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*Chinese-Built Dams, Africa, and Economic Growth: Is There a Role for African NGOs?\**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper will investigate the impact of Chinese-built dams in Africa, the economic and political impacts, and what roles African NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) play. As the continent of Africa continues to shed its “paper tiger” status in the postcolonial era and continues to become a potential economic powerhouse, what role will African NGOs play? The primary goal of this paper is to discern the role of African NGOs in the face economic growth, especially in the area of Chinese-built dams (a growing segment of economic growth in Africa as “engines” of industrialization).

**KEY WORDS** Chinese-built dams; African NGOs

As the continent of Africa continues to witness spurts of economic growth in the postcolonial era, will we see more transparent evidence of similar growth patterns in political liberalization, specifically in the area of civil society? One of the “engines” that will continue to propel economic growth is dams, which provide hydroelectric power for the growing energy demands of industrialization. That “engine,” however, will have to consider the potential negative impacts on communities such as residential displacement, environmental degradation, and continued wealth disparities in already fragile communities. Moreover, what roles (if any) will nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play in a linear, deterministic model (see, for example, Rostow 1960) of economic development? But perhaps we might also consider if NGOs should play a role. Typically, as countries mature politically and economically, space opens up for civil society actors in the form of pluralism. Thus, one would think that there will be space in which NGOs can facilitate discussions, gather information, and keep the public abreast of the economic (and political) stakeholders in “developing” states.

Currently, two-thirds of the total electricity production in Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa) comes from hydropower (US EIA 2004). Concurrent with the need for energy and economic expansion are calls for democratization, which typically are in tandem with economic growth, at least in most Western models of glasnost and perestroika, but Africa presents a unique case study, not only in its path to economic growth but also in its “dependent autonomous” (Lu

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2009) state-civil society relations. Moreover, African NGOs are stymied by the push for privatization and other forms of economic liberalization. This economic liberalization is quintessentially a Western model of economic development, which may be contrary to some components of economic growth in parts of Africa. As a result, there have been calls by African NGOs to be cautious about privatization. For example, in its millennial development report in 2005, in Goal Seven, the South African National NGO Coalition (SANGOCO) stated, “We support the expansion of essential services such as electricity and clean water supply to all, and oppose their privatization. This means that we must halt the policies of privatization and ‘liberalization’ which lead to the concentration of public resources in fewer and often non-national hands.”

Costs beyond the economic realm—that is, social costs (housing displacements, agrarian lifestyle displacements), environmental costs (environmental degradation, water temperature changes, sediment buildup), and political costs (exacerbating elitism in already politically fragile countries)—are indisputable areas of concern. What roles could African NGOs play in minimizing these cleavages? NGOs can help ensure “best options” practices (Hathaway and Pottinger 2009:172). Conversely, what are some of the hydroelectric power benefits for Africa? The benefits include relatively low electric costs, heating, and manufacturing power; power grids for urban and rural areas; more FDI (foreign direct investment); better infrastructure; and greater predictability in terms of energy availability.

In the postcolonial era, African NGO activists continue to experiment with various models of civil society growth (e.g., Dбие and Dбие 2008) in the midst of spurts of economic growth, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. On the one hand, some African activists have adopted the Western-style model of NGO organization and agitation—that is, no official intrusion by the government (but occasional state funding), whereas others have adopted a more user-friendly version of NGO organization and activity (i.e., direct intrusion by the state, including funding, bureaucratic mandates, and institutional structure). The fluidity of NGO models in Africa in the midst of increased globalization illustrates that one size certainly does not fit all. African NGOs must be framed in a non-Western civil-society framework. Just as important for civil society studies, a wider discussion is needed for researchers to understand the complexities of economic liberalization and tempered political liberalization, especially in quasi-democratic societies. Moreover, civil society actors and hydroelectric dam-affected social movements are concerned that China’s own poor record of protecting human rights and the environment could mean trouble for African rivers now targeted for ongoing Chinese-built large dams. Not only is Africa ripe for a growing source of raw materials (as in the colonial era for the Western powers) for China’s industrial sector, but Africa is also a marketplace for Chinese exports. Consequently, Chinese companies are heavily involved in many areas of industrialization: oil, mining, logging, and infrastructure, but at what costs to Africa?

