



Water Politics : Impacts on Disenfranchised Communities



Special Report
UNREPRESENTED NATIONS AND PEOPLES ORGANIZATION
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April 22, 2010



The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organization. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and unrecognized or occupied territories who have joined together to protect and promote their human and cultural rights, to preserve their environments, and to find nonviolent solutions to conflicts which affect them.

Although the aspirations of UNPO Members differ greatly, they are all united by one shared condition – they are not adequately represented at major international fora, such as the United Nations. As a consequence, their opportunity to participate on the international stage is significantly limited, as is their ability to access and draw upon the support of the global bodies mandated to defend their rights, protect their environments, and mitigate the effects of conflict.

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Human rights swirl around water; one facilitates the other. The worth of water in allowing individuals to determine their own destinies cannot be overestimated. At the same time, equitable access to this most precious of resources is unlikely for those marginalised communities unable to enforce political and social rights. As access to easily available water is rapidly becoming politically complex and economically costly, it is probable that the rights of vulnerable groups will be sacrificed.

A water supply of adequate quality and quantity is associated with a wide range of positive externalities; from increased enrolment in education, to bountiful crop production and the improved health of livestock. By the same measure, those who lack access to clean and plentiful water bear immense direct and indirect costs, from the time appropriated by distances travelled and queues waited, to effects on health through waterborne diseases. Education is often sacrificed if children must aid in the collection of water. As a household's water is traditionally seen as women's responsibility, it is likely to be female members who are cajoled into abandoning the opportunities and aspirations offered by education and employment. Access to waterways for fishing or trade also allows for livelihood opportunities and economic development.

The concerns of marginalised communities are, however, disregarded for a range of reasons: from traditions of exclusion along lines of caste, ethnicity and religion, to more dynamic economic and political considerations. With regard to supply, the needs of excluded people are not understood, appreciated or addressed; with regard to demand, they often have neither the capacity nor the political access to articulate their concerns. As the politics of water are rooted in institutional decision making and political choices, it is those individuals, communities and nations without political sway or legal entitlements who are unable to meet their water needs. It is the rights of these vulnerable communities which have often appeared secondary to the economic considerations of elites. Indigenous groups, often with autonomous forms of water management based in traditional mores and cultures, are particularly at risk. Dams, for example, are devastating for the lives and livelihoods of local communities and yet are habitually accompanied by inappropriate, indifferent and culturally-insensitive resettlement arrangements for those displaced.

For nations and states, the accessibility of water has similar implications for economic growth and rates of productivity as those of a household. Agricultural and industrial sectors are dependent upon continuous access to a consistent water supply. As with households, any barriers to this resource are more likely to be the consequence of political decision-making as it is of absolute shortages. The cartography of water makes political borders appear capricious. Waterways cut across nation and state boundaries calling for greater cooperation between the relevant parties. These relations are often, however, dictated by wider relations; historical antagonism and suspicion, for instance, are often replicated in water arrangements. Again, it is those without political and economic influence that are liable to obtain few rewards.

Water is a product of its context and can never be seen as separate. The politics of shared waterways are made more elaborate by the inherent asymmetry of power. The advantage is held by the upstream party; it is they who have priority on extractions; it is their externalities that flow downstream. As easily accessible water is becoming scarcer, it is like to become a bargaining chip between nations and states. Human rights would then be held hostage for political gain.

