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The uneven geographies of transnational advocacy: The case of the Talo Dam

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ABSTRACT

The Talo Dam was built in 2006 on the Bani River, a tributary of the Niger River in Mali. The path towards the completion of the project has been complex and controversial. This paper offers a case-study of the advocacy efforts initially opposed to, and later in support of the building of the Talo Dam. Several international institutions have been key decision-makers regarding the building of the Talo Dam, but the geographical and culture distance of the decision-making institutions to on-the-ground reality presents a serious obstacle to goals of participatory development and illustrates some inherent challenges of transnational environmental advocacy and management. Several typologies of transnational campaigns are analyzed to demonstrate the range of participation and accountability that a transnational campaign can pursue. Finally, I encourage the use of qualitative research methods by advocacy organizations as a useful methodological approach to counter otherwise inherent challenges to local inclusion and participation.

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1. Introduction

This paper offers a case-study of the Talo Dam on the Bani River in the Niger Inland Delta of Mali, unveiling some aspects of the complexity of international dam politics. The geopolitics of transnational advocacy both for and against dams is a subject that has not been substantially researched. Critics of dams argue that participation in the environmental management of dams is challenging (Goulet, 2005; *The Report of the World Commission on Dams*, 2000). The World Commission on Dams asserts that in the decision-making process surrounding dams, “there is a frequent failure to recognize affected people and empower them to participate in the process” (WCD xxxii). The role of NGOs and advocacy organizations in the decision-making process is core and it is imperative that their role be both participatory and long-term.

In the case of the Talo Dam, the vast majority of management decisions were made by institutions not rooted in local social, economic and political systems. Further, NGO-led advocacy efforts, both for and against the dam were primarily conducted in the United States, far removed from the people of Mali. I argue that the geographical distance of decision-making from the actual location of the dam reduced the ability of local populations to participate in the management of their own environmental resources, an example of “the uneven geographies” of NGO intervention

(Bebbington, 2004: 726). Greater use of qualitative research methods, such as interviews, surveys and participant observation offers advocacy organizations better insight into local perceptions regarding the construction of large dams, and can help remediate some of the uneven qualities inherent in transnational advocacy (see Tilt et al., in this issue, for an example of one such research tool—Social Impact Analysis).

The paper begins with a description of the Talo Dam. The next section details the process of the advocacy campaign initially opposed to, and later in favor of dam construction. I analyze this campaign in the context of literature on different typologies of transnational campaigns. The purpose is not to myopically criticize the role of NGOs in decision-making regarding large dams—NGOs have been and continue to be important advocates of issues as important as human rights, gender equality, environmental sustainability and numerous other issues important to humanity and the earth. NGOs are a part larger political and economic processes which should not remain unexamined (Fisher et al., 2001). However, few genuine evaluations of NGO work and/or impacts have been conducted (Edwards and Hulme, 1996). The paper is written in the spirit of being “constructively critical of the existing system and not to inflict specific damage” (Townsend and Townsend, 2007).

2. Study area

In 1997, the African Development Bank (AfDB) approved funding for the *Projet De Mis en Valeur du Moyen Bani* (Middle Bani Plains Agricultural Improvement Project) hereafter referred to as the Talo

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Dam Project. The Bani River is a major tributary of the Niger River, which flows into the Niger Inland Delta. This watershed is in many ways the life-blood of Mali, a West African country whose landscape is dominated by the Saharan desert. Most cultivation occurs in the floodplains of the Niger Inland Delta, and the majority of economic activity, generally agriculture and fishing, takes place in the surrounding floodplains. The completed project has the potential to impact an estimated 63,500 people in the area, and potentially could impact millions more, considering the total population of Mali as well as other countries reliant on water from the Niger Inland Delta. The Niger River runs for 2500 miles, crossing Guinea, Mali, Niger, bordering Benin and then passing through Nigeria, and finally emptying into the Gulf of Guinea.

The Talo Dam is located northeast of Bamako, upstream from the historic town of Djenné. Djenné is famous for its clay architecture, most notably the Djenné Mosque, a protected World Heritage site (see Fig. 1).

2.1. Irrigation schemes in Mali

Mali is primarily an agricultural country. The population of nearly 12 million people is over 80% rural, and most people derive their livelihood from agriculture, livestock and fishing. It is a poor country, with GDP per capita estimated at \$1200. Less than half of the population has access to potable water, and the availability of water decreases as the population increases. Water struggles are marked by issues of access and distribution. There is a high prevalence of water-borne disease, especially in those areas dependent on the Niger River.