Africa’s economic systems are in a state of flux, as many African countries slowly relinquish their socialist, agrarian-based economy to a more market- and capitalist-based economy, but various political systems are still quite static or rigid in terms of creating structural and nonstructural (e.g., education, insurance policies for property owners) institutions. As well, most of the African economies are still quite stagnant because of the low levels of political liberalization in terms of civil liberties and rights. As a result of this asymmetrical relationship, some private businesses are beginning to forge patron-client networks that allow private business to develop types of NGOs that have some level of impact outside of the business realm; however, these “arms” of private businesses have not meant a concurrent increase in civil society activism.

A caveat: as researchers and practitioners, we must move beyond the confines of Western-style myopic modeling because, after all, one size does not fit all, whether in political and economic systems or non-state activism. During the 1980s and 1990s, increasing numbers of civil-society actors exposed the World Bank and other donors of dam projects for overlooking the hazards and residuals of the impacted communities throughout Africa. As a result of the grassroots activism, the World Bank agreed to review the effects and created in 1998 an “independent” watchdog group, the World Commission on Dams (WCD; Hathaway and Pottinger 2009). The WCD’s final report was issued in 2000, however. Such an ad hoc approach to such a salient issue begs the question, why stop now, especially as the need for electricity grows with increasing levels of industrialization and globalization in Africa? Also, it appears that most of the dams being built in Africa are connecting the industrial and urban centers, as distribution networks (Hathaway and Pottinger 2009), while neglecting the rural communities as a source of utility power. This type of neglect only exacerbates the political, economic, and social cleavages in Africa, which further complicates the work of the NGOs but at the same time creates opportunities for the NGOs and their spheres of influence. In addition, institutional relationships between African NGOs and Chinese multinational corporations in the area of hydroelectric dam construction could be enhanced, which may “spill over” into more calls for democratization efforts in the areas of civil rights and civil liberties in nascent African democracies.

#### **THE CASE FOR WIDENING NGO NOTIONS IN THE MIDST OF GLOBALIZATION**

First, there are varying degrees of fairness, equality, and justice when discussing sustainable development (Dibie and Dibie 2008), which further complicates NGO efforts in postcolonial Africa. In addition, globalization creates certain expectations (some positive, some negative), including trade openness, cultural partnerships (and cultural losses, which at times include loss of ancestral burial grounds), political liberalization, increased levels of predictability and trust between participants. There are many faces or components of globalization, including economic and political (Sharma 2008). Moreover, increased tensions are becoming more apparent regarding the role that NGOs should play in policy formation, such as in environmental policy (Fisher and Green 2004). In the case of African NGOs, most have some level of decentralized organizational structure, which means that they have some level of latitude and thus liberty to pursue various avenues of social, political, and/or economic justice. Even with a level of latitude, however, the African NGOs continue to face an uphill battle with domestic and foreign corporate interests, as well as their own governments, as such actors mostly pursue short-term goals of profits without genuinely considering the long-term social, cultural, and economic costs of hydropower projects. Moreover, the corporatist model or vertical orientation (Salmenkari 2008) of African NGOs and Chinese relations deemphasizes social autonomy and encourages a corporatist type of relationship. A caveat: researchers should be cautious of such explanations, because they appear to be culturally deterministic and linear, analogous to modernization theory. The following cases illustrate (and generally mirror the other African cases) the potential economic growth and infrastructure development in select African countries.

