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Research article

State-Actor-Society Relations: The Challenges of Development Practices of Hydropower Project in North Western Ethiopia

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This article examines the effects of state-society relations for the development of hydro-power programs in the North Western Ethiopia. The Beles valley is one of the major development corridor recognized in the country of which attempts were made to harness hydropower in the mid 1980s. In this valley, hydropower development program was initiated to enhance sustainable national economy through power production. However, this public investment has been facing challenges shortly after the commencement of the project. Methodologically, the paper is based on qualitative method conducted in cross sectional manner in the Beles upper valley, North Western Ethiopia. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions and consultation of secondary documents. The data were analyzed through thematic and content analysis. The major challenge of the hydropower development practice in the Beles valley was associated with state-actor relations. There was security dynamics by the move violence between the state force and insurgent armed group. The situation was further complicated by the society's negative perception to the project attempted to be implemented in the upper stream by government. Related to these, low linkage between the Beles valley rural communities to the nearby administration and regional economy has also impacted the development of Beles hydroelectric projects. The article shows that how the state, actors and society relations affected the development projects attempted in mid 1980s for implementation in the Beles valley.

Keywords: Development, Relations, Challenge, Hydropower, Beles Valley, Ethiopia

Introduction

The notion of development is better summarized as ‘development of any sort is about people concerning their indigenous development opportunity, standard of living, and the use of the available resources within their environment sustainably’ [2. P. 95]. Whenever there are abundant water resources, hydroelectric power was a major driver of development worldwide. Initiated hydroelectric power plants were owned and operated by both private and government bodies. Irrespective of the

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level of development, countries perceived hydropower development in terms of using their own natural resources to meet growing industrial and domestic demands for electricity, energy security and self-sufficiency [12. P. 1].

The role played by hydropower has become increasingly important particularly as a means to reduce poverty and attain sustainable development. Hydropower can be used not only to provide electricity access but can also effectively contribute to regional cooperation and development through increasingly scarce energy resources and it is vital to address sustainable social and economical development. To achieve sustainability, it is crucial therefore to consider application of best practices and lessons learnt through a bottom-line approach [11. P. 501]. As a country with large water resources, Ethiopia has planned its immense water resources to develop substantial energy. The country has launched plans and strategies to guide economic development in sustainable way. These plans aimed at to address the development sectors from which energy sector is a key component of development strategy for sustainable growth to the country [4. P. 308].

It has been identified that hydropower as the backbone of energy development strategy in Ethiopia [9. P. 6]. Ethiopia considered its immense energy potential in the form of hydroelectric power as the most valuable resources and the backbone of the country's future economic and social development [4. P. 308]. As indicated by power planning studies, Ethiopia has a hydropower potential of 45,000 MW. Taking the Blue Nile basin, the energy potential of country is estimated to be 60,000 GWh/year, the highest in the Nile basin countries [11. P. 503]. So, exploiting this resource would bring various social and economic opportunities to the country [4. P. 308]. The development aspects will be delayed unless the country's development is not supported by energy sector. It was because of this the country has developed policies and strategies long before to assume national development supported by hydropower sector.

The attempt of the development of planned water projects in the Blue Nile basin were not implemented due to lack of economic capacity, absence of institutional capacity, hydro politics and recurrent political crisis [1. P. 157]. The development of the Blue Nile system in Ethiopia territory was largely ignored in several reasons these include inaccessibility and poorly mapped of the basin, the worry by the planners that sediments carried by the Blue Nile would silt up reservoirs in the valley and Egyptian interest and limited economic capacity of the country [8. P. 107].