There is a long history of various irrigation schemes aimed at addressing water scarcity in the region. A major water problem in Mali is the unpredictability of the rains, as agriculture is heavily dependent on the seasonal rains. For example, the Selinguay Dam, which is the main supplier of electricity to the nation was nearly completely shut down in 1996 due to a delay in precipitation (N'Djijm et al., 1998). Similarly, the overall economic situation in Mali varies annually with the amount of rainfall available for agriculture. While there have been about three decades of declining

rainfall in the Sahel, there is some indication that there is a possible recent recovery in rainfall levels (Nicholson, 2005).

West Africa is a part of the world where climatic variability is the norm, so it is difficult to calculate what is normal, what is drought, and what factors, if any, can be attributed to global climate change. But what we do see is an overall decline in rainfall, a decline of the amount of water in the major watercourses, a reduction in natural wetlands and declining water quality, and a decline in the groundwater recharge level. The area of flooding within the Inland Delta has decreased dramatically in the last few decades (Niasse et al., 2004).

Irrigation schemes in Mali reach back to early 1900s. The French Office du Niger scheme, which began in 1932, is a classic example of external approaches to irrigation in Mali. This project, in the inner Niger River Delta was conceived of by French colonists. The goal of the project was to irrigate about 1,000,000 ha in the central delta (Ertsen, 2006). A major goal was to produce cotton for export, thus developing the cash economy and building a Malian consumer society.

The Manatali Dam, on the Bafing River (a tributary of the Senegal River is another oft cited case-study of the challenges of water management in the region). This multi-purpose dam was completed in 1988, but today remains plagued with problems, such as an inability to adequately simulate flood seasons that downstream communities are dependent on, and its hydroelectric facilities delayed in production. The reservoir created by the Manatali Dam has destroyed forest, depleted downstream aquifers and displaced 12,000 people (Bossard, 1999).

3. Talo Dam Project details

In technical terms, the structure is actually referred to as a weir, meaning that during peak flood flow periods, the water will flow over the top of the structure. However, given the size of the wall and the accordingly large reservoir it creates, the structure should also be considered a large dam. The original blueprint for the dam claims it will measure 295 m long, 5 m high, and will create a reservoir with a capacity to hold 175.6 million cubic meters of

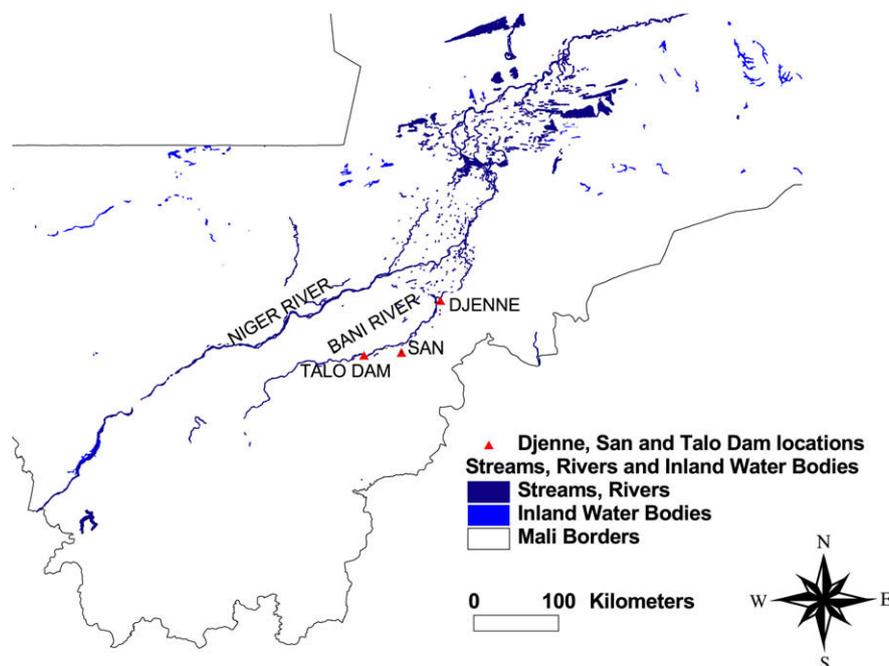


Fig. 1. Location of Talo Dam (Data sources: Digital Chart of the World (DCW) layers (<http://www.maproom.psu.edu/dcw/>) and Gallier (2002).

water (though there is no available data on the actual size of the completed dam). The reservoir is long and shallow, following the natural riverbed up to 100 km back. Project aims are purely agricultural; it is not intended for use as a hydroelectric facility. In addition to the dam, the infrastructure necessary for irrigation is included in the project design.