African NGOs in the midst of hydroelectric dam construction must also consider the *African Model Law*, in terms of privatization of the Chinese-built dams. The African Model Law “deals with bio-safety, access, and benefit-sharing with respect to genetic resources” (Zerbe 2007:97). Even though Zerbe’s analysis deals with African farmers’ rights, the notion that African NGOs should be “at the table” is highlighted by the fact that the hydroelectric dams have meant huge rural residential (and thus farmer) displacements and crop devastation. After all,

“environmental problems are increasingly characterized by their transboundary nature” (p. 99), that is, moving beyond one’s own state borders. In addition, stronger transnational civil-society ties between African NGOs and Chinese multinational corporations perhaps could play a role because environmental issues (and beyond) would be seen as a vested joint interest, as is the case in mitigating ethnic and racial suspicion with the newly arrived Chinese laborers in Africa (Campbell 2008). Early on in the development of the African Model Law (early 1990s), it mostly dealt with only the question of access and benefit-sharing; however, later in the 1990s, it included provisions on plant breeders’ rights as well, because such rights “represent the most important entry point into control over local genetic resources” (Zerbe 2007:110). So, what would such crucial rights have to do with African NGOs and hydroelectric dams?

In the context of the African Model Law, farmers as plant breeders might mean that African NGOs in their environmental efforts could partner with local farmers as a way to stave off (or at least mitigate) the negative impacts of acres of arable land needed for dam construction. The African NGOs and farmers could tout sustainable development in the midst of increasing globalization. More broadly, discussions regarding intellectual property rights in biodiversity, as well as the “no patents on life” campaign advocated by others (e.g., GRAIN) recently, represent serious challenges for African NGOs. One of the implications of the “no patents on life” campaign essentially means that hydroelectric dam development carries land ownership by the Chinese hydroelectric dam company and thus by default threatens life (natural plant production and human life). While such measures may appear innocuous, they actually have a negative impact on nurturing the political process (thus civil society) in already tenuous democracies. As African NGOs consider collaborating with international NGOs, however, perhaps they can minimize such negative externalities while fostering the political process and can maximize societal welfare more broadly. In other words, how can African NGOs facilitate Chinese hydroelectric dam production while helping to minimize the negative externalities and nurturing the political process to maximize societal welfare?

## **AFRICA’S ECONOMIC MODEL**

Contrary to W.W. Rostow’s (1960) linear Western path of five stages to economic growth, most of Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, has remained in the first stage (traditional or agrarian society). Thus, this stage presents enormous tasks for African NGOs to not only minimize the negative impacts of the hydroelectric dams but also cultivate the political process. Obviously, a few urban centers have moved beyond the primordial stage (of economic growth and governance), including Johannesburg, Harare, and Nairobi. Sub-Saharan Africa has seen its ratio of trade to GDP (gross domestic product) either remain flat or decline. Thus, for many of these countries, the problem is not their impoverishment on account of globalization but rather being excluded from globalization (Lindert and Williamson 2003). Moreover, Western models (e.g., Rostow’s) of economic development (domestic economic liberalization policies, increased free trade, FDI) perpetuated not by anti-state institutional policy choices but rather by “strong man” (dictatorial) rule has exacerbated the primordial stage of economic growth. In Sub-Saharan Africa, a “developing” model of economic growth (including structural adjustment programs, or SAPs; primitive accumulation of native African peasant farmers; defensive modernization to protect certain precious commodities like water) can be stimulated by state institutional policy choices to augment political liberalization.

African NGOs nurture the political processes (in the midst of the negative externalities of Chinese dam production) in Uganda and Zambia by exercising influence in the areas of land and

water rights. For example, the Ugandan constitution was amended in 1995, and Article 78 (Fifth Schedule), Section 3 has a consequential impact on the NGOs. In part, the article (de facto) provides an opportunity for Ugandan NGOs, working in tandem with regional governmental officials, to influence public policy in the area of land and water issues, which are undoubtedly related to dam construction. Moreover, under the auspices of the Committees of the Regional Assembly, subsections (f) and (g) specifically refer to cultural or primordial (traditional) clan lands and sites. Furthermore, under the patronage of the regional government, subsection (i) specifically discusses the issue of water and goes on to discuss “coordination and monitoring of land use in the region.” Thus, in this sense, Rostow’s model, or perhaps most models of Western economic development, may be antithetical to Uganda (and perhaps much of Sub-Saharan Africa). The Ugandan constitutional measures focus on social rights (e.g., land and water), whereas Western models of economic development tend to focus more on macro-notions of growth, including technological competitiveness and individualistic opportunities. Consequently, Ugandan NGOs (and, more broadly, African NGOs) have the ability to influence public policies not only at the national level but also at the regional and local levels, which is where most citizenry will feel the impact of the political process.

