Workshop Report

Damned by Dams: Artefacts of Modernization and Conflicts of Transformation

Duisburg, 26-27 October 2017

Workshop organized by:
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Since their inception, large-scale hydroelectric dams have been controversially debated. On the one hand, they represent ideas of climate change mitigation, low-carbon energy production and economic development. On the other hand, they have continuously been at the centre of various political, social and cultural conflicts. As such, dams are a matter of opposites: They are treated as both a solution and a problem, represent the future and the past, show the relationship between the centre and the periphery, and stand for both creation and destruction.

The workshop held on the 26th and 27th October 2017 focussed on issues related to conflicts and cooperation in hydroelectric dam projects. In 16 presentations discussing 15 different dam projects in nine countries on five continents, an international and interdisciplinary cast of participants showed a wide range of perspectives on the matter at hand.

Focussing on historical examples of dam building projects in Spain, Egypt and India, Benjamin Brendel (University of Gießen), Magnus T. Bernhardsson (Williams College) and Aditya Ramesh (SOAS, University of London) showed how competing visions of the future can be and have been projected into dam construction. The discussion that followed addressed the question whether colonies were used as a test ground for dam building experiments. A special emphasis lay on the presentation and marketing of dam projects and showed that dams are often connected to the use of symbolism and to an appropriation of language. The topic of discourse strategies and narratives was further pursued by Millie Creighton (University of British Columbia), Wondwosen Seide (University of Lund) and Susan M. Manning (Dalhousie University). While Creighton’s presentation concentrated on the marketing of dams in Japan, Wondwosen Seide analysed the media coverage about dams in Egypt and Ethiopia. Finally, Susan Manning identified six different discourses that are present among the opponents and supporters of the Lower Churchill Hydroelectric Project in Canada.

Simon Yin Shuxi (Hefei University of Technology) and Dmitry Foryy (University of Siegen) shifted the focus from national political aspirations to geopolitical interests in dam-building. While Shuxi discussed the Mekong River that connects China to the countries of Southeast Asia, Foryy’s presentation gave insights into the consequences of several dam projects around Lake Baikal which are supposed to ensure Mongolia’s energy independence from Russia. Both presentations showed that dam projects hardly ever impact only one nation but usually have transboundary implications.
The complexity of relationships around dam projects was further explored in the next panel which showed that beside the interaction between states there are also non-state actors on various levels involved in the approval of or resistance against dams. Vincent Lagendijk (Maastricht University) showed how different national and transnational entities interacted during the construction of the Nam Ngum Dam in Laos. Rhodante Ahlers' (SOMO/Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations) argument that human energy needs are not the key reason for building dams sparked an especially lively debate. Rather, she argued, investments in infrastructure projects such as dams guarantee high profits for investors. The role of risk insurance companies in the case of the Belo Monte dam in Brazil was analysed by Johanna Gördemann and Christian Scheper (both University of Duisburg-Essen). Rodrigo José da Costa Sales (AIDA/ Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense) enriched the debate by bringing in a legal practitioner’s perspective on this controversial project in Brazil. The project has been accompanied by massive protests including 60 pending legal actions. Nevertheless, the construction does continue and has so far led to a sanitary crisis through the contamination of ground water, extensive land flooding and widespread fish kill. Paula Arruda (Pará Federal University) and Ilan Presser, a Federal Judge in the Brazilian state of Pará, reflected on human rights violations and the rights of indigenous people that were violated in the case of Belo Monte. The possibilities and preconditions for effective social mobilization against dam-building were discussed by Christine Unrau (Centre for Global Cooperation Research), Andrea Schapper and Sarah Killoh (both University of Stirling) using three examples from Brazil, Ethiopia and Panama.

Overall, the workshop showed that dams are projections of a much encompassing (social) phenomenon and manifestations of bigger ideas. And the implementation of these ideas can lead to social exclusion. Dam-building is driven by very strong financial motivations and long-term narratives highlighting economic growth and development. Furthermore, the workshop illustrated that the question of dams’ location is vital. Hydroelectric dams are often built in rather remote areas which are often the home of those population groups who have already been marginalized in society, who are often less well educated and are expected to dispose of fewer capacities to organize protest. This choice of off-centre locations is an important measure to shift the attention away from the projects and prevent protest. However, there is a steady presence of resistance when it comes to dam-building.

Report written by Eva Marie Trösser