The original plan was to irrigate 4750 ha of land divided in 2.8 ha plots and allocated to 1600 “locals” for the cultivation of rice during phase one of the project. At no point did the plan ever specify who these local people are, or how they would be chosen. Ten years into the project the goal is 11,280 ha of rice, 1820 ha of pasture, and 100 fisheries in production. There are also existed project goals that did not directly relate to irrigation including the rehabilitation of a major road (funded by OPEC), agricultural extension activities, rangeland management schemes, reforestation of 150 ha of land, and various development projects focusing on women, literacy, health education and sanitation. There appear to be no funds allocated to these other activities, nor specific plans as to how they will be realized.

The overarching goal, per project records, is to increase agricultural production in 65 villages in the immediate area. The official objectives, according to the AfDB are, 1) increased agricultural production, and 2) the creation of permanent rural employment. The total cost of the project, estimated at \$26.89 million, will be shared between the AfDB (\$18.49 million), OPEC (\$4.4 million) and the Government of Mali. The official borrower and administrator of the project is the Government of Mali.

3.1. Environmental and social concerns of the Talo Dam

Environmental impact assessments (EIAs) on the Talo Dam were conducted in 1995 and 1997.¹ The 1995 EIA raised concerns about potential flooding in the areas bordering the reservoir. It also identified risks typically associated with large dams like water-borne diseases and increased pollution. At one point, it said that up to 15,500 people in upstream villages might need to relocate. The 1997 EIA was presumably commissioned in response to issues raised in 1995. Like the first EIA, it focused mainly on the left bank upstream from the dam. They concluded that there was minimal risk to upstream villages, but also called for a 25-km dike between the dam and Wori in order to protect upstream communities. They also made several remarks about the failure of similar previous projects in Mali, especially because of poor management.

In a separate 2001 Project Report, commissioned by an NGO advocacy organization to study potential impacts of the dam, concerns were separated into three geographical areas: the target area (where the new agriculture would take place), the area upstream from the dam, and the area downstream from the dam. In the target area, concerns centered on the implementation and the logistics of the project. Participation of local communities in the target area was ambiguous at best. For example, it was not specified in project documents how the 1600 farmers would be selected to partake in the new rice agriculture (i.e. their gender, ethnicity, village location, education, etc.) Similarly, the project was designed to have a committee of users in charge of monitoring the valves. These committee members would be responsible for controlling the flow downstream and into the irrigation canals. Government and AfDB documents did not specify how the members of this committee would be selected or if individuals from downstream communities will be allowed to participate.

General concerns were raised for both the target and the upstream areas that are standard concerns for any large dam

project. These include health issues (mainly from water-borne diseases), a decrease in the water table from increased agriculture, loss of water due to evaporation and unlined irrigation canals, questions over who will actually benefit, and ambiguities in administration, accountability, and responsibility.

Downstream concerns were considered the most pertinent and pressing issue because downstream communities had been completely excluded up to this point, and because downstream areas stood to lose the most in terms of reduced water availability and environmental degradation. The 2001 Report predicted the following detrimental impacts:

- Downstream farmers would be deprived of water needed for subsistence
- Fish populations would decline
- Pastoralists would lose land for grazing
- The level of groundwater would decrease
- The health of local populations would deteriorate

In addition to the potential impacts as listed above, the report found discrepancies between AfDB policy and the reality of the project. For example, the AfDB requires that with any dam project provisions must be made to protect downstream communities. It also has very specific and strict guidelines regarding environmental impacts of which there is no evidence that it followed. The AfDB has also accepted the findings of the World Commission on Dams (WCD) which reiterates time and again that downstream communities must be considered, included, and protected.

The concerns of the 2001 Report can be summarized into the following five issue areas. The first was participation, especially regarding downstream communities. The failure to consider downstream concerns directly contradicted internal AfDB policy and internationally accepted standards. Second, a downstream EIA was necessary. It is simply not accurate nor sufficient to limit environmental impacts to upstream areas. Third, if the project was implemented at some point in the future, who would be responsible for monitoring and accountability? At a minimum, there must be at least equal participation allowed for downstream stakeholders. Fourth, based on the findings of the report, a new cost-benefit analysis was needed. If, upon further study, it was found that the costs did indeed far outweigh the benefits, then there was no logical reason to go on with the project.

