, displacement and river ecosystems, especially in social sciences, it is widely recognized that such projects have tremendous impacts on the environment and people living around them (Fearnside 2004, Fletcher 2010, Sneddon & Fox 2008). Significant part of this research has looked at social movements and opposition groups which have formed around hydroelectric projects and large water management schemes; socio-environmental conflicts around such projects have been documented and described extensively (McCully 1996 and 2001, Khagram 2004). This paper aims at contributing to this body of literature and focuses on the analysis of the critique such movements have been raising towards the current energy production model, especially since the publication of the WCD report (WCD 2000) and the interconnections with other relating issues (water management, agriculture, etc).

For meeting this task, we will constantly consider the following aspects: first, dams should be considered in their historical dimension as symbols of modernity and national prestige, a gateway to development, energy and food supply self-security, and economic growth (Kaika 2006, Baviskar 1996). They are part of what Appadurai calls *ideoscapes* (Appadurai 1996). Second, they have been promoted as efficient green energy sources and therefore solutions to climate change; dam proponents have this way tackled social movements' and environmental groups' concerns over dams performance and socio-environmental impacts (*technoscapes*). Third, social movements and environmental justice organizations have been opposing such projects for decades and used different argumentation for that, according to the time of mobilisation, socio-economic and productive structure of their countries and dominant discourses around dams. In fact,

they have been formed in different political and historical contexts and their struggle involves different kind of actors (workers, indigenous communities, conservationists, etc).

For many years the priority of anti-dam groups rightly was the application of compensation measures for the affected communities which were going to be displaced and to lose their basic means of livelihood. After 2000, and even more since the mantra of the green economy dominates climate change debate, the focus of anti-dam discourse is more and more shifting to a social *and* environmental justice discourse, questioning even stronger the development and growth paradigm. The ultimate importance of such movements, in fact, relies in the questioning of the very concept of “national development” as a paradigm and the “politics of needs” in their countries; it has a strong potential for the emergence of other rationales, other world visions, other “life projects” (Escobar 2008).

Using a post-structural political ecology (Bagher & Nuesser 2010), transnational constructivism approach (Khagram 2004), and activist-led research actions (Escobar 2010), this article looks at such counter arguments of anti-dam movements and explores at what extent they can be deemed as “political movements” and not only local-based groups, nor mainly NIMBY actors, nor post-political subjects (Harvey 2001, Swyngedouw 2004, Featherstone 2005).

We finally argue that they represent today milestones for social and equity struggles along with what we call an international (socio-)environmental justice movement (Schlossberg 2004, Martinez-Alier 2002). The article draws on the Atlas of environmental conflicts produced in the EJOLT project (Temper & at. forthcoming) and looks at major articulation of anti-dam movements in countries, among which India (Narmada Bachao Andolan and SANDRP), Mexico (MAPDER), Brazil (MAB), Colombia, Chile (Campaign Patagonia Without Dams), and in the South East Asian region (Save Mekong Campaign).

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