After the third decades of twenty century, Blue Nile River has been perceived as a potential source of livelihood and for the country's future economic development by the government of Ethiopia. Subsequently, master plans and development projects have been drawn since 1930s. The country places much hope and commitment to harness the water resources of the Nile valley and its tributaries in the basin of its territory [1. P. 29]. With this plan, therefore, harnessing the upper catchment areas /sub basins/ as has been drawn by power planning studies would bring meaning full development in the basin. In this connection, the Tana-Beles, the major sub basin of Blue Nile, is the first of the five growth corridors in the country identified and designed to enhance sustainable national economy through power production

and development schemes [13. P. 2]. Studies identified that the area, Beles River, as the most suitable place for the generation of hydroelectric power if water would be transferred from Lake Tana through tunnel [3. P. 492; 7. P. 2].

The government of Ethiopia, in the mid 1980s, envisaged plans to electrification of the country through developing hydropower in the Beles upper valley as the most important option to make its vision practical. Five hydroelectric power stations were envisaged in the upper stream and agricultural establishment in the downstream for resettlement [6. P. 61; 5. P. 212] and there was attempt to harness the upper catchments of Beles valley for hydropower and downstream for irrigation purpose with financial support of the Italian government [5. P. 212]. The first phase of Tana Beles project began in mid 1980s with US\$300 million estimated budget. The projects aimed at for hydropower production in the upper course of the Beles and provide irrigation for a settlement scheme [10. P. 158; 5. P. 212]. But the progress of the development projects have got challenges for the most part. Though it is perplexing to access the evaluation of Tana Beles project, indicators show that the project was a failure already by the late 1980s [1. P. 157]. This development program in the Beles River valley has not been studied as part of Blue Nile basin development practice. Thus, the main purpose of this study was to examine the challenges of development practices of hydropower projects attempted to be built in the Beles valley, Blue Nile basin, initiated by the government in mid 1980s.

Methods

The objective of this paper was to examine the challenges of hydropower development practices in the Beles valley, Blue Nile basin of Ethiopia. This study was conducted in the upper Beles catchment, North Western Ethiopia, from October 2018 to January 2019. This study employed qualitative method in cross sectional manner to get in-depth information about the challenges of development practices in the Beles upper valley. The qualitative methodology employed was that of an exploratory study.

Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions and documentary records in North Western region of Ethiopia where hydropower projects were attempted to be placed. Twelve key informants and twenty six interviewees were interviewed. Interviewees responded to questions that were raised pertaining to the started project activities, people's understanding of the project, conditions when the program started, trends of development, measures taken to arrest the problem and development challenges in the upper valley of Beles. Each interview lasted one to two hours. Some of participants were local community members and former project workers were traced for interview. Some of the participants who were formerly involved in the insurgent armed group as military officials provided information about their experiences, views on the project activities and people's perception about the development program in upper course of Beles River.

Four focus group discussions were held. Eight individuals were involved in each discussion session from the surrounding communities. Discussions were held

with purposively selected participants knowledgeable about the contexts of development program attempted in their locality, upper course of Beles. The discussions emphasized on some of the questions relevant to the study such as the development experience of the upper valley, government modality of implementing the project, how the local communities conceived the project and challenges faced to implement the project.

A short meeting was held with individuals, five in number, who had worked in the Beles downstream project in different professions and discussion points were raised pertain to the planned project activities and problems related to the project implementation in the upper course of Beles River valley development program. Secondary sources such as personal memos and reports were also consulted to supplement the primary data.

Results and discussions

Development in the Beles River valley

The Beles River (catchment area 14,200 sq km) is one of important sub-basins of the Blue Nile basin. “Given the significant economic, environmental and cultural endowments in sub-basin in terms of water, land, human resources and planned developments, this sub-basin offer tremendous opportunities for accelerated economic growth underpinned by careful sustainable development of these endowments.” [13. P. 2]. This sub basin covers the vast rural communities from the South Western part of Lake Tana to its end length of joining the Abbay River.