Finally, the fifth concern was in regard to the Djennè Mosque. The Mosque is World Heritage site, located in the stunning adobe-built historic town of Djennè, and is maintained each year with clay obtained from the floodplains surrounding the town. While the report did not claim that the mosque is in immediate danger of submersion or destruction, the building of the Talo Dam might negatively affect the mosque in a number of ways. On the simplest level, if the dam holds back sediments needed to maintain the clay structure, it could literally melt in the sun after a few years. On another level, if the dam brings about an economic decline in Djennè, the artisans needed to maintain the mosque could migrate to other cities and a great cultural treasure could be lost. The loss of traditional resources and cultural icons is an often overlooked impact of dams (see Tilt et al., in this issue for another example of this impact.)

3.2. Key actors and institutions: mapping the path of advocacy

Though feasibility studies for the Talo Dam reach back to 1989, as of January 2001, when outside parties became involved, construction had not yet begun. In January 2001, a North American based advocacy NGO (NANGO) whose mission is to advocate on behalf of indigenous people around the globe, was approached by individual funder (an expatriate living in Mali) and asked to

¹ 1995 EIA by Hedeselskabet (Danish Land Development Service). 1997 EIA by Argrer, a Belgian consulting firm.

develop a campaign against the proposed dam. The project did not fit within the normal scope of the NANGO's mission, but since it was a funder-driven special project the organization decided to commission a team of researchers to assess the potential impacts of the dam. It quickly became evident that downstream populations had not been consulted and thorough environmental and social impact assessments had not been conducted. The NANGO deemed the project an imminent environmental and social disaster. They hired a research team from a local university who wrote the 2001 Project Report highlighting potential detrimental environmental and social impacts the dam might have on downstream communities and ecosystems. I was a part of this project as a graduate student research assistant. This report was presented at a meeting in Washington, D.C. with representatives from the NANGO, the university, The US Department of Treasury and the African Development Bank.

The African Development Bank (AfDB) is the primary funder of the Talo Dam. It is a multinational development bank comprised of 77 member countries. Member countries are not limited to African nations, and include countries from Europe, Asia and North and South America. The AfDB's headquarters are located in Adibijan, Côte d'Ivoire. It was first established in 1964, its mission to "promote economic and social development through loans, equity investments, and technical assistance." The US is one of the major non-regional member countries, and maintains significant control over the bank both financially and administratively. The US Department of Treasury advises and offers financial support to the bank, and thus has some sway influencing projects the AfDB undertakes.

During this meeting in Washington, D.C. in April 2001, when the AfDB received the Project Report as described in detail above, they immediately placed a moratorium on the building of the dam. The consensus was that most significant finding of the Report was that downstream populations had not been consulted at any stage in the life of the project. One of the key complaints of the local community at that time was that if the dam was built, management over the amount of the flow of water released would not fairly represent downstream communities.

At the time of the 2001 Report submission, I argued that another omission was occurring—that of the voices of the local community and stakeholders in the NANGOs quest to stop the dam. The NANGO did attempt to include local stakeholders in the following two years, but up to point of the moratorium this had not occurred. These shortcomings were not the result of poor intention or lack of effort, but largely the result of inadequate financing and geographic distance. Up to the point of the moratorium, local NGOs and other organizations were not included in the effort to stop construction on the dam. The authors of the report drew heavily upon one letter that showed an agricultural association's opposition to the project, but attempts were not made to include other local perspectives.

Three attempts were made over the course of the next few years to increase local participation in the decision-making process. Two graduate students conducted research in and around Djennè in the summer of 2001. And in 2004 the NANGO helped organize community meetings to discuss the future the Talo Dam. The following section discusses these attempts.

3.3. Seeking local perspectives

Two studies by graduate student researchers in 2002 sought to integrate the perceptions and perspectives of local fishing populations into the debate on the merits of the dam. In May 2002, I traveled to Mali in an effort to learn about local perceptions of the Talo Dam. My primary goal was to measure awareness of the dam in Djennè, and to assess attitudes and perceptions of the dam. Based on informal interviews over a three-week period, I learned that awareness of the proposed dam was high, but opinions and ideas

regarding the impact of the dam varied substantively from the major issues being discussed by the decision-makers.

