

## **An NGO Perspective on the Ilisu Dam: Vested Interests and Politics**

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Turkey's power consumption is less than one sixth of the OECD average per capita, and is growing rapidly. Does this trend warrant the construction of dams like Ilisu regardless of their cost? NGOs do not believe so. At a closer look, Ilisu illustrates the serious social, environmental, political and financial problems which beset many large dams. NGOs are particularly concerned about the following features:

### **NGO concerns**

**Social impacts:** In South-East Anatolia, human rights are routinely violated, and thousands of villages have been destroyed by the military. It is naive to expect successful resettlement schemes in this context. Not surprisingly, earlier dam projects in the region have an abysmal record of rehabilitation. According to official surveys, 67-89 % of the people affected by these dams would like to go back to their original villages.

The project authorities estimate that Ilisu will displace 12-15,000 people. They discount thousands of people who have been evicted from their villages by the military, but intend to return home after the civil war. They disregard thousands of others who will not be displaced but will lose land. A report commissioned by the British government estimates that in total, the Ilisu reservoir will negatively affect more than 36,000 people. The creditor governments have pledged to comply with World Bank standards when financing Ilisu. Yet so far, these standards have been violated time and again during project preparation. As the confusing figures indicate, the affected people have never been properly identified. Even the local authorities have only been officially informed about the project in December 1999. No consultations regarding resettlement options or environmental impacts have ever taken place.

*Environmental impacts:* As the Ilisu consortium admits, the new reservoir will bring waterborne diseases like malaria to the region. The dam will also cut off the downstream areas from the seasonal floods on which their ecosystems and agriculture depend. Wastewater

treatment facilities may prevent the reservoir from turning into a toxic pond. They will however not prevent a shortage of oxygen, a drop of the groundwater level, the interruption of the sediment flow and the erosion of the riverbed in the downstream area.

*Regional tensions:* Turkey is well-known for its aggressive water policies. "Neither Syria nor Iraq can lay claim to Turkey's rivers any more than Ankara could claim their oil", President Demirel stated bluntly at the opening of the Ataturk dam in 1992. And further: "This is a matter of sovereignty. We have the right to do anything we like." Consequently, Turkey was one of only three countries which opposed the Convention on the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses at the UN General Assembly in 1997. In violation of international law and of the pending Convention, Ankara has indeed made use of its purported "right" and has reduced the regional waterflows in periods of crisis since 1991.

Project proponents point out that more than half of Iraq's Tigris water is from tributaries which are not affected by Ilisu. Yet Turkey is now damming some of these other tributaries as well. While Ilisu is not an irrigation project, it does increase Ankara's clout to interrupt the river flow, and thus to blackmail the other riparian countries. Furthermore, the deterioration of the water quality has negative impacts on the downstream countries even under normal operating conditions. In spite of these impacts, Turkey refuses to inform or consult its neighbors about the construction of the Ilisu dam, and thus violates bilateral treaties and international customary law. As the protests from Syria and the Arab League demonstrate, the project is fueling regional tensions already now.

*Economic viability:* The Ilisu contract has never been up for public tender. An attempt by the Turkish government to implement the project on a BOT basis failed. In November 1998, the Swiss government guaranteed contracts for the so-called Ankara gas power project. At a cost of \$380,000/Megawatt, this project costs less than a third of the Ilisu dam, which the Swiss government considered on the very same day. Rehabilitating Turkey's notoriously inefficient transmission system would be even more cost-efficient. These figures demonstrate that Ilisu does not make economic sense, and that more sustainable - and emission-free - alternatives are available. Ilisu is not a rational answer to Turkey's energy needs. It rather seems to be motivated by the strategic interests of the government in South-East Anatolia, and by the vested interests of the dam-building industry.

## **International Standards - For Real or For Alibi?**

As it stands now, Ilisu violates international law and contradicts five World Bank policies on 18 accounts. The World Bank has refrained from financing dam projects in South-East Anatolia since the mid-1980s. In 1999, it even turned down a request from the Swiss government to assist in the preparation of a rehabilitation action plan for Ilisu. The Turkish government in turn refused permission to the World Commission on Dams to independently evaluate the dams on the Tigris and Euphrates. In March 2000, the Trade and Industry Select Committee of the British Parliament also noted the "excessive degree of secrecy" and the "deplorable and counter-productive lack of transparency" in preparing the funding of the Ilisu project. What is the reason for this secrecy if Ilisu is a rational investment option?

Since private or multilateral finance could not be tapped, the Ilisu consortium has applied for funding from official export credit agencies. These agencies are the last group of public financial institutions which hardly apply any binding social and environmental standards. In the case of Ilisu, they have for the first time agreed to provide funding only if project implementation complies with international standards. Presumably they refer to the relevant World Bank policies. These policies are more than empty words. They require that alternative investment options be considered, riparian countries be consulted, and affected people be involved in a participatory process BEFORE a project is adopted. Similarly, the stakeholder report commissioned by the British government stipulates that "consultation/participation with local stakeholders should be in place before (...) the contract is signed".

If the creditor governments are serious about their commitment to international standards, the Turkish authorities must go back to the drawing board. This would allow the region's population, whose benefit the project supposedly serves, to identify and bring in their own development priorities. Equally, the creditor governments must be prepared to suspend their credits and guarantees if international standards are seriously violated during project implementation. So far, only the British government has agreed to accept this basic principle of project supervision and accountability.

If the Turkish authorities and the creditor governments are not prepared to draw lessons from their earlier experiences with dams in

South-East Anatolia, international NGOs will continue to oppose the Ilisu project. Working together with representatives of the local people they will call the responsible governments, companies and banks to account for the human rights violations, the environmental destruction and the breach of international law which these parties could foresee but have not prevented.

***The Berne Declaration*** ([www.evb.ch](http://www.evb.ch)) is a Swiss public-interest group which promotes more equitable and sustainable North-South relations.