There is a strong tendency to discuss the issues related to people displaced by dams as some sort of special case but they have much in common with the many other groups of people who have been obstructions in the path of the seemingly inexorable expansion of the modern nation state in the last few hundred years. A useful perspective on the recurring pattern applying to people displaced by dams and large infrastructure is that of James Scott, the author of Seeing Like a State and a number of other books dealing with the spread of states or governments across the world. Scott observes that we are now accustomed to seeing states and governments as a normal condition of human society. However, even though maps of the world indicate that all land and much of the sea is now controlled by governments this is a very new situation. The first states developed only within the last ten thousand years but the human species has existed in a form very similar to today for hundreds of thousands of years. Even a century ago there were still large numbers of people who lived without what we would recognise as a government.

James Scott has written about the process of state expansion into new geographical regions and the intensification of their reach within their own societies. In the latter case he has focussed attention on the processes over time by which the state gains control over ‘its people’. Even in strong states such as France, United States and China, until fairly recently
governments had little direct control over their people but mainly ruled through intermediaries such as large land owners and urban authorities. Record keeping was desultory and highly decentralised (In Europe for example, local church records were the main way of recording births deaths and marriages). Governments provided few services beyond national defence. The main beneficiaries of their support were the relatively small proportion of privileged people who were directly involved in their activities. This is similar to the fate commonly experienced by people displaced by dams. Towns, cities and powerful stakeholders who are integrated into the governmental system get substantial benefits and their interests are well protected. People outside that group, living ‘below the radar’ with their semi-independent lives based on the informal economy are not well protected. This is frequently the situation of people who are displaced by large infrastructure projects such as dams. When they are suddenly in the way of governments wanting to build dams their fate is often similar to that of the Indigenous people that were pushed aside by colonising governments and their settlers in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The similarity between colonised people and displaced people is not just in the living conditions they experience after the event. The process of eviction and resettlement itself also has many parallels. The way governments extend their power both into new territories and within their borders, which used to be described as introducing the benefits of ‘civilization’, has been extremely violent. Ethnic minorities, First Peoples, Indigenous and Aboriginal people in all continents of the world have been devastated by the expansion of colonising governments and their subsequent consolidation. Only a small proportion of the devastation has been caused by direct coercion and suppression. Much of the misery has been the result of social and cultural dislocation, poverty, epidemics and life style related illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes. To a significant degree this has also been the fate of people displaced by dams and other large water infrastructure. We now know from many longitudinal studies that even with generous compensation (still rare) the cost in terms of culture, social values, health, family break-down etc. continues to be huge. In the year 2000 the World Commission on Dams estimated their number at between 40 and 80 million. But these figures exclude many others who eventually also have to leave their homes without any compensation because their losses are not so obvious.

In a recent paper titled ‘Lost in Development’s Shadow’, included in a special issue of the journal Water Alternatives published as a ten year retrospective on developments in the dam building field since the World Commission on Dams report, it was conservatively estimated that over 470 million people have been significantly impacted by the downstream effects of dams on agriculture, fishing and other economic activities. The authors explain that the negative impacts of dam building extend much further and affect many more people
than previously acknowledged. They provide many examples where large scale depopulation downstream has occurred as a result of dams upstream. They base their argument on an analysis of the way rivers relate to their catchments and the complex variety of methods that people have developed to take advantage of those ecological relationships. Their analysis highlights the need for knowledge of the connections between rivers and people in order to understand the dependencies that develop over time.

They authors of ‘Lost in Developments’ Shadow’ show that water security means much more than having enough dams to supply towns, industry and large scale irrigated agriculture. A model developed by Michael Cernea hints at the insecurity imposed by large water infrastructure projects on people displaced or exposed to downstream impacts. It was designed to tease out what is involved in the experience of displacement. Developed through extensive field experience and known as the ‘Impoverishment, Risks and Reconstruction’ model its category titles are landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, food insecurity, increased morbidity, loss of access to community resources and community disarticulation. How can we account for the absence of these costs in the standard cost/benefit analysis of the many major dams that have been constructed in recent years? Here the perspective provided by James Scott is helpful. Within the context of the expanding state the people displaced by dams and other large development projects are marginal and the beneficiaries of dam building are central. Living within the informal economy and not paying taxes they are an anonymous mass that does not carry the political weight of the beneficiaries of dams who are identifiable as individuals living within the formal economy. Like the ethnic minorities, indigenous, aboriginal and first peoples whose populations plummeted in the aftermath of initial contact as the various colonial governments (some European some not) expanded and consolidated their regimes in Europe, Asia, the Americas, Oceania and Africa in recent centuries, their fate can be easily ignored because it is so poorly documented.

References:

at: http://www.water-alternatives.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=99&Itemid=1

This article is part of an 11-part series titled ‘International Water Politics’. The series homepage can be accessed here.

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