In the months before the moratorium there had been regular town meetings discussing the pros and cons of the project. But surprisingly, not a single individual or organization I spoke with had heard of the project 2001 Project Report nor a campaign being waged on their behalf by people in the United States. There was no association between the recent moratorium and any outside NGO or academic influence. For example, CARE Mali, the largest NGO working in the region, had not heard of any reference to the Report. Care received its information on the dam from Djennè Patrimoine, a local architectural preservation organization with support from Malian elites and French nationals. Even the village chief had never heard of the report, nor did he care to learn anything about it. It wasn't until I met with a government employee at *Direction National du Hydrology* in the capital, Bamako, that a reference to the 2001 Report was made. This individual reported that the dam would certainly have been built were it not for an outside NGO that interfered. Further, he claimed that people had been in favor of the dam, until rumors started circulating against it. However, he did validate the NANGO's criticism of the government's lack of local participation. *Direction National du Hydrology* believed the project would overall be good for agriculture in Mali. They also believed that the reason people in Djennè were against it is because it has been unfairly criticized via unfounded rumors, not that it was a bad project in and of itself. Thus, local connection to the campaign against the dam was minimal, and quite possibly non-existent, but the government, far away in the capital city made a strong association. It appears that there was rich dialogue among community members about the dam that existed outside of the mainstream discourse. But decision-makers did not draw upon this discourse. And because of this, they did not focus on the primarily concern of downstream communities—fishing.

Fish consumption is a major component of the local diet, is the main source of protein, and also linked to many cultural traditions. For Bozo fisher people, the main fishing ethnic group in the area, it is their main subsistence strategy, and most people of all ethnic groups have a strong dependence on healthy fish populations to meet nutritional needs. In a second study conducted by a graduate student researcher, the vulnerability of Bozo fisher people around Djennè is examined. This paper argues that the dam might cause serious negative repercussions to fisher people (Fink, 2002). Bozo fisher people feel that their livelihoods are threatened, and are especially concerned with diminishing water levels. But because outsiders defined their own agendas (primarily focusing on the Djennè Mosque, this key concern of local people was missed). If the campaign had different roots, say a Djennè-based farmer or fishing association, the agenda might have been completely different. It would be even more radically different if its roots were based in a loosely affiliated group of herders or fishers, or a grassroots organization of any type.

If a network or organization starts a campaign that is issue specific, then the campaign is formed with this agenda and its respective goals—local concerns often take a back seat to the established agenda of the NGO (Fox and Brown, 1998: 449). When NGOs act as the agenda setters, they gain credibility with those who make development decisions. They shape the level of discourse, the analysis needed and the steps to be taken. With the Talo Dam, because an outside NGO initially defined the "problem", the needed information, and suggestions for solutions, they focused on issues less important to community. The NANGO's campaign initially focused on any danger to the Djennè Mosque while the 2001 Report, in turn, took a broad look at many potential widespread impacts of the dam. But in later on-the-ground research, it was clear that a major concern among local people was the impact of the dam on fish.

3.4. Challenges to participatory advocacy

The NANGO initially faced some criticism for not including local populations in its research and advocacy efforts. Minimal efforts were made to disseminate information to local NGOs or communities, yet during my visit to Mali in 2002 not a single person I talked to in Djenne, whether a government official, aid worker or local citizen had heard of the NANGO-commissioned 2001 Report. In part as a response to the criticism that the advocacy campaign against the dam had not been participatory, in January 2004 a set of meetings were held in Mali that included the AfDB, the Malian Ministry of Agriculture, researchers, local aid agencies and government officials. At this time, after a three year moratorium, project planning began anew, but supposedly adjusted to take into consideration issues raised in the 2001 Report such as design changes to all allow increased water flow and increased local and downstream participation in dam management (Childs, 2004).

In September 2004 the NANGO completely changed course and offered endorsement for the Talo Dam. They said that concerns surrounding the project had been “sufficiently addressed” (Petrillo, 2004). There is no detailed information available as to why the NANGO changed its position. The AfDB claims that during the moratorium, they placed staff on-the-ground in downstream areas consulting with local populations. They remarkably claim that downstream populations were now in favor of the project. However, there is no formal documentation nor evidence to support the supposed recent acquiescence of downstream people. Further, the AfDB never commissioned another EIA or SIA in response to the findings of the Talo Dam Project Report, and the NANGO apparently did not consider this necessary for project endorsement.

An internal review of the Talo Dam Project by the AfDB was also critical of the amount of participation by both the bank and the government of Mali (referencing the NANGO and the 2001 Project Report). The internal review claims that although preparations for the project reach back as far as 1989, local populations were not informed about the plans for the dam until 1997 (Fall, 2002: 1171). The review asserts that opposition to the project is rooted in a lack of participation rather than environmental concerns, and further claims that local chiefs were actually in favor of the dam. Importantly, it is asserted that it was international pressure that led to the AfDB’s postponing the project, specifically the attentions of the NANGO and the US delegation to the bank—not local opposition (ibid 172). Ultimately, the AfDB decided to ignore the Report’s recommendations for further EIAs, and recommended that the project should continue with an improved public relations campaign. A later internal evaluation of the project by the AfDB also concludes that the project was flawed due to lack of participation, not for environmental concerns (Fall, 2005: 15).

