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Can Uganda's hydroelectric Karuma dam balance local displacement and promises of modernisation?

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A new hydroelectric dam under construction in northern Uganda has promised to promote the country's socio-economic development, but effects on local communities are hard to reconcile with these aspirations. New research explores the reality of the government's 'modernisation' programme and asks whether social securities are adequate to address the extent of disruption.

Uganda's presidential campaigns have promised modernisation and development, among other things, since 2000. Further promises regarding infrastructure and advances to lifestyles for the rural poor have included improved access to electricity, updated roads, better education and healthcare, mechanised agriculture and industrialisation.

It is in this spirit that, in 2013, construction of Uganda's biggest hydroelectric 'MEGA' dam **started in northern Uganda**, located at **Karuma waterfalls** on the Nile river. The government of Uganda undertook compulsory land acquisition from riverbank communities and villages to pursue the works, so that electricity generated could ignite the country's **socio-economic development**. Project documents promised many affected people access to better amenities, including electricity in households, as well as industrialisation for the nation.

In the dam's resettlement plan, some affected households were given direct cash compensation. Others were selected to benefit, in kind, from compensation with houses in a model village to be constructed.

How has the dam project affected local communities?

In July 2021, we conducted interviews and focus group discussions with the rural poor where this multi-billion-dollar project is located. The people living in the area have been designated by the government 'project-affected persons' (PAP's) and 'host communities'.

Still in the final phases of construction with electricity yet to be generated, Karuma dam brought in many workers seeking employment opportunities. Numerous youth from the project host communities were absorbed as labourers and Karuma witnessed a population boom and increased demand for social services. In response, the local populace adopted coping mechanisms to deal with changes to their livelihoods.

For instance, some in the area stuck to traditional peasantry farming, fishing and working at highway roadside businesses (selling roast meat, maize, cassava, fruits and chicken), food businesses and retail shops. Others vandalised project infrastructure, such as power lines under construction for scrap, or took to scrap scavenging, artisanal mining and illegal hunting in the protected Karuma Wildlife Reserve in Murchison National Park. Prostitution and crime rates have increased, and a significant

section of the displaced population have resettled within the host community, far from living the modernised life envisioned. In essence, the power dam has brought neither electricity nor development for the area's rural poor, with mixed socio-economic gains for project-affected persons.

During interviews with project-affected persons, it was suggested that many still expect to live modernised lives, with better access to quality education and healthcare – all Presidential promises. But much unfinished business regarding housing project resettlement for vulnerable project-affected persons remains, with a slow pace of construction, compensation and infrastructural development.

In subsequent months on Africa at LSE, we will explore in-depth the 'modernisation project' as mediated by Karuma dam and its 'social safeguards'. We will ask the question: how will project-affected persons' lifestyles be developed and improved by Uganda's MEGA flagship power generating plant, and will this development improve their safety?

Photo: 'Construction' by JJ (Uganda). Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

About the author



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