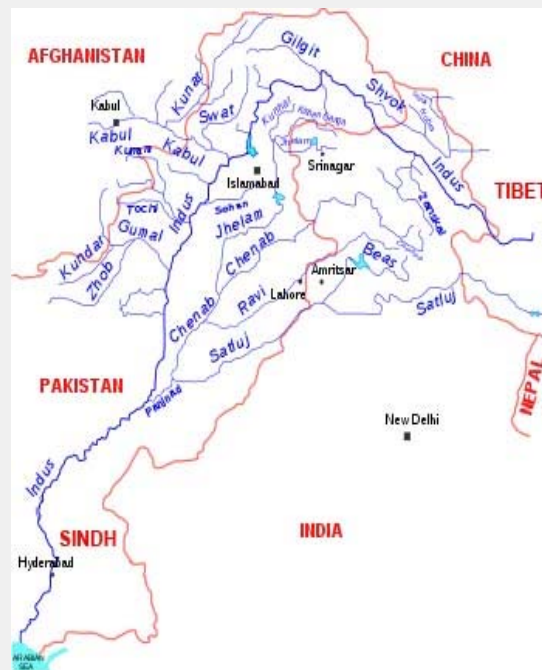


DAMS



The issue of dams has grown to be one of the most controversial human influenced developments facing the world's water sources. Proponents of dams have historically understood them as positive contributions; both to the status of agriculture through increased irrigation and renewable energy sources through hydroelectric power. However, recently dams have come under increasing attention for the negative impacts they have had on the environment and surrounding human populations. The damming of huge trans-national rivers is as much a power debate and form of repression as it is a method to improve the lives of individuals. This is especially true when more politically, economically, and socially powerful groups upstream take more than their fair share of water from those living downstream. Indigenous and underrepresented persons more often than not bear the worst of the damages that damming major rivers systems can cause through force displacement of their native lands by flooding, being deprived of a water and food source through the drying up of river beds, and pollution and ecological devastation to their natural environment.

INDUS RIVER



Originating in the Tibetan plateau in the vicinity of Lake Mansarovar, the Indus River runs a course through the Ladakh district of Jammu and Kashmir and then enters Northern Areas of Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan. It continues flowing in a southerly direction along the entire length of the country, to merge into the Arabian Sea near the port city of Karachi in Sindh province. Through The Peoples Republic of China and the government of Pakistan, the Indus river flow has been radically altered as water has been divided and diverted to fuel these nation's interests. In Pakistan alone the Indus River has become famous as the world's largest continuous man-made system of 61,000 km of canals and 105,000 water courses, irrigating 35 million acres of land. Despite proclamations by both the Pakistan and Chinese governments of the benefits that their damming projects can provide to their local populations, in reality many indigenous and unrecognised nations living alongside the Indus river suffer serious and devastating effects brought on by the forcible diversion of the river's natural flow.



Tibet

The Indus river has its beginning in the highlands of the Tibetan Plateau. It is here that a majority of important river systems in Asia have their headwaters. Tibet is strategically situated at the centre of Asia by bordering China in the east, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Burma in the south, and East-Turkestan in the north. Since the invasion by the People's Republic of China in 1950, Tibet has been under violent repressive control by the Chinese Government in which Tibet's people and resources are continuously abused for China's benefit. One such form of abuse is in the field of water management. Despite officially introducing more environmentally-friendly policies in recent years, China continues to flood Tibet with potentially destructive mega development projects, such as the building of massive hydroelectric dams. In the last eight years, the Chinese government has invested 2.9 billion dollars in building hydroelectric power stations and it is feared by experts that these may prove disastrous for Tibet (see Global Alliance on Water Security). Mainland China and all neighbouring countries depend on these life-sustaining rivers. Through the years, Tibetans have vehemently opposed many of the Chinese damming projects as they have forced Tibetans to relocate from their homes and permanently altered and destroyed their sacred rivers and means for water and food. Many peaceful protests by Tibetans against the dams have incited severe punishment by the Chinese police and Government as protestors have been fatally shot and imprisoned.

