

# Shedding light on Africa

Grand plan could generate 40 000MW of electricity, but critics worry that environmental and developmental issues could be ignored

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With up to \$80-billion in potential investment on the Congo River and the prospect of producing enough clean energy to light up the whole of Africa, the Grand Inga project in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is as big as its name suggests.

The plan, to build the world's largest hydropower facility, is being driven by the continent's biggest power utility Eskom, together with the power utilities of Botswana, Angola, Namibia and the DRC.

Together they have formed the Western Corridor Project (Westcor), which aims to develop Inga III and the Grand Inga dams on the Congo River. The project is part of a greater vision to develop a power grid across the continent by 2010 to stimulate industrial development in Africa.

It is a grand project, until one realises that only 6% of the DRC's population has access to electricity from earlier phases of the project, which have been operational since the 1970s. "Some NGOs are advocating that effu-



The Inga hydro electric dam supplies only 6% of the Democratic Republic of Congo's power. Photograph: AP

ture projects are developed, the first priority should be to increase the rate of access to electricity to 60% of DRC's population," argues Terri Hathaway, in the *World Rivers Review*.

This may prove difficult because of the amounts of money that are going to be poured into the project. Tim Kingston, communications manager at International Rivers Network, said: "Concerns are growing that

foreign and industrial interests will gain vast economic benefits from this mega-project, taking attention away from the development needs of Africa's poor majority."

Kingston added: "Despite its priority position and high profile, very little about the project has been revealed and virtually no engagement of civil society has been undertaken."

Upon completion the Grand Inga

project will produce up to 40 000MW of electricity, twice the amount generated by the Three Gorges Dam in China. The first development phase will be the Inga III Dam, which is considered a stepping stone to Grand Inga. In addition to construction of the Grand Inga Dam, an estimated \$550-million rehabilitation of the existing Inga I and Inga II dams is planned. The two dams have been operating at less than half their capacity, largely because of mismanagement, war and siltation.

An energy consultant said the possibilities the project offers are immense. He said the completed project would provide access to cheap energy at a cost of about \$0,01 per kWh, significantly cheaper than the \$0,04 per kWh charged by thermal power stations or the \$0,12 for a gas powered plant. "The initial capital costs are high, even higher than that of a thermal power station," he said, adding, "it would take many years to build, up to a decade."

The Inga project is an engineer's dream. The Congo River is the only river that has a significant slope in its lower course, making it a natural site for a hydroelectric plant. It drops in height by about 100m over 15km and is a potential source of up to 370-billion kWh a year.

But environmental activists the *Mail & Guardian* spoke to said it is premature to say what the effect of the greater Inga project will be, as an

environmental impact assessment has not yet been done. A 2002 report by the Congo River Environment and Development Project argues that the "damming of the entire river [is the] greatest future threat to the extraordinary biodiversity of the region ... [as the] Grand Inga Dam would block the entire river".

"While the landscape has already changed, the aquatic ecosystem still harbours an extraordinary richness of fish," the report says. It recommends that "discussions ... take place over the next several years [between] a qualified hydrologist and the government to determine ways to build or modify the dam to best protect the region's flood cycle and [to] maintain some of the rapid areas".

Richard Worthington, the coordinator for Earthlife Africa's sustainable energy and climate change project said the hydro-energy resource "could be exploited in a manner that does more good than evil, particularly if substance is given to promises of a 'long-value chain', which should include energy services for local people." However, he was cautious, pointing out that "the challenge would be to ensure that the quest for high output and maximum profit does not turn this around, which is particularly challenging in an area with high risk, that translates into a requirement for higher returns to investors".

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