The Zambian constitution of 1996 (which amended the 1973 and 1991 constitutions) allows for traditional chiefs in the policy-making process, which opens the door for Zambian NGOs to play a role in the political process. Such a scenario may ignite ethnic- and religious-prone politics in an already tenuous democracy, but Zambian NGOs at least may have an ally outside of the mainstream political processes of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government in Zambia. Part XIII (Article 127) of the Zambian constitution notes that “the Institution of Chief is (1) Subject to the provisions of this Constitution, the Institution of Chief shall exist in any area of Zambia in accordance with the culture, customs and traditions or wishes and aspirations of the people to whom it applies. (2) In any community, where the issue of a Chief has not been resolved, the issue shall be resolved by the community concerned using a method prescribed by an Act of Parliament.” Moreover, Article 129 (Chief Not to Be Partisan) states, “A person shall not, while remaining a Chief, join or participate in partisan politics.” Thus, there is a type of checks and balances on the possible whims of the ethnic- and religious-prone politics of the institution of chiefs. In the next section, I consider types of African NGO involvement in Chinese-built hydroelectric facilities and operationalize levels of involvement with notions of minimal, medium, and high.

### **OPERATIONALIZING MINIMAL, MEDIUM, AND HIGH LEVELS OF AFRICAN NGO INVOLVEMENT**

The following section represents a sample of the levels of NGO involvement in hydroelectric dam processes in Africa. The particular cases are illustrative and thus mirror the levels (minimal, medium, and high) of involvement throughout the continent. An operational definition of the various levels is as follows: By minimal involvement, NGOs are relegated to observer status regarding discussions between Chinese companies and national/local government authorities, especially in non-pluralistic governing systems such as the Sudan, whereas medium involvement means that certain criteria must be included in any discussions related to hydroelectric dam construction—criteria such as forming policy and adequately addressing issues of minimizing residential and crop displacements—and possible monetary compensation (although Chinese companies typically have not met this criteria). Lastly, high involvement

means ongoing dialogue with Chinese multinational corporations and (possible) profit-sharing with the impacted local communities.

## **UGANDA**

The case of Uganda represents a high level of NGO activism. Why is NGO activism relatively high in Uganda? The National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) of Uganda ([www.nape.or.ug](http://www.nape.or.ug)) has been at the forefront of nurturing a culture of challenging the status quo or business-as-usual mantra as it relates to dam construction. NAPE also has a lobbying magazine to help get its message out to the public, not just domestically but also internationally. Since the NGO's founding in 1997, it has been at the vanguard of energy and environmental governance, water resources management, forest and wetlands management, human rights and justice, and chemicals management. Not only have NAPE's ongoing environmental impact assessments (EIA) challenged the Ugandan government to respond and be more proactive in mitigating ever-present environmental concerns brought on by hydroelectric dams, but NAPE has also challenged the World Bank for its involvement in dam construction. Moreover, a recent report highlights the level of high commitment on the part of NAPE and other civil-society actors to hold the Ugandan government accountable. For example,

The National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE), together with other Civil Society Organizations in Uganda working on environment and energy issues has developed a civil society geothermal guide for Uganda. Uganda is endowed with a rich geothermal potential mainly located in the rift valley parts of the country. Preliminary studies on the resource indicated that the country's geothermal potential could be as high as 450 MW or even more. Today, the energy consumption pattern in Uganda is estimated to be 90% of biomass-based energy, 5% of petroleum products and about 6% of electricity however, only about 2% of the rural population have access to electricity. The high dependence on biomass energy has resulted in an estimated annual wood consumption of about 20 million tons. This threatens the sustainable utilization of the country's forest resources. On the other hand, high consumption of imported fossil fuels is responsible for taking a considerable percentage of the country's already low per capita income. By the year 2002, an estimated 430,000 tons of fossil fuels were being consumed in Uganda per annum but has continued to grow steadily all through the years. Despite this high potential, harnessing of the resource in the country is yet to be realized. Although government has for some time expressed interest of developing it, several decades have gone by without the commitment being translated into reality. There are many explanations for the slow progress and these include: lack of political will, the presumed high cost for geothermal

development in relation to large dam-based hydropower and environmental concerns. (Geoffrey 2010)