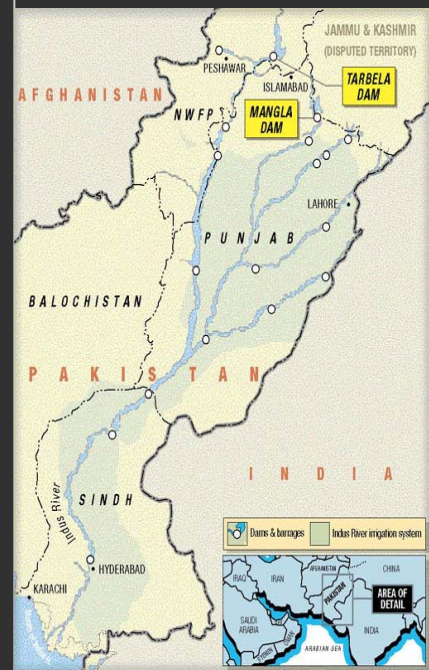


Gilgit Baltistan

After leaving the Tibetan Plateau the Indus River flows directly through Gilgit Baltistan, located in northern Pakistan, and is therefore contested by Pakistan, India and the inhabitants of indigenous communities. Pakistan's refusal to provide basic human rights and political representation to the peoples of Gilgit Baltistan has created a serious situation with regard to the management of the Indus river system. In an effort to provide further irrigation and water resources to the desert region of Punjab, Pakistan has undertaken massive damming and water diversion projects in Gilgit Baltistan without the approval of the local population. These so called "infrastructure developments have had devastating effects on the area's inhabitants. These include being forced from their homes, the destruction of cultural and sacred sites, and the loss of usable farmland and pasture.

Sindh

Through the Northern Areas of Pakistan the Indus river's natural flow leads it into the heart of Sindh, an unrecognized and heavily disputed territory in the southeastern portion of the country. Due to massive building of water retention and diversion canals by the Pakistani government to irrigate the Punjab desert, the peoples of Sindh have suffered severe droughts, the loss of usable farmland and fishing, along with forced evacuation of their homes and lands. The devastating ecological effects caused by the damming of the Indus river in Northern Areas of Pakistan has led to the extinction of the Indus River Dolphin and the loss of 850,000 acres of mangrove swamps. In addition to this, the non-release of river downstream has led to over 2.2 million acres of fertile land being devoured by the Thatta coastal belt and 1.2 million acres of farmland covered by sea water. Access to fresh water has also been a considerable problem for people of the Sindh region as the damming of the Indus River has led to the drying up of smaller fresh water river channels that once flowed into the area.



Location of dams on the Indus



FISHING RIGHTS

A variety of treaties and conventions determine which nation's vessels and citizens have the right to fish in national and international waters. The nature of these treaties means that conflicts can arise between countries, corporations and local fishermen over fishing rights. The increasing environmental concerns over dwindling fish populations adds another source of contention in determining who has the right to fish and how much fish they are allowed to capture. Indigenous groups are commonly caught in between these struggles for fishing rights as they are often underrepresented and ignored by powerful national and commercial interest groups. Many native communities have had their fishing rights revoked in order for the fishing industries to have a monopoly on the local fishing sources. Governments fail to recognize and protect indigenous populations' traditional fishing culture and often leave these groups out of discussions on how to manage their waterways. The damage done by governmental and capitalist gains in fishing has irreversibly altered traditional communities and has forced many to leave their families in search of other forms of subsistence.

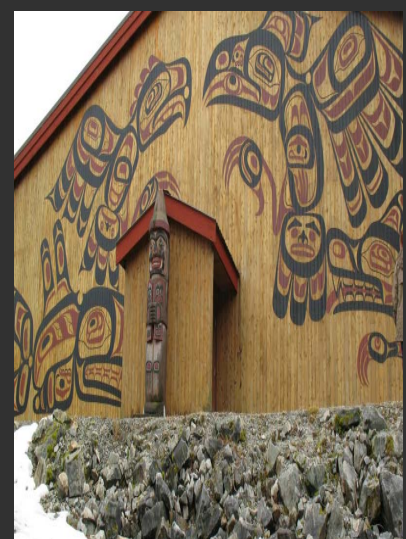


Tsimshian Nation

For centuries, the Tsimshian Nation has lived in small scattered communities spread out across what is today known as the Northern Coast of British Columbia (BC) and Southeast Alaska. Generation after generation of Tsimshian people have lived not just on the land, but with the land, making use of the abundant resources that flow from the rivers, reside within the earth and grow under forest canopies. However, the symbiotic relationship between the earth and the 10,000 strong Tsimshian community is increasingly threatened with every passing day. Now plentiful fish stocks are steadily depleting and resource ownership is an opaque subject. But it is perhaps the stark disconnect between traditional and contemporary lifestyles that is having the most severe impact. The problems that ensue by imposing unfamiliar bureaucratic frameworks onto traditional Tsimshian lifestyles leads to what Teresa Ryan, scientist and member of the Gitlan Tribe of the Tsimshian Nation, describes as "a bit of a mess right now".

