

Norwegian support for hydropower: peacebuilding through best practice

by Ashley South

**Democratic Voice of Burma,
21 October 2014**

<https://www.dvb.no/news/norwegian-support-for-hydropower-peacebuilding-through-best-practice/45265>

Last week I accompanied a group from the Norwegian embassy in Yangon, and the Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate (NVE), to the Karen National Union 3rd Brigade area in Kyauk Kyi Township, eastern Bago Region. The purpose of our trip was to prepare terms of reference for a pre-feasibility study regarding a potential hydropower project on the Bawgata River.

During this brief mission, we explored part of the potential dam site, which is situated in an area of outstanding natural beauty and considerable biodiversity, in the middle of dense forest. We held a consultation with potentially affected communities and local civil society organisations, and met with government and KNU officials.

We undertook this mission at the invitation of the KNU's 3rd Brigade and central headquarters. There had previously been plans to construct a large dam on the Bawgata River. The KNU rejected this approach, and proposed instead the construction of two or more smaller dams - with a focus on identifying and addressing the environmental and social impacts of any hydropower project. The KNU insisted that the community should be consulted at all stages of the project.

In the past, when dams were built in Myanmar, this involved little if any consultation with communities, and few significant attempts to address environmental or social impacts. Previously in the 3rd Brigade area, the government built a 75 MW hydropower project on the Shwegyin River, which flooded and displaced several villages and destroyed the natural environment, with no consultation or compensation. Understandably therefore, local communities have serious concerns regarding the possibility of another hydropower project in their area.

Indeed, on the morning of the consultation some local people had put up "no dams" signs in a nearby village. During the consultation, a number of Karen pastors and other community leaders expressed their concerns - but by the end of the meeting all those who spoke said that they were satisfied to go ahead with a pre-feasibility study for this project. By the time we left that afternoon, the "no dams" signs had been taken down. After consultation with local villagers and CBOs,

NVE will - on behalf of the KNU and with approval from the government - go ahead with preparation of a prefeasibility study. NVE, which is a Norwegian government agency, emphasised several times during the fieldtrip and public consultation that they only provide advisory services to the KNU and government, and have no commercial interest in the proposed project.

What explains the villagers' movement, from outright opposition towards cautious support for this project?

I think the most important element was NVE's assurance that, unlike previous dam projects in Myanmar, the intention at Bawgata is to adopt international standards, from start to finish. This involves continuous consultation with the community and other stakeholders throughout the lifetime of the project - which is likely to be at least 10 years. Of utmost importance is the identification of possible environmental and social impacts, and detailed plans to mitigate these. During the community consultation and discussions on the sidelines, it was repeatedly stressed that the hydropower project would only go ahead if the advantages outweighed negative impacts on the environment and local communities. The forthcoming pre-feasibility study (the next stage of this project) will assess the different options. It will also look at issues of financial viability, and social and environmental impacts - and how to mitigate these. At every stage, the project would only go ahead after extensive consultation with community and other stakeholders. One option remains not to proceed, if advantages of the project do not out-weigh potential negative impacts on environment and communities.

On initial assessment, there seem to be few people currently living in the potential flood-zone - although some people may have lived there before the 1975 "Four cuts" counter-insurgency campaign in this area. A more significant issue may be threats to the wonderful biodiversity and natural beauty in this area. These are issues to be addressed in the forthcoming pre-feasibility study.

Already the Bawgata "pre- prefeasibility study" has broken new ground in Myanmar, introducing international best practice into an area which has been devastated by half-a-century of armed conflict. If the project goes ahead, it can be a model for other parts of the country.

In terms of peacebuilding, I found it extraordinary to see the Myanmar government, the KNU (and its armed wings, the KNLA and KNDO), Karen CBOs and local communities discussing together in a spirit of friendship and cooperation - albeit with some understandable caution and concerns on the part of local people. Many issues remain to be resolved, including the future ownership and management of the hydropower plant - which may be jointly held by the Myanmar government and KNU. Also of course, this project could only go ahead if it is financially viable. It will be important to provide training to local stakeholders (including KNU personnel), so that they can fully participate in all stages of the project.

On a personal level, I was particularly interested to see how a non-traditional contribution to peacebuilding in Myanmar might work. Having spent the last three years working for the Norwegian government-initiated Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, I have seen some good practice in this country. However, I've also come to learn how difficult it is for mainstream international donors to support peacebuilding in Myanmar. Too often, international donors have their own agendas and priorities, which are imposed on conflict-affected communities. In this case however, the request for outside intervention comes from a key conflict actor, the KNU.

Community participation will be central to the project from the outset. Hopefully, by working with these key stakeholders and the government, any future Bawgata hydropower project can provide much-needed local revenue, and clean and renewable power supplies to conflict-affected communities. If it goes ahead, the project can also contribute towards multi-stakeholder participation in peacebuilding, after half-a-century of armed conflict in southeast Myanmar - while limiting (although inevitably not entirely excluding) significant environmental or social damage.

Dr Ashley South is a Senior Adviser to the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative. The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not reflect DVB editorial policy.