In the late 1970s, the Dergue government announced mega development programs for the primary objectives of agricultural irrigation establishment and re-settlement program in the lower stream and hydropower development program in the upper stream of Beles River, one of the major tributaries of Blue Nile. However, the Beles upper stream hydropower development program was started in the mid-1980s, and it had a number of hydropower plants planned for the production of substantial hydroelectric power by transferring Lake Tana water in to Beles River through tunnel. This giant development program comprises power plants, access roads, permanent and temporary site camps and other facility activities. In year 1986, the government started the projects and other infrastructures that helped to facilitate the project activities. The project contract was given to the Italian company named Salini Costuritori S. P. A. under the consultation of Studio Pietrangeli consulting engineers. Evidences reported that the Dergue government envisaged a number of hydropower plants on the Beles upper stream to produce substantial electricity to foster the national energy sector. The projects were started in May 1986 with full efforts and undergone till the interruption of project works in January 1987. These large public investment was thought to be very promising in three terms: project location (technically suitable to exploit the valley by establishing a number of hydropower plants), water sources (the Lake Tana as a natural reservoir with the Beles water would result uninterrupted flow of water) and local de-

velopment (infrastructures as a means to connect the area to the regional center or local government would have been significant). The development of these projects, however, have not been yet translated in to practice due to the challenges described below.

***Challenges of development management in the Beles upper valley.
State-actor relations and security dynamics***

The Beles area covers the vast rural communities in the North West region of Ethiopia. In the programs and policies, it has been identified as one of the development corridors of the country and that hydropower projects were attempted based on power planning studies made by different companies and organizations. Informants reported that the planned development of hydropower in the Beles upper stream was remained undeveloped and challenged by the security concerns raised in the region. Area of the Beles sub basin, one of the major tributaries of Blue Nile, was not fully controlled by the government and the insurgent armed group was increasingly strengthening their capacity time to time to have power over the area. Because of intention of the government to take over the places for project implementations and the antigovernment force's interest to control the area as a military base created complexity.

The evidence by the community members provided clear picture about the development context of the area. After the promised hydropower development program was initiated in the Beles upper stream, the area becomes changed gradually into unpredicted security conditions. This was because as it was indicated above the project sites drawn the attentions of both the government and antigovernment forces. The anti-government struggling armed force known as the Military wing of Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was operating on and around the project sites in the time when the projects commenced. This armed force hijacked experts who had studied the feasibility study and consulted the project activities. This action manifested that the situation would be uncertain. Few months after, the area becomes despoiled and insecure due to warfare situations; war was breaking out, between the government and EPRP armed group. The Beles upper stream hydropower development project works were interrupted and even destabilized in the early stage of its progress by unpredicted war. This warfare caused the area to become insecure and marred that has remained as the major challenges faced to implement the project. One of the key informants described the security situation of the Beles sub-basin as follow:

“By the time the government started the Tana-Beles hydropower development project in 1986, I was commanding a Brigade of the (EPRP) military force. Hydropower projects and related infrastructures in the Beles upper valley were interrupted and unrealized due to internal security threats. There were serious security problems brought by armed struggles to control the region. Particularly, the security problem centered on along the project activities. Within this unpredicted situation, war was breaking out between the Dergue government and EPRP armed force.

The war was disastrous; it devastated the project sites, activities and machines highly.” (*Eshetu, key informant interview, January, 2019*)

It is good to know the complexity for better understanding of the situation from the view point of experienced participants. EPRP established the military base in the Beles valley which was strategic for its military operation against the Dergue regime. In one hand, this area was identified and given attention as one of the development corridors by the policies and programs of the Dergue government to develop hydropower and irrigation schemes. On the other hand, the area was controlled by the EPRP armed force as strategic area for its military mission. It was in this situation that the government started to develop the project activities in the conflict marred region.