## ZAMBIA

The Republic of Zambia represents some (medium) level of NGO involvement in daily affairs, including activism in dam construction and policy-formation. Moreover, Zambia's Interim Report (chapter 14) of the Mung'omba Constitutional Review Commission (CRC) notes

the progression of the growth of NGOs in this country, as we came out of one-party state to multi-partyism. This has meant moving from early "social welfare" groups (e.g., Red Cross, Rotary Club), to "development" groups (e.g., those focusing on issues such as environment, rural development, gender), to "governance" groups (e.g., those mobilizing people around issues such as human rights, elections, corruption).

Additionally, the Bill of Rights section of the 1996 Zambian constitution explicitly states that civil society will be protected. Zambian-based NGOs have been adamant about protecting residents and have been outspoken about adequate rehabilitation in the affected communities. As promising as those NGO efforts appear, however, the activism has been tempered by the hopes of the Zambian government that dam construction will ultimately increase its citizens' overall well-being.

Lastly, the Table 1 represents other hydroelectric dams currently being financed by the government of China and/or Chinese corporations as "tools" or "engines" to *modernize* Africa but perhaps ultimately astools to further China's economic development.

**Table 1. Key African Dams and NGO Involvement**

Sudan (Merowe Dam)	Minimal NGO involvement
Zambia (Lower Kafue Gorge Dam)	Medium NGO involvement
Ethiopia (Tekeze Dam)	Minimal NGO involvement
Mozambique (Mphanda Nkuwa Dam)	High NGO involvement
Nigeria (Mambila Dam)	High NGO involvement
Ghana (Bui Dam)	Medium NGO involvement
Democratic Republic of the Congo (Imboulou Dam)	Minimal NGO involvement
Gabon (Belinga Dam)	Minimal NGO involvement
Zimbabwe (Kariba Dam)	Medium NGO involvement
Kenya (Gibe 3 Dam)	High NGO involvement
Uganda (Bujagali Dam)	High NGO involvement

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH



Economic development continues to be a hot topic in Africa, especially in the Sub-Saharan region. Energy development in the form of hydropower can be the catalyst to spur economic development; the question becomes, at what cost or at whose expense (e.g., the poor rural communities)? Moreover, what role will (and should) civil-society actors like NGOs play in Africa's energy future? Coupled with external forces and actors like the World Bank, vigorous Chinese investors, and the Chinese government, civil society's tasks are even more challenging. As Hathaway and Pottinger (2009:171) point out, "This momentum hinders the ability of civil society to question the choices being made for Africa's energy future." As the above table illustrates, there is a mixed level of NGO involvement in hydropower economic development in Africa. It appears that minimal involvement is most evident in relatively unstable politically and economically fragile African states. ["Fragile" in this article is characterized by a "window of opportunity . . . for redemption and strengthening if the right diagnosis is made and appropriate medicines are administered" (Osaghae 2007:697).] This is important because, as the vast majority of civil-society and development literature suggests, civil-society actors flourish most in stable countries with mature institutions of governance.

Furthermore, as we have seen, autonomy and independence are relative (i.e., the ability of civil-society actors in Africa to make a genuine difference and have influence from start to finish in affected communities), especially when we compare them to the Western paradigm of NGO-state relations. Thus, as globalization and economic growth continue to increase, the richness of Africa's political liberalization efforts at the village and local levels may continue to be the catalyst for nurturing civil rights/liberties. Contrary to a Western-style federalist model whereby power is divided among branches of government at the national, state, or regional and local levels, power is being garnered and sustained at the grassroots levels in Africa, and perhaps African NGOs may be at the vanguard.

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