

Public release date: 13-Sep-2006

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Mega-dams back on the agenda

The World Bank is showing a growing enthusiasm for funding new large dams, especially in Africa. Yet according to a leading ecologist at an organisation part-funded by the bank, this policy threatens to drive parts of the world back into poverty.

Max Finlayson of the International Water Management Institute told the 2006 International Riversymposium conference, held in Brisbane, Queensland, last week that many large dams exacerbate poverty by damaging the fisheries and wetlands on which the poorest people depend most. "A quarter of the world lives in river basins where the water is already fully or over-allocated," Finlayson adds. New developments in these areas "will only take water from some users and give it to others". He says investment should go instead into using water more efficiently.

The World Bank was an enthusiastic funder of large dams until the 1990s, when under pressure from anti-dam campaigners it backed away from high-profile projects. Now it is back in the dams business. The competing arguments mark the end of a fragile ceasefire between the bank and ecologists since the publication of a 2000 report produced jointly by the World Bank and the World Conservation Union. This said dams should be built only if they meet high ecological standards and have the support of people who will lose their homes, lands and livelihoods. Now the bank is being accused of going back to "business as usual".

The bank's senior water adviser, David Grey, defended the dam-funding policy. "Africa has only 20 to 25 per cent of the water storage capacity that it needs," he told the conference. Ethiopia and Kenya are far more vulnerable to droughts than rich nations because they lack water storage, he says. Drought in Kenya recently slashed GDP by 16 per cent, whereas no rich country has lost more than 1 per cent to such "climate shocks".

Comparing two river systems of similar size in arid lands, Grey points out that while the Murray-Darling river basin in Australia has dams capable of holding 500 days of river flow, the Indus in Pakistan has a storage capacity of only 40 days. Dams could stabilise developing economies and encourage further investment, he says. The debate took place as the host nation, Australia, is suffering a record drought. Water shortages have triggered proposals for large dams and pipelines to bring water from the undimmed rivers of the wet north. This is opposed by ecologists such as Carl Binning of the environmental group Greening Australia, who told the meeting that too much water is already being taken from rivers. He called for a nationwide project to restore rivers to their natural state, and suggested instead that cities should recycle their sewage.

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THIS ARTICLE APPEARS IN NEW SCIENTIST MAGAZINE ISSUE: 16 SEPTEMBER 2006

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