

***“The interest behind the adverse comment against Gibe III Dam is ignorance”,***



**Dr. Tewolde Geber Egziabher**

Dr. Tewolde Geber Egziabher is the General Manager of the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) of Ethiopia. EPA is the main responsible body in monitoring and evaluating of environmental and social impacts of projects that are carried out throughout the country. In relation to this, Dr. Tewolde gave a short interview for the Gibe III Hydroelectric Project website. Excerpts:

- *What are the duties and responsibilities of EPA in terms of evaluating and monitoring projects like the Gibe III Hydroelectric Project?*

The mandate of Environmental Protection Authority of Ethiopia is to protect the environment. This is to mean that when big projects like Gibe III Hydroelectric Project are in place, it would make sure that the environmental impact assessment is carried out properly and efficiently; the negative aspects to the environment created by the project are as well mitigated. Similarly, if negative social consequences result, they are compensated or corrected. There are also many other aspects in the environmental protection, but in the context of just like Gibe III this is the main mandate of the Environmental Protection Authority of Ethiopia (EPA).

- *Some international institutions and individuals would like to argue that Gibe III HEP has violated the laws and rules of EPA. What do you comment on that?*

How do they know that saying it from wherever they are? They have not come to us and find out what has been done. I doubt if they know where Gibe III is except on the map. Those who have been shouting about Gibe III Hydroelectric Project they know it only from thousands miles away. I really do not take their voices seriously. Unfortunately, any voice confounds the air and caused some confusion but I would challenge any of them to come to Gibe III Hydroelectric Project and conduct a study on the environmental impact.

Of course, the environmental and social impact study had already been conducted by international experts and submitted to us. And we have examined it very seriously. We have also gone recurrently to the Gibe III dam site and the catchment area to check what the documents enfold is correct. And we are certain that like any other big projects, there are some very minor problems caused. In fact, there are really minors compared to the other big projects. And the owner of the project (EEPCo) has promised to take the necessary mitigation measures that will nullify those problems. Therefore, my comment to them is, please, if they make specific comments, it must be based on specific knowledge. If it is not based on specific knowledge, it will not be more than background noise.

None of the opponents of the Project are from Ethiopia. I know one from Kenya and several others from Europe. The only person who claimed to have gone to the Gibe III

dam site was the BBC reporter; and he can also not judge such measure undertakings from one –day- visit. Therefore, I simply dismiss the complaints as they are irrelevant.

- *Opponents of the Project frequently mention that EPA has approved the Project's environmental and social impact studies after the project set into operation. What is your response?*

It depends on the infrastructure development where the project is to be realized. There have to be access roads to enable the planning under study and obviously when those access roads had been built, we have claimed the environmental impact study. The access road is an entry point to make the environmental impact assessment (EIA) possible.

As far as the Gibe III Hydroelectric Project is concerned, once its environmental impact assessment was finalized, it was submitted to us, we evaluated and checked it based on the grounds of problems identified and mitigation actions proposed.

And therefore, those who argue that the EIA had not come at the beginning, they are right. But where is the beginning? You have to get in to make the study. In this country many parts (areas) are inaccessible. We have to make access roads in order to conduct a serious of environmental impact assessments.

Each country has its own peculiarity; most countries have already access roads, they are accessible by roads, air or other means. Ethiopia is one of the least developed countries and lots of the areas have not roads.

Therefore, before the EIA is made, entry points have to be in place. When that was made, it was submitted to us. If, for example, somebody were to build something a big factory near Addis Ababa which is accessible, the EIA study has to be conducted before any work started because there is no excuse to even build roads before getting ahead to the project. But the sites like Gibe III dam has to be made accessible before the EIA study was made.

- *According to the International Rivers, Gibe III is the most destructive dam under construction in Africa. The project will condemn half a million of the region's most vulnerable people to hunger and conflict. Do you think that Gibe III HEP has significant adverse impacts upon the physical, biological and social environments?*

No. It does not. Again it is the people who do not know the area that say so. Most probably the Gibe III dam may stop the flow of water for short periods of time; and then the water will go into the deep gorge. The deep gorge does not affect the environment very much because it is more or less bare gorge; it will be filled with water. And the water will flow down. Those who are at the downstream area will still go on getting water because it is only going to turn the turbines and move on. Nobody is going to use the water upstream. The only thing that is going to be impeded is crossing the River on foot as the water inundates back. Of course, the owner of the project has proposed to avail means of crossing the water as part of mitigation measures.

In general, will it affect the biodiversity? It is very little because the gorge is deep. The accumulated water is not going to flow beyond the edges of the gorge. It is going to remain within the gorges. The construction of the dam has lots of economic advantage for

the country as well as the neighboring countries. The people at the downstream will also no longer worry about the destructive flooding which used to be a regular problem in the Omo River valley. There have been several years of deaths and lots of property destructions have happened to the downstream communities. Now the dam will control the flow of the destructive flooding and keep them away from the unexpected overflow of water. Environmentally, socially and economically, it will be an improvement for downstream communities.

The Gibe III dam never dries the Lake Turkana because the water will continue to flow and reach Lake Turkana.; it won't affect the Lake; studies indicate that the Lake volume decreased in the previous three years. That is because of reduced rainfall in the catchment area. It has nothing to do with intended Gibe III dam because the dam has not yet set into operation. The dam is being built; the water still is flowing. So, what has happened so far to the Lake has nothing to do with the construction of the dam. Rather, it has to do with the fluctuations in the rainfall in the catchment area.

The interest behind the adverse comments against the project is ignorance. Ignorance causes fear. Many dams in many parts of the world have caused a lot of destruction because the dams are built on relatively flat areas; the people in those areas have to be moved, the biodiversity will be destroyed. The case of Gibe III dam is different from those cases. But opponents criticize the project without knowing the specificity of the gorge and location of the site.

I would not be surprised if there were some who don't want for the country to develop. I have not made specific studies of the background of each of the organizations that have been making these shouts to keep Ethiopia backward. they are doing it because of ignorance. I have a feeling that they have been doing it from ignorance. They are ignorant of specificities of the setting. Building this dam does not bring significant damage to the environment.

- *What is EPA's plan and role on the mitigation of project impacts and the implementation of the mitigation measures mentioned in the ESIA studies of the Project?*

EPA's role is merely monitoring what is happening and instructing experts of the owner of the project, if they need any instruction on what to do in the environmental impact study. They have specified what they will do to counter the negative impacts. We also do the monitoring works at various times. If we feel that the mitigation actions are not fully implemented, we will order the owners of the project to do that. If they fail to do so, they will quarrel against the government because we are working on behalf of the Ethiopian government.

- *In what way should EPA and the Project/ EMU of the Project work coordinately in the future for all environmental (including social) activities of the project?*

The project's Environmental Monitoring Unit (EMU) I hope will not be biased. I hope that it will become objective; it will continue to have the environment as its priority and not allegiance to EEPCo. And therefore, since it is established there, it is going to monitor all the time. And if any problem arises, it will ask EEPCo to take the necessary

action. If there is also need, it will inform us to help it pressurize EEPCo to take the necessary action. I am really confident that EEPCo will also do the right action per the requirements.