Access to land and resources that have traditionally been at Tsimshian fingertips is a moot subject. State-imposed regulations and restrictions have debilitated Tsimshian communities. Longstanding freedom to access land resources and fish stocks has been removed by government regulations such as the 1871 Fisheries Act which gave the Crown authority to control the entire fishing industry.

Attempts have been made to appease those with an interest in accessing the resources. Negotiation between British Columbia, Canada and the First Nations initiated through the British Columbia Treaty Process was intended to produce a tripartite agreement on what the Crown refers to as "land claims". The process started in 1992 and was expected to run for no more than five years. However, the last 18 years have yielded not a single concrete conclusion in Tsimshian territory and has fostered intense internal conflict. As a result of such a long drawn-out process, the various First Nations have accumulated an exorbitant amount of debt with substantial lost opportunities.



Solid financial commitment from the state to assist the different communities has generally been weak and inconsistent. Whilst the 175 million dollars made available for the Pacific Commercial Integrated Fisheries Initiative, a 5-year pilot programme intended to increase Aboriginal opportunities in BC for commercial fisheries access through co-management, accountability and capacity building appears generous, it has not been substantial enough to generate any major improvements. The programme has focused on communal commercial fishing where groups are currently struggling without adequate support resources and compounded by declining fish stocks. Commercial fisheries access requires commercial type vessels and maintenance, operations that are expensive and management is currently onerous and complex. The 175 million dollar investment has been a mere drop in the ocean.

Governance of resource management needs improvement to advance Aboriginal engagement. Opportunities for improvement exist such as improving relationships, by combining scientific knowledge and aboriginal knowledge to encourage more holistic awareness of resources and complex environments, and strategically investing in institutional capacity.

The World Bank reports that while the world's population has more than tripled, the usage of water has increased sixfold. The changing of river flows through excessive damming and the rising amount of water pollution in ground water, lakes and rivers has created a significant crisis in access to critical fresh and clean water. While the UN and the World Bank have stated that access to water is a fundamental human right, many indigenous and underrepresented populations are continuously deterred from water sources through national and international regulations. For many indigenous groups, their culture and social community have been radically altered as restricted water access has limited traditional agriculture and herding lifestyles. As these populations suffer under oppressive and misguided water and land regulations, the local environment is devastated through increased industrial and commercial development.

Maasai

The Maasai people are an indigenous ethnic group in Africa who live in Kenya and northern Tanzania and inhabit land which spans from Lake Turkana to Ngorongoro. Traditionally the Maasai are nomadic cattle herders who live in small camps, moving frequently in the constant search for water and good grazing lands. The young Maasai men tend the herds and live in small camps, moving frequently in the constant search for water and good grazing lands. They often travel into towns and cities to purchase goods and supplies and to sell their cattle at regional markets. However, as both government and private interests have appropriated land that the Maasai need for pasture - often in the name of conservation, the reduction in available grazing land has brought increasing poverty to the Maasai pastoralists.



ACCESS TO WATER

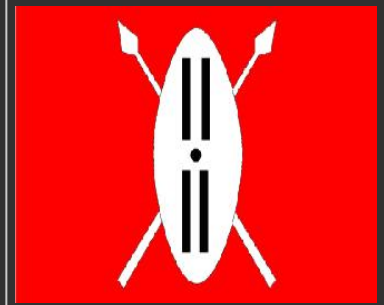


The Sekenani village in the Massai Mara was apportioned for the construction of a private tourist resort and communities lost access to two major water sources. and instead are left to suffer the consequences.

