

Chinese loans could fuel regional conflict in East Africa

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[Peter Bosshard](#)

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Dam and irrigation projects could spark “bloody and persistent” conflict, suggests Peter Bosshard of International Rivers.



A man holds an AK 47 in front of a granary in Chelete, a tribal community of Ethiopia's Lower Omo River Basin. (Image by Alison M. Jones for www.nowater-nolife.org)

China has made great efforts to support poverty reduction in Africa, and likes to present itself as a friend of the African people. But loans for contentious dam and irrigation projects now threaten to pull China into an explosive regional conflict between well-armed groups in Kenya, Ethiopia and South Sudan.

The Lower Omo Valley in south-west Ethiopia and Lake Turkana in Northern Kenya are marked by a harsh climate and unique, fragile ecosystems. They are home to 12 indigenous peoples, one of the largest remaining wildlife migrations, and some of the earliest remains of the human species.

The region is currently being transformed by one of Africa's biggest and most controversial infrastructure ventures. Once completed, the [Gibe III hydropower project](#) will dam the Omo River to generate electricity with a capacity of 1,870 megawatts. It will also allow the irrigation of 2,450 square kilometres of sugar plantations, which are currently being developed on indigenous lands and in national parks.

Scientific report documents looming environmental disaster

The dam and irrigation projects have been debated for many years. Reports commissioned and prepared by the [African Development Bank](#), [International Rivers](#), the [World Heritage Committee](#) and the [Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority](#) have documented their impacts on the fragile ecosystems of the Lower Omo River and Lake Turkana, the 500,000 indigenous people who depend on them, and the unique cultural heritage of this cradle of humankind.

A [new scientific study](#) published by the NGO International Rivers explores the social and environmental impacts of the project in detail, and examines the knock-on effects of the impending ecological crisis on the security of the volatile border region of Ethiopia, Kenya and South Sudan.

The study confirms that Lake Turkana, the world's largest desert lake, almost completely depends on the inflows from the Omo River, and that the lake's unique ecosystems and fisheries are closely linked to the river's annual flood cycle.

The dam and sugar plantations will affect this ecosystem in several ways. The dam will interrupt the annual flood of the Omo River, which sustains the agriculture, grazing lands and fisheries of the region. The filling of the Gibe III reservoir will lower the water level of Lake Turkana by two metres. The sugar plantations will divert at least 28% of the Omo River's annual flow, and lower the lake's water level by at least 13 metres.

With a more realistic assessment of the water demand of the plantations, the report's author estimates that Lake Turkana will lose more than half of its current volume, and its water level will drop by 22 metres. This will split the lake in two, and likely turn the water in the southern half so saline it will become undrinkable.

The new paper compares the forced modernisation of the Lower Omo Valley to China's [Great Leap Forward](#). It concludes that "the long-term effect will parallel what has happened to the Aral Sea in Central Asia", which was almost sucked dry by cotton plantations, turning the region into a toxic wasteland.

Will resource conflicts spiral out of control?

The indigenous peoples of the Lower Omo Valley and Lake Turkana are extremely poor, but well-armed. They have a long history of resource conflicts over water, fisheries and grazing land. [Chinese media](#) have already warned that the disputed Gibe III Dam "fuels Ethiopia-Kenya border attacks". According to the new report, these conflicts will escalate and may spiral out of control if the dam and irrigation projects are completed.

The [report warns](#): "Local groups displaced from their livelihoods and homelands will seek out resources on the lands of their neighbors in the Kenya-Ethiopia-Sudan borderlands. Based on the recent history of conflict among local communities in this region, they can be expected to react largely through raids and warfare. Well-armed, primed by past grudges, and often divided by support from different state and local governments, these conflicts can be expected to be bloody and persistent. In fact they are already under way."

Once the projects are completed, the northern shore of Lake Turkana will retreat from Ethiopia into Kenya. Peoples such as the Dassanech will have to follow the shoreline into Kenya in order to maintain their access to the lake. The shrinking of Lake Turkana will also remove a buffer between the peoples of the western shore, particularly the Turkana, and inhabitants of the adjacent shore such as the Gabbra.

Such migrations and conflicts will likely push people into the disputed Ilemi Triangle between Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia, across the Ugandan border, and into the Borana region east of Lake Turkana. Groups of displaced people will also seek refuge in urban slums and rural famine camps, which will breed their own violence and despair. The report's author, who has to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of the issue, warns of "inflamed cross-border tensions" between Kenya and Ethiopia at a time when oil has been found near Lake Turkana, and when Ethiopia is looking for better integration with Kenya for access to the sea.

The Ethiopian power utility promises that brief artificial floods will help mitigate the environmental

impacts of the project. It [argues](#) that “the possibility to control flooding” through the Gibe III Dam will make irrigated agriculture possible and prevent occasional destructive floods. The Ethiopian government also points out that the Kenyan power utility has agreed to import electricity from the Gibe III Project, even though the Kenyan parliament passed a resolution against this.

Chinese support at the core of the conflict

In the years after 2006, the Ethiopian government tried to raise funds for the multibillion dollar projects on the Omo River from the World Bank, the African Development Bank and other international financiers. Due to the controversy over the social and environmental impacts, none of these funders got involved. Only the [Industrial and Commercial Bank of China](#) (ICBC) stepped forward and [approved a loan](#) for a US\$500 million turbine contract of Dongfang Electric for the Gibe III Dam in August 2010. In September 2012, the [China Development Bank](#) (CDB) signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ethiopia Sugar Corporation for [another loan of US\\$500 million](#) for the construction of sugar factories in the Lower Omo Valley.

The Gibe III Dam and the sugar plantations will threaten World Heritage Sites in the Lower Omo Valley and near Lake Turkana. In June 2011, the [UN World Heritage Committee](#) called on the Ethiopian government to “immediately halt all construction” on the dam, and encouraged the Chinese financiers “to put on hold their financial support” until the Committee’s next annual meeting in June 2012. Neither the Ethiopian government nor ICBC heeded this call.

Ethiopia is an important friend and partner of China – but so is Kenya. Once the dam and irrigation projects are complete, China may find itself at the centre of an escalating conflict, which does not serve its interests in the region. “The destruction of Turkana, if it proceeds, will become as notorious as that of the Aral Sea, tainting all those who perpetuate it”, the [paper](#) warns.

The completion of the multibillion dollar project in the Lower Omo Valley depends on international funding. Neither ICBC nor the CDB have so far disbursed their loans. Now that the likely social, environmental and security impacts of the projects are evident, the Chinese government should reconsider its interests in the region, and ask its banks to withdraw their support for a social and environmental disaster in the making.

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