A key informant, who was political commissar in one of the Brigades in the insurgent group, stated the conditions what happened in the Beles development projects as:

“The project works covered vast area and significant rural communities who were presumed by the Dergue as supporter of the anti-government armed group. The situation was leading both the government and EPRP armed force into war. Foreign experts of the project were hijacked by EPRP armed group in two different places to know about the project activities and what the government devised to do before the war operation was made. The war was undergone with mechanized support for five hours in three different places on and around the project activities. Project sites with its machines were burned up and the project interrupted immature. Eventually, the Beles valley hydropower development program was no longer implemented and the government was not enabled to continue because of the security threats.” (*Key informant interview, Mr. Yilkal, Achefer (upper Beles area), December, 2018*)

It is clear from the above discussion that the area under conflict was first identified and recognized as one of the growth zone and plans were initiated for action by the government. On the contrary, the opposition armed force was operating military activities and undertook permanent military base in the area. Interviewees reported that the government was informed as the military activities carried out by anti-government force in the area that would create obstacles to undertake security sensitive development projects. But the government was doing nothing to deal with it. Note that the government also labeled the communities resides in the Beles areas, specially the upper stream, as the supporter of the opposition group and tried to attack the local people to implement the project forcefully. Doing this, the local people on and around the project activities perceived development program negatively as it holds hidden aim. The local people thought that government’s intention was to achieve its objective of national military service by recruiting youth in the name of development project. This movement the government had got oppositions from both the people and EPRP. Because of this complexity, the security concerns become intense and unpredictable. Progressive improvement of the conflict situations become unthinkable and the area became marred by security problems so that

situations did not allow the government to continue the project works including road infrastructures connecting the upper Beles to the lower valley.

Data obtained from the in-depth interview supports the above evidence in which the security challenges caused the Beles upper stream hydropower development program unrealized. A former sergeant in anti-government force and now a community member in upper Beles area briefed the case in-depth as follow:

“I have been reintegrated in this community after EPRP was dissolved but before I had commanded a squad in the rebel military force and struggling against the Dergue regime. I noted how far the development project of Beles upper steam was destabilized by security problem in which I engaged in as staff sergeant. The instability had destabilizing effect on the hydropower development projects in the Beles Valley. The area became marred by instability and situations did not allow the government to continue the projects work. The Beles hydropower development program as a well-organized start failed because of the security dynamics. Eventually, the project was forced to be left out from the project sites.” (*Mr Wudineh, Bizeratuda (upper Beles area), October, 2018*)

The experience of the above interviewee can be help full to view the development trends of the Beles development program in terms of outside within perspective. The EPRP recruited soldiers mainly from the local communities and some of the ranked military positions were held by individuals from local communities. The dynamics is, related to the security in the experience of Beles upper stream development projects, once they had challenging the project activities under the leadership of EPRP and involved in the warfare now become reintegrated in the community. Placing the community members in different circumstances would help to realize how security challenges impacted planned development schemes highly. Unsecured and unpredictable conflict situations people experienced better understand what the real sense it seems like. The most significant challenge in the Beles upper stream hydropower development program was that the volatile security situation in the upper stream areas and related complexity.

Interviews drawn by field work showed that Beles upper stream hydropower development program was not practical due to the security problems. Let alone undertaking the project activities, making subsistence activity was very difficult for the local community initially. One of the community members in upper Beles valley described the security dynamics as:

“I still remember about the immature hydropower development project in the early stages of its commencement in our locality, Beles upper valley. The government had undertaken the project works from May 1986 to January 1987. The reactions of the struggling forces manifested when there were changing situations in the community and project works. This moment could be taken as a sign working environment is going to be disturbed especially in the ongoing hydropower projects of Beles upper valley. Shortly, the war broking out and the area became of the most unsecured and disturbed. Since then the government was forced to terminate hydropower development project.” (*Mr. Kenaw, community member in Wazena-upper Beles area, November, 2018*)