The loss of land has led to a severe water scarcity as the Maasai are no longer allowed to travel with their herds to fresh drinking water sources and instead are forced to watch their cattle die from dehydration and starvation. In addition, the Maasai are forced to compete with the local wildlife for water and food. In many cases, the lions that are protected in the national parks that surround Maasai grazing lands stray away from them and kill Maasai cattle. Commercial agricultural expansion has caused severe environmental devastation in the area and while ecological and environmental conservation and tourism groups try to protect the local flora and fauna, the Maasai are always sidelined from this conversation

Throughout time sea ports have played a fundamental role in human history by acting as a crossroads for social exchange, trade, and governmental power. The impacts of sea ports have been wide ranging as they have brought benefits of intercultural exchange and development, at the same time they are associated with detrimental offshoots of providing the base for human enslavement, environmental destruction and military prowess. Often ports are framed in a positive light as signs of economic growth and sustainability for the region, however in many instances their benefits are misappropriated to larger commercial and military interests instead of the local population. In the age of globalization the construction and usage of ports has become increasingly more complicated as different governmental and commercial bodies play an active role in their development and usage. Nowadays the construction and management of sea ports are no longer confined to the interest of the state, but has broader implications worldwide for other countries. More often than not indigenous populations who live and survive on the land upon which these ports are being built are excluded from the decision making process and are given little ground to provide their opinions, nor input their far reaching ancestral knowledge of the land and local context.

The self-serving goals that governments and corporations have had in the development of ports has led to gross devastations of the natural and social environment. Indigenous groups suffer severe pressure and loss as their lands and coastal areas are used only for the commercial and military gains of larger governing bodies. The impacts of high tariffs on exporting and importing goods, as well as unfair trade practices, has made it so that the native population cannot compete and survive in the market. In addition to this, the pollution and oil runoff caused by incoming large sea vessels has devastated local fish and wildlife, which in turn has created a severe loss of economic support for local fishermen and villagers. The damage done by sea ports is often irreversible and the impact is far reaching as whole civilizations are radically transformed by these developments in their native lands. Unless indigenous groups are allowed an equal say in the management of ports, the devastation of their traditional livelihoods and environment will continue.



Maasai Flag

PORTS



BALUCHISTAN AND GWADAR PORT

Balochistan is the largest province in Pakistan, constituting approximately 43% of the total geographical area of Pakistan. Covering a sizable portion of the country, it is also the poorest region in Pakistan. Although the area is rich in resources, the indigenous tribal groups in Balochistan have suffered from a lack of international protection and recognition. Due to religious and ethnic discrimination by the Pakistan government, the Baloch people are treated as second class citizens and receive very little domestic representation in the national government. They have been systematically deprived from practicing their cultural beliefs and traditions, as well as accessing natural resources such as land and water. Violence and terror has been routinely employed by the Pakistan government to silence the people of Balochistan in their quest to gain greater civic representation and self determination.

A situation that has been particularly traumatic for the Baloch people has been the internationally led building of the Gwadar Deep Sea Port on the apex of the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf. According to the BBC, 30 percent of the world's oil passes through these large bodies of water, making the Gwadar Port a strategic location for trade and military power. Serving as a hub of energy and a trade corridor into China and the Central Asian republics, the Gwadar port has earned the nickname as the Chinese outpost in the Arabian Sea. Although China has invested heavily into the building of the commercial and military port and its accompanied railway through Pakistan and Afghanistan, they have done so without taking into consideration the impact these developments have had on the native population. Hundreds of acres of inland and coastal areas have been used by the Pakistan government in the construction of the Gwadar port and its railways without consulting the Baloch.

While the port rests on their native lands, the Baloch people do not receive any compensation for the loss of their natural resources and are denied by the Pakistan government any legal say in how the money coming in from the port will be managed and distributed. The Pakistan government has refused to hand over authority of the port to the Baloch people and instead has used military violence and imprisonment to silence them. Recently, Baloch parliamentarians have protested the appointments of non-local officials by the Gwadar Port Authority despite having several senior Baloch ministers, however, their arguments have gone unanswered. Lastly, the environmental damages caused by pollution runoff from the sea vessels and oil shipments has created further devastation to traditional fishing villages around the coast and many Baloch families have been forced to leave their communities in search of other means of support for their families.



