



Environmental Activism: The case of Hasankeyf and the Ilisu Dam

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My last visit to Turkey had a mission: I was to travel with Heinrich Böll Foundation to attend a Resource Politics workshop. This time, the workshop was not set in a fancy hotel adjacent to the bustling Taksim square in Istanbul but right on the bank of the Tigris River, in the picturesque city of Hasankeyf, in southeast Turkey. This was the closest I have ever gotten to the Syrian and Iraqi borders and I was filled with excitement to witness the diverse culture and people I was about to meet. With much anticipation, we arrived safely in Batman, where a bus was waiting to take us to Hasankeyf. The group instantly got along, with participants from Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. Representing a region where civilizations prospered, conquered and some disappeared, we were on a mission to dream and design our resources vision for our region.

In Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization, lies its pearl: Hasankeyf. Hasankeyf has a history that spans nine civilizations. Assyrians, Romans, Byzantine, Arabs, Artukids, Ayyubids, Mongols and Ottomans all left their legacy in this city. Ancient human-made caves, fortresses, bridges, churches and mosques, a once bustling commercial centre strategically located on the Silk Road, bridges and palaces make this city feel like an open-air museum.

A place that seems to be frozen in time is nevertheless under the threat of being submerged under water, with 10,000 years of civilizations destroyed. The Turkish government is fervently set to build the mega Ilisu Dam as one of 22 dams of the South-eastern Anatolia Project to produce hydroelectric power and to store water. A massive, 135 meter high dam with the enormous capacity of 10.4 billion cubic meters of water storage is not only tremendously destroying the natural ecosystem but also ruining cultural heritage, displacing thousands of people and hundreds of communities.

The controversial dam project has incurred its first stumbling block with major international funding of Swiss, German and Austrian governments and banks being withdrawn in 2008, following the inability of the Turkish government to meet 153 international standards of environmental protection and cultural heritage and transboundary resource management. This did not deter the Turkish government from continuing this out-dated infrastructure that has been discredited as a 'renewable' energy resource. Dams have been built worldwide to obstruct the natural flow of rivers and harness the power it has to produce electricity and increase water supply and irrigation. All over the world, 45,000 gigantic structures have been built to achieve development and reduce poverty by providing basic commodities and creating a work force around dams building and operation. Nevertheless, dams have displaced around 40 million people, many indigenous communities that have lived harmoniously and with little impact on the ecosystem for thousands of years¹. In the World Bank and other major investors in dam construction, economical factors weigh much more than social and welfare factors for the communities most affected by dam construction. Issues such as cultural heritage preservation, ecosystem protection, impact on livelihood, welfare and culture are rarely taken into consideration when designing and constructing dams. Due to their very large scale, dams further entrench the divide between local communities and their surrounding environment, distrusting their life patterns and introducing an alien infrastructure that will cause them to become internally displaced or lose their cultural heritage for the least. Today, investments must focus on clean alternative energy sources such as solar and wind and should work to promote environmental rights and cultural preservation through ecological tourism in this rich land of culture, heritage and abundant natural resources. Social equity, which guarantees equal distribution of natural resources and ecological sustainability, will ensure that the less fortunate people and communities receive equal access and control of their natural resources in order to be able to get out of poverty and lead dignified lives².

The world attention is rising on this issue. On the other side of the world, an Brazilian indigenous community in the Amazon is equally fighting the infamous Belo Monte dam construction and land appropriation and displacement by the multinational corporations and the government. 'Damocracy'³, an international movement, is highlighting the destructive impacts of dams worldwide and with an aim to stop these projects through advocacy and awareness raising of the people, nature and cultures at stake.

The good news is that the Turkish State Council ruled on January 7, 2013 in favour of the legal case filed by the Chamber of Architects and Engineers (TMMOB) against the construction of the Ilisu dam project, ordering an immediate halt to the controversial dam construction in southeast Turkey. The Council of State concluded that the Ilisu dam construction on the Tigris River, proceeding without the legally required Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), goes against Turkish Environment law and EIA⁴. Nevertheless,

¹ Duflo, E. And Pande, R. (2007) DAMS, The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 122 (2)

² Chemnitz, C. and Fuhr, L. (2012) To Have or Have Not: Resource Equity in a Finite World, Heinrich Böll Foundation

³ <http://damocracy.org/>

⁴ <http://www.internationalrivers.org/resources/controversial-ilisu-dam-on-hasankeyf-halted-by-turkish-court-7787>

the Turkish government is continuing to build the dam at all costs but International and local pressure is also getting more powerful.

Future Workshop: daydreaming projects

Field trip to Iisu Dam construction site

To get a better understanding of the concept of resource politics, the group was guided on a tour in Hasankeyf and the construction site of Iisu dam. From a viewpoint of the town, we were met with members of the local committees established with an aim to raise awareness and lobby against the construction of the Iisu Dam. Listening to two members of the campaign share with us their personal drive to be part of this campaign and to stop the threat to their historical village and to the ecosystem as a whole was very powerful.





The road leading to the dam site feels like a closed military zone. Military posts on mountain tops and checkpoints on the road alert soldiers of any planned activism heading towards the site. On the way, the displaced communities around the construction site are now resettled in a 'new' gated neighbourhood, with identical apartments and a small plot of land to plant a flower or two, very different from the self-sufficient model that existed in their village. These rural communities, whose livelihood is entirely based on livestock and agriculture, are now displaced and fragmented, with their life pattern shattered and transformed, leading to many social, psychological and economical distress. We witnessed firsthand the inequalities caused by this mega project, benefiting multinational corporations and elitists while all the negative implications of the project are experienced by the indigenous communities which are more alienated from their natural resources and more prone to poverty now than before the dam construction.