The conflict between the government and EPRP stifled the already commenced project works and planned development schemes in the upper Beles stream. This was manifested, in fact, before the operation of war between the government and EPRP armed force along the project areas. The anti-government armed force was identified as it was making its operation on the proposed development areas. The two struggling forces, the state force and the insurgent armed group, had been battling to control the areas in the growth corridor of the Beles region. The war damaged project activities, machines and residential campus built for workers. Here, it is important to note that the government was informed about the insecurity situations before the commencement of the first phase of the project that the rebel group has operations and the area was blemished by instability and security threats but it did nothing to deal with it. Sadly, no practical measure has been yet taken to arrest the problem in the form of either linking the security mainstreaming into the development program or settling the dispute peacefully. The government was failed to link and considers security issues in development program and these escalated instability in the region and worsen the situation of the area. Evidently, the Beles upper stream hydropower development project had less direct links to the regional security frameworks. This low linkage of security mainstreaming in the development program affected the practical move of Tana-Beles project.

The case, Tana-Beles hydroelectric power project, truly experienced how far security is very decisive for development and it challenges the development aspects at regional and national level. Initially, Beles upper valley hydropower project plans were not mainstreamed in the national security frameworks. This hydropower development program had very less links to security frameworks at regional and national level and did not mobilize the local communities to integrate in the projects' activities. The upper Beles valley hydropower development practices have been challenged, with visible circumstances, mainly by security problems and unpredictable occurrences in the project locations and in the upper catchment of Beles at large. Undoubtedly seen, the Beles valley hydropower development project was interrupted due to the dynamics of security and associated factors emanated from unresolved disputes between the government and non- state armed force operating in the region.

The relation between the state and society: societal structure and development context

Before the attempted hydroelectric development, the rural villages in the upper stream remained in accessible and poorly integrated; the subsistence basis of the communities was dominantly agriculture and stick in cultural tradition. The mid 1980s hydroelectric development influenced the communities' livelihood in one way or another. The development implementation approaches were not complying with the communities' existing tradition.

In the cultural context of the region, being hero can be expressed through involving in different armed struggle as a soldier. It is believed that having weapon and know how to operate it would add good value to someone's life for the reason

that privilege obtained by possessing gun and less likely to be attacked by others. The settlement pattern of villages in these communities can also tell us something related to people's organization as drawn from the observation. Relatives are resided in close connections as neighborhoods to make communications very easy and organizations fast and strong. The social value as it is described above encourages the young to have experience in warfare struggle that would guide their future life. They thought that such kind of experience is just schooling one's life. Communities have practiced to train themselves how to operate the weapon as a life experience. The social value of the community was, in occasions, complying with the situation happened in the region which was security concerns. Evidence obtained from key informant and community members indicate that proportionally large numbers of soldiers in the insurgent armed group (EPRP) were recruited from the upper Beles areas. This leads the situation very intense and hardly possible to have support from the local people as it was thought by the government.

With regard to Beles upper stream development attempts in the mid 1980s, two important issues are noted to be realized according to the evidences. First, government approach to implement the projects was not devised in relation to placing the local people in to consideration. The people were rural communities predominantly agriculturalist which must be considered ahead in the planning stages. However, the government perception about the people and the people towards it was in suspicious. Discussants reported that the government had intentions to manage the intervention through force without priory aware the local people. Households were burnt by the government soldiers in the upper Beles valley without prior information as if it was needed for development projects. The way the government approached the communities to implement the program brought an intention that the people would see it suspiciously. Second, the values and social structure of the people worth to influence the development program is another significant aspect. Government's approach to handle development activities was against the survival of the local people on and around the project site according to people's view so that they challenged it through supplying youth recruitment to military services for the EPRP which has its own effect on the government development plans of the Beles valley. This was occurred truly in the upper Beles area when the government initially started the project works. These conditions in turn contributed for the interruption of the Beles hydropower development program from its progress.

Government's strategy to manage project activities was problematical. In fact, the cumulative effects, the management problem to apply suitable modalities specially in communities where they have no development experience and the value system that encourage the people to be brave through joining armed groups contributed their share for the failure of the development project in the valley of Beles.

