

The Himalayan Blunder

The governments of India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan are planning to transform the Himalayan rivers into the powerhouse of South Asia by building hundreds of mega-dams to generate electricity. However, the possible impact of climate change will jeopardize the viability of the hydropower projects as well as the safety of the dams.

The Himalaya today is one of the fastest changing regions of the world due to global warming. The mountains' mighty glaciers, the source of most large Asian rivers and a critical "savings account" of South Asia's water supply, are melting. In early February 2009, Chinese scientists warned that glaciers on the Tibetan plateau are melting at a "worrisome speed".

More than 150,000 megawatts (MW) of new hydropower is proposed to be built in the next 20 years in the four countries. At that rate, the Himalaya could become the most heavily dammed region in the world. Some of these dams - including the 3,000 MW Dibang project in India, the 1,000 MW Tala project in Bhutan, and the US\$12.6 billion Diamer-Bhasha Dam in Pakistan - are among the world's largest and most expensive planned dams.

A dam-building boom in the Himalayas in times of global warming is like investing billions of dollars in high-risk, non-performing assets. In the Himalayas, "melting glacier water will replenish rivers in the short run, but as the resource diminishes, drought will dominate the river reaches in the long term."

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, ICIMOD, in Nepal and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change agree that global warming will also lead to more storms and floods, especially in tropical and mountainous regions. A report by ICIMOD on the impact of climate change on Himalayan glaciers states : "On the Indian subcontinent, temperatures are predicted to rise between 3.5 and 5.5°C by 2100. An even higher increase is predicted for the Tibetan Plateau. Climate change is not just about averages, it is also about extremes. The change in climate is likely to affect both minimum and maximum-recorded temperatures as well as triggering more extreme rainfall events and storms." These heavy storms and floods will jeopardize the economic profitability of hydropower projects, as well as the safety of these mountains of concrete.

One billion people in South Asia and many millions in China are dependent on the Himalayan rivers. If the Himalayan governments go forward with their planned dam boom, they deny that global warming is actually transforming their region and the planet. The prudent course would be for the Himalayan countries to develop water resources in a way that helps the people of the region adapt to the changing climate, and reduces their risks. This dam building plan does the opposite. □□□