It is incredibly difficult to find accurate, current updates on the project. Part of the problem with outside institutions picking and then later dropping advocacy projects is that the outward flow of information halts when funds diminish or people lose interest. According to AfDB documents available, the dam, including lateral dykes has been constructed and irrigation “works” have been completed. New roads were developed, 350 ha of irrigated crops, and 1600 farmers received 2.8 ha of land. There was farmer training and 150°ha of village reforestation (AfDB and Mali: 37 years of Partnership, 2007: 25). It is a remarkable achievement since presumably all of these activities were completed in just 6 short years (the last time an outside group reported on the state-of-affairs)!

Project proponents argue that now, with a steady flow of water “farmers are no longer subject to the vagaries of the weather” (AfDB and Mali, 2007: 25). However, one local source reports that while the dam was completed in 2006, and did not cause an

immediate environmental catastrophe, the region has not suffered a drought in the past two years, so the long-term future stability of the area remains uncertain. There is no mention of any post-project follow up or long-term management or environmental review by any of the groups previously involved. The close date for the project is set for December 31st, 2007, indicating the AfDB now views the project as completed.

While the rest of the world has since moved on, local communities are still grappling with the ramifications of the Talo Dam. In a forthcoming article in the Royal Geographic Society, journalist Ben Willis chronicles his recent trip to the region. Local residents claim that the town of Djenné is “drying up.” One local farmer explains “the dam is dividing what little water there is, and trying to share it between more people.” There is also a growing shortage of rice husks available, an essential component of the adobe mixture used to fortify the mosque and other adobe buildings each year (Willis, 2008). The full effects of the dam probably won’t be understood until the region faces another unpredictable rainy season.

4. Geo-political analysis of northern-based advocacy campaigns

Scholars have begun to analyze the different approaches that transnational advocacy campaigns can utilize assessing the effectiveness, legitimacy and accountability of transnational advocacy networks. In this last section, I review some of the literature on this topic looking specifically at the role of NGOs within transnational advocacy campaigns. “Most of the literature on NGOs is exceedingly optimistic about the roles of NGOs play in the international, national and local arenas” (Jordan and Van Tuijl, 2000: 2051). But in reality, NGO advocating for and against dams are subject to various forces including funding shortages, political motivations and difficulty accessing information. These challenges are amplified when the NGO exists in a different geographical and cultural location than the dam under consideration.

Transnational environmental advocacy takes place within larger global networks, in this paper referred to as transnational advocacy networks. The study of transnational advocacy networks offers one perspective on the role of NGOs in international dam politics. A common definition of this type of network is “those relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services” (Keck and Sikiink’s, 1998: 2). Networks can take many shapes and angles, and can include a variety of actors including: international or domestic advocacy organizations, social movements, foundations, the media, churches, trade unions, consumer organizations, intellectuals and different parts of government (ibid 9). Obviously, not all actors will be present in every network, but NGOs are often central players. Advocacy networks often exist when there is a value-laden issue at hand, like the environment, gender, wage-labor exploitation, etc.

There is an undercurrent of optimism and support for international advocacy networks; they are seen as a way to effectively and provocatively confront the state and associated state policies, international development institutions and multilateral banks. They are seen as an opportunity for inclusion, empowerment and access and are seen as way to “multiply the channels of access to the international system” (Keck and Sikiink, 1998: 1). There is an assumed communicative quality to transnational networks, and most promote policies of inclusion and participation with local communities.

However, if a transnational network occurs between an entity located in the North and the target community in the South where the issue takes place, then in all likelihood there is a power differentiation. One side has access to more funds, resources and

has a closer proximity to institutions of power. The target community is in many ways dependent on the northern-based network members for information and access to decision-makers. This can lead to decisions made on incomplete or peripheral information. Environmental organizations that are culturally and geographically separated from the issue itself can face barriers to participation and inclusion. One major outcome of this challenge is that alternative scenarios risk neglect (for example, alternative design, management or alternatives to the dam itself.) This process is evidenced in the advocacy efforts surrounding the Talo Dam. It was difficult to initially get information into the local community, and it remains challenging to get accurate information out of the community—both in terms of actual logistics of the dam as well as local support/opposition.

NGOs are praised and valued for connections to local communities and the grassroots, whether these connections are direct, or indirect (Fisher, 1997: 454). However, this perceived connection with the local is often not grounded in reality. While it is acknowledged that community meetings were organized in 2004 (Childs, 2004) after the moratorium, it is not clear whether this can be considered mainstream inclusive participation. Participation by local, non-elites in the governance of large dams is rare (Goulet, 2005), and without adequate documentation or follow-up, it is difficult to accurately determine if/how local support grew after these meetings. Follow up interviews, surveys and participant observation would have offered useful insights into local responses and perceptions. Most surprisingly, follow-up EIAs and SIAs were never completed, yet somehow the NANGO felt confident that they were able to now approve the dam.