Integration and rural communities

The area was poorly integrated with the nearby administration let alone the national level. From the very beginning, project implementation was done in the area where there was no road networks and other facilities that would help to in-

tegrate the communities to the district or zonal level government. The rural communities in the Beles region were not connected to the regional government not even in the district level before the projects implemented. These communities were almost excluded from the mainstream development due to it appears in the region where no roads connected with the surrounding small towns. The implementation of Tana-Beles project was started by constructing road facilities with the project works. At least in the intervention time, road accesses should come first so that they can control emerging problems that would disturb the activities.

Absence of connecting networks such as roads and formal institutions characterizes the condition of Beles upper catchment. The area was inaccessible and had limited established institutional structure to take control of emerging problems. That, in turn, created barriers to reach the rural communities in the Beles upper region to considerable extent. The attempted upper Beles hydropower development projects did not consider the local development contexts of which situations were interrelated. According to the evidence by focus group discussion, inaccessibility of road networks created problem of integrating the people to the regional and district government level. The rural side living situations were almost forgotten from the social and economic development opportunities for decades since the first water development attempt by the government. This created low level of linkages between the local communities and development project as well as the concerned government administration. Though it recognized as a growth zone, nothing was done to integrate the area.

Conclusions

This paper showed the challenges of development practices of Beles upper valley hydropower project public investment attempted in the late 1980s in Ethiopia. The major problem of implementing the project was security concerns derived from the conflicting forces between the state and non state actor operating in the Beles area. This created low level of connectivity between development program and security frameworks during the attempted implementation of hydroelectric power project in the Beles River. Associated to this is the local communities' low level of trust for the development intervention further complicated the administration of the project by the government. The government approach to implement the project was not focusing on the local people and even violently acted along the project areas. The negative perception about the project implementation by the local communities and low level of integration to the surrounding economy and administration system have also impacted the development practices of the hydropower program in the upper course of Beles River. This paper argues that the development practice of the Beles valley hydropower program was influenced by the awkward relations between state, actor and society and the absence of formerly established synergy and effective administration in the Beles valley. Dealing the complexity through involving multi actors and centering local people as focal point of the development should have been credited to address the problem.

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Отношения между государством, субъектом и обществом: проблемы практики развития гидроэнергетических проектов в Северо-Западной Эфиопии

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В данной статье рассматривается влияние отношений между государством и обществом для развития гидроэнергетических программ в Северо-Западной Эфиопии. Долина Белес является одним из основных территорий развития, признанных в стране, на которой развивалась гидроэнергетика в середине 1980-х годов. В этой долине была начата программа развития гидроэнергетики для повышения устойчивости национальной экономики за счет выработки электроэнергии. Тем не менее вскоре после начала проекта эти государственные инвестиции столкнулись с проблемами. Методологически статья основана на качественном методе, использованном в поперечном разрезе в верхней долине Белес, Северо-Западная Эфиопия. Данные были собраны посредством интервью, обсуждений в фокус-группах и вторичных консультационных документов. Данные были проанализированы с помощью тематического и контент-анализа. Основная проблема практики развития гидроэнергетики в долине Белес была связана с отношениями между государством и обществом. Уровень безопасности менялся из-за насилия между государственными силами и повстанческой вооруженной группировкой. Ситуация усугублялась негативным восприятием обществом проекта, который правительство пыталось реализовать в верхнем потоке. В связи с этим низкая связь между сельскими сообществами долины реки Белес, окружной администрацией и региональной экономикой также повлияла на развитие гидроэлектростанций в Белесе. В статье показано, как государство, негосударственные акторы и общественные отношения повлияли на реализацию проектов развития, предпринятых в середине 1980-х годов в долине Белес.

Ключевые слова: развитие, отношения, вызов, гидроэнергетика, долина Белес, Эфиопия

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