WATER DIVERSION



AHWAZI AND THE DIVERSION OF THE KAROON RIVER

Al-Ahwaz, also known as Arabistan or Khuzestan, is situated in the south-western part of Iran. Nearly 90% of Iran's oil originates from Al-Ahwaz, due to its location at the tip of the Gulf and the Shat al-Arab waterway. However, despite the rich oil reserves, the indigenous population of the area, known as the Ahwazis, are marginalized by the Iranian government and have faced increasingly harsh treatment. Ahwazi Arabs have had their lands taken away by the Iranian government and given to ethnic Persians. The Ahwazis have not received any compensation for the loss of their lands and instead have been forced to move into shanty towns in the outskirts of the regional capital, Ahwaz.



One of the greatest threats to the Ahwazi people have been the diversion of the Karoon River by the Iranian government. The diversion project will hit the province's Arab majority hard, exacerbating endemic poverty in the region by reducing water availability. The region also contains extensive marshes and rivers that support endangered species of fish as well as migratory birds. In January 2006, local members of parliament threatened to resign their seats in protest at the diversion of the Karoon. They claimed that it would seriously undermine water security and the livelihoods of many farmers in the Arab-majority province. In December 2005, some Khuzestan MPs launched a petition to impeach Energy Minister Parviz Fatah over the project.

Nevertheless, in June 2007, Fatah rejected the United Nations Environment Program's (UNEP) concerns over the environmental impact of the government's Karoon River diversion project, despite claims that it will create an environmental disaster on the scale of the Aral Sea in Central Asia. According to local media reports, Fatah said that the government would instead step up its river diversion program, claiming that it "will not damage any part of the country and will not reduce the quota of water of any province." He said that Khuzestan would benefit from hydroelectric power stations that form part of the river diversion project.

According to the UNEP, the Hor al-Azeem marsh has transformed from one of the biggest marshes in the Middle East to a barren wasteland with soil that is too salty to sustain any plants. The marsh lies at the mouth of the Karkeh River on the Iran-Iraq border and also receives water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Iran's current project of transferring the waters of the Karoun River to decertified Iranian provinces will have major consequences for the marshland, according to environmental activists. Ahwazi Arabs in Khuzestan already suffer from poor health, low life expectancy, high rates of unemployment and pollution from the oil and petrochemical industries. The diversion of the Karoun would spell disaster for their livelihoods and well-being.



"I am convinced that all we need to do to bring an overwhelming insistence of the new generation that we stem the tide of environmental disaster is to present the facts clearly and dramatically."

U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson, October 8, 1969



The launch of this UNPO Special report coincides with the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, celebrated on 22nd April to inspire awareness, promote conservation and appreciation of the environment. Since U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin announced his idea for a nationwide educational day, Earth Day has developed into a global movement uniting a vast array of individuals and organisations by the common aims of challenging behaviour and channeling quantifiable action on environmental issues.

Over 20 million people participated in the inaugural Earth Day and it gained momentum in the 1970s, as thousands of students demonstrated from coast-to-coast across the US. The campaign has since moved from a tributary into a fast-flowing river, now mobilizing 200 million people in 141 countries.

While Senator Nelson stated that Earth Day ‘worked’ because of the response at the grassroots level – this report has highlighted how when it comes to worldwide environmental policy, this is precisely where inputs to decision making procedures are lacking. It is fundamental that when considering Earth Day as a forum to respond to widespread environmental degradation, the voices of disenfranchised communities who are so often silenced are not drowned out. For the marginalized groups introduced in this report, exercising even the most basic of rights to input into decisions which affect them are so often denied. In some cases people are prohibited from participating in peaceful demonstrations, just like those which made Earth Day to grow.

Water covers 71% of the Earth’s surface and conservation issues span from global climate change to basic access to drinking water. In a unique approach, this report focuses on the perspective of politicization of water as tool of governments; studying how power relations, historic circumstances and water scarcity have influenced the control of the most basic of human needs.

UNPO is committed to commemorating Earth Day to highlight issues affecting their members worldwide where, more often than not, the inherent relationship between environment and livelihood is neglected. It might just be a drop in the ocean, but it is by inspiring debate and stimulating learning that this publication aims to guide the spotlight towards those environments not often spoken about or even heard of.



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For Further Information:

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BALOCHISTAN NATIONAL PARTY: <http://www.balochistannationalparty.org>
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THE WORLD SINDHI INSTITUTE: <http://www.worldsindhi.org/>
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