NGOs have what can be termed “multiple accountabilities.” “Accountability” is defined as “the means by which individuals and organizations report to a recognised authority, or authorities, and are held responsible for their actions” (Edwards and Hulme, 1996: 9). This means that NGOs have both upward accountability, i.e. to their funders, trustees and organizational supporters; but they also have downward accountability to their constituencies, beneficiaries, and those they represent (either officially or implicitly). NGOs tend to have high levels of upwards accountability, especially to their funders. Donors have an expectation that NGOs will be responsive and responsible when it comes to their money. Donors dictate the type, amount, location and extent of a NGOs work (Uphoff, 1995). I would add to this discussion a geographical component. Northern NGOs have even less downward accountability to their southern beneficiaries due to logistical and geographic constraints.

Fox argues that there are two factors that effect accountability: the roots of a campaign (i.e. whether it was initiated by a grassroots social movement or an international NGO) (1998: 443) and second the proximity in social, cultural, political, and economic terms between the various actors in a campaign (448). A campaign may become “path dependent.” That is, if it is born as part of an agenda of a northern or international NGO, then tends to have lower levels of participation, accountability and empowerment for local communities. Alternatively, if is born the product of a grassroots social movement, it would tend towards greater accountability to the target community.

Jordan and Van Tuijl developed a typology of the different relationships patterns that can occur in transnational advocacy networks. To begin, the authors offer the following normative definition: “NGO advocacy is an act of organizing the strategic use of information to democratize unequal power relations” that aims to “empower weaker sectors of society” and “the underlying function of advocacy is often to enhance the self-respect of weaker communities, to improve their self-confidence, constitute integrity and promote mutual trust” (2052). To remedy the ‘problem’ of representation and power differentiation, the authors argue in favor of ‘political responsibility’ in global advocacy networks. This is

different from accountability in that it does not require formal mechanisms of regulation and feedback. “Political responsibility is a commitment to embrace not only goals in a campaign but to conduct the campaign with democratic principles foremost in the process” (Jordan and Van Tuijl, 2000: 2053). Transnational advocacy networks are not inherently democratic in their process or their product. Rather, they idealistically propose a democratic methodology, and whether or not they can actually achieve this goal can only be assessed on an individual campaign level.

On one end of the spectrum there is the “Cooperative” or “Interlocking” campaign—one with a high level of shared information, joint management and a high level of political responsibility (Jordan and Van Tuijl, 2000: 2056). This, of course, is the most empowering relationship between advocator and advocate. This typology most closely embodies democratic process and product. The second-ranking typology is the “Concurrent” campaign. It achieves a lower level of political responsibility than the first, but there is still a large amount of information flowing between actors. Here different NGOs might have different objectives, but there is some mechanism in place for “strategic review and coexistent management” (ibid 2058).

I would type the Talo Dam advocacy campaign in the second to lowest type of campaign, the “Disassociated” or “Conflicting” campaign. Within this typology, the potential exists for a clash between the objectives of various actors. There is a distinct flow of information—generally from the South to the North. Minimal efforts were made to disseminate that information presented in the Report to local NGOs or communities. And while community meetings might have been more inclusive and participatory, there is not evidence to document this.

Covey looks at the tension built into the role that NGOs play in transnational advocacy (1995). There is a tenuous relationship between the need for policy and advocacy “experts” and the need to remain inclusive and democratic in process (this assumes that the experts are located in the North). Advocacy does not inherently promote democracy or empowerment. Covey argues that “expanding people’s consciousness and empowering community-based organizations is not an automatic outcome of policy work” (1995: 169). Rather, empowerment is a goal that has to be identified and striven for in order to be achieved. In another system for assessing the effectiveness and accountability of NGOs in transnational campaigns, Covey looks at the effectiveness of a campaign in achieving its policy goal(s), i.e. passing a new law or challenging a development project. Second, she looks at a campaign’s impact on local communities. This “strengthening” of civil society is measured in two ways: by the impact a given campaign has on local institutions, and the level of public participation involved in the policy influencing aspect of the campaign.