Day 1: Critique or problem phase

The idea of the first day of the Future Workshop was to express what makes us angry when it comes to resource use and abuse. Many ideas were expressed and we then worked on identifying the main issues or themes we find most pressing in our region. The priority areas were:

1. Water resource management and scarcity
2. Land, soil and food security
3. Energy

4. Waste management

Obviously, these four issues were the main pressing topics that all the countries in the region face. Water in most of the regions is scarce and transboundary, but to add additional stress, mismanagement and incompetence increases the vulnerability of the resource. Land, soil, water and food security are also global issues, felt very strongly in our societies as they are agrarian and the main livelihoods are most directly resource dependent. Energy, including nuclear, has been raised as a hot topic that holds positive and negative sides as the potential for renewable energies is very high. The output of our current abusive systems of managing our resources is the production of great amounts of waste that are barely dealt with.

The main actors involved in maintaining this crooked system were many: Governments for their lack of strategic planning and weak institutions, big corporations for their recklessness and profit-driven policies, media for its distorted and biased coverage of news and information and lastly the individual consumers for their apathy and consumerism and lack of awareness when it comes to natural resources and environmental protection.

In each group, we brainstormed how we view these resource problems progressing until 2050, if no intervention or transformation occurs. Imagining our finite resources in more than three decades gave us a realisation of where we stand today in our region and globally. Examples of what was imagined:

“Tigris River is no longer running” Water was presented in our discussions as a hot topic. The scenario imagined was that of scarcity leading to more tension and conflict. The consequences of which are commoditisation of water, environmental disasters, and loss of culture and identity.

“Oil is Over!” Imagining the projection where oil is no longer available, especially for countries whose economies are highly dependent on oil markets. This was imagined as an energy transformation event where more dependence and investment on renewable energy will happen. “A Middle East Chernobyl due to end of oil and dependence on nuclear” was another scenario, where more investment will be put in nuclear rather than clean energy.

The Middle East region today therefore suffers due to

- 1) Lack of governmental, civil society and grassroots interaction
- 2) Behavioural trends of its citizens that are driven by apathy and consumerism
- 3) Globalisation and open markets and their effects on local resources production and use
- 4) Political instability and the prioritization of political and economical parameters in planning policies rather than environmental



Day 2: Utopian or fantasy phase

The day of creativity arrived where we had the floor to imagine a world with a vision for 2050. This was coupled with role-playing, where we took the role of historian at a conference debating and analyzing the concrete steps needs for the realization of this vision. The result was a colourful display of utopian scenarios for each resource theme aiming to broaden our horizons and think big.

How can we today, as young environmentalists, imagine a utopian future for our region? With many political, social and economical constrains and limitations, the environmental and resource scenarios are bleak. Imagining how it could be if all these limitations were nonexistent and we had the perfect situation. Much of the emphasis was on energy, land, soil, and water. Energy innovations in the Middle East will primarily focus on solar energy, wind, and in some context hydropower. Food and land resources must be increased in urban and rural areas with a focus on local and organic production. Integrated water management will allow fair and sustainable use and management of water resources. In the core of it all, community is key as active stakeholders controlling and deciding on how the natural resources are utilized, with the interest of people, not corporations, in mind. This will achieve knowledge and awareness and bring natural resources closer to people.



Day 3: Realization or implementation phase

Realizing that our region today is undergoing major transformation and changes, the utopian stage seems unachievable. But with small steps and a perspective, many concrete actions can be made today. The momentum to re-empower people and re-establish their connection to natural resources is inevitable today. Raising awareness of people's right to natural resources is the foundation for building a surge of change that will deliver informed and active critical mass that will pressure decision makers to design their policies in a more sustainable and inclusive lens. With a timeframe of 15 years, practicable projects must be designed to achieve resource sustainability and social, economical and human development.

One of these ideas was Project Five: five cities connected with five villages to implement food innovation village-city interaction. This idea highlighted the need to empower rural areas through establishing strong bonds with neighbouring cities where information and produce exchange can happen both ways and strengthen the sense of community and knowledge between the two. Solution-based projects must be introduced to offer alternatives to the current destructive norms of governments, corporations and people. People's commitment to cleaner, more fair and accessible energy and natural resources will further strengthen the global call for resource equity.



The main recommendations that have been developed by the end of the workshop are:

- 1) Strengthening the role of civil society and grassroots movement in mobilizing and educating the public on resource politics, rights and power.
- 2) Formalization and design of participatory decision making processes to include people as the centre of resource utilization and management.
- 3) Creating new resource governance systems that will transform the management of natural resources in a sustainable and equitable manner.
- 4) Mainstreaming resource politics, climate change and environmental protection to transform societal interactions and connectedness with resources.
- 5) Utilizing advanced technologies to introduce solutions to pressing environmental issues.

Resource Politics: A topic to pursue for social and environmental equity

In the fast pace NGO world we live in today, ideas for projects and proposals spring up automatically. We find the buzzwords that will make our project a success or at least a certain pick by donor organizations. Rarely do we stop and dream of how our current situation, whether it's an environmental problem or a social issue, can be creatively transformed without any limitations. This workshop has taught me to think in different dimensions, to analyze, to daydream and to act in small but firm steps. It was a rewarding experience, from visiting the controversial dam and meeting and hearing beautiful stories of resilience of communities in Hasankeyf to enjoying the simple but very rich hospitality of our great hosts at Hasbahce, who made sure that we fell in love with every meal we were served and every moment we had in that special place where civilization began.