Contrasting the success of policy outcomes with the level of civil society involved. Covey identifies four potential types of campaigns that can occur: high policy outcome with high strengthening of civil society (ideal); high policy outcome with low civil society (achieves campaign goal but does strengthen or empower civil society); high civil society with low policy outcomes (empowering but not effective); low policy outcome with low civil society (least desirable, not empowering or effective) (1995: 174). With the Talo there was high policy outcome from the NANGO’s perspective. When they lobbied against the dam, they won a moratorium. When they changed course and lobbied in favor of the dam, it was built. But there were low, or at least undocumented results of building of local civil society.

An NGO-centered alliance becomes consumed with the pursuit of their policy goal(s) and will only use local voices when they can build and give legitimacy to their cause. For example, in the 2001 Report, the authors drew heavily upon one letter that showed an agricultural association’s opposition to the project. Their opposition gave the NANGO the legitimacy to speak out on behalf of local

populations, but by no stretch of the imagination was it participatory or empowering. “As microcosms of the larger society, alliances can easily replicate unbalanced patterns of influence” (Covey, 1996: 177). The path of least resistance for an NGO to follow is an NGO-centered alliance, especially for a northern-based NGO. Because the common-perception of NGOs is of a democratic and inclusive organization, there is often little assessment of actual levels of participation. Unfortunately, an NGO's level of policy effectiveness is not linked to the strengthening of civil society, so the motivation to be empowering and participatory must derive from a goal other than effectiveness.

Townsend and Townsend (2007) suggest that an NGO can become “corrupted” when they begin to focus more on their own status and success rather than a “commitment to improve other people's lives” (276). Of course it is naïve to expect NGOs *not* to be concerned with their own status and public relations, these things are essential to their future existence. But this doesn't mean we cannot and should not be critical of their process. An analysis of the geopolitics of dam construction provides an opportunity to dissect this complex process. Advocacy work *can* be improved by refining the campaign process. An ideal campaign would be one with easy access information and frequent exchange between campaign participants in the North and the South. It would be both effective in achieving its policy goals and in strengthening civil society in the target community. These characteristics would create a high level of accountability for the NGO(s) involved.

Finally, the issue of human agency plays a key role in determining the social networks that an NGO or campaign is a part of (Bebbington, 2004; Bebbington and Kothari, 2006). These individuals and organizations are embedded in larger political economic contexts. The AfDB and other agencies tend to focus on the primary objective of the Talo Dam as a poverty reduction effort. If we understand poverty as a static, in situ event, then it possible that the Talo Dam may indeed reduce poverty in the region. However, if we understand poverty as being embedded within larger environmental, social and political networks, a question arises: “do the connections and flows that come with NGO networks give people sufficient resources to rework the political economy of development and the geographies of poverty that it produces?” (Bebbington, 2004: 731).

5. Conclusions and implications for measuring dam impacts

Construction on the Talo Dam was completed in 2006, however, the bulk of international interest in the project existed between 2000 and 2004. In the years between the moratorium and eventual construction, community meetings took place in Djenné but formal documentation of the participants and their representation is lacking. The longer-term social and environmental impacts of the Talo Dam remain uncertain, and at present no organization is conducting monitoring or evaluation of the social and environmental impacts of the dam.

The presence of NGOs in international development projects becomes part of the process of the “reworking of nature-society relations” (Bebbington, 2004: 732). In order to adequately measuring this reworking on a social level, qualitative research methods such as interviews and participant observation offer important information. These types of research methods are necessary to counter otherwise inherent challenges to local inclusion and participation. Interviewing and surveying local community members from a broad spectrum of society provides alternative and supplemental data to that gathered in an environmental impact study and allows for participation of local populations in the decision-making process surrounding the construction and management of large dams. In the case of the Talo Dam, on-the-ground research illuminated otherwise neglected issues, such as the

importance of fishing culture and consumption. A continued investment of these methods on behalf of the NANGO involved would have allowed for greater inclusion of local populations.

Transnational advocacy for or against dams should not end with the construction of the dam, continued evaluation and monitoring should be implemented post-construction. According to the World Commission on Dams, evaluations of completed projects are rare, and there has been a “pervasive and systematic failure to assess the range of potential negative impacts” of dams (2000: xxxi).

Finally, a review of the Talo Dam Project is more than just an academic exercise. Progress is being made towards the construction of a new dam downstream from Talo. A secondary movement has arisen in Djenné. This movement asserts that as a result of the Talo Dam, the downstream community will be deprived of water. Their solution is to build a second dam just 10 km from Djenné. This idea was given credence during meetings regarding the Talo Dam in 2004. 1.13 million dollars were allocated by the AfDB that year to fund a study examining water management (including a second dam) in the Bani Catchment Basin near Djenné. It remains to be seen whether this project will garner outside interest, or better environmental and social impact assessments.

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