



BE DAMMED

The Magdalena is Colombia's principal river, it is born in the south west mountains of the country and flows northwards all the way up to the Caribbean Sea for 1,528 kilometers. 86% of the country's gross domestic product is generated in its basin. El Quimbo is a hydroelectric dam under construction in a narrow gorge 150 kilometers downstream from the Magdalena's source. In 2012 the river was diverted to start the construction of the concrete faced rock fill dam that will be 151 meters high, 632 meters long, and will generate a reservoir of 8,250 hectares, covering fertile lands as well as secondary forests. Its installed capacity will be 400 Megawatts, which is expected to achieve an average energy generation of 2,216 Gigawatts per year, for local consumption and for export.

El Quimbo will be the biggest hydroelectric dam of the nation, and is the first hydroelectric dam in Colombia constructed by a private transnational company, Emgesa-Enel, an Italian-Spanish company through its Colombian subsidiary Endesa. It is located 30 km upstream from another large hydroelectric dam called Betania, which started operation in 1987. 6 towns in the department of Huila are directly affected by El Quimbo, and approximately 3000 people will be displaced. The environmental and economic damage is such that the environmental license and construction permit had been denied over the course of 2 decades. However in 2009 the land was declared eminent domain (national interest) by the then President Alvaro Uribe Velez, and the environmental license was suddenly approved. A military battalion was built in the zone to ensure the interests of the company. Affected residents, small farmers, peasants, students, and fisherwomen have organized in civil disobedience under the name of Asoquimbo, and maintain a brave resistance against the abuses from the company and from the state apparatuses.

In the year 2000 the World Commission on Dams published the report *Dams and Development*, concluding that the construction of Large Dams (15 meters or higher) are not sustainable, due to their social, environmental, and economic eroding of local ecosystems and communities. There are more than 45,000 large dams in the world. Due to rotting organic matter in the reservoirs, the water that passes through the turbines is a significant source of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane, contributing 7% of the total global warming human emissions. Geophysicists have reported that the weight of the water reservoirs has tilted the earth's axis and changed its rotation speed. Nearly 80 million people have been displaced by dams.

We are in solidarity with the struggle of Asoquimbo, and with other communities around the world that are resisting extractive policies. We are not speaking about but speaking with them, raising awareness towards shifting the obsolete paradigm which manages nature as a resource, and as an object for exploitation and study. We believe that there is no need to increase electricity supply, but an urgent need to cut its demand.

On September 17th 2013, the 31 year old Nelson Giraldo Posada was shot dead and his throat slit. Nelson was a leader from the Rios Vivos (Living Rivers) movement in Antioquia, Colombia. He was in charge of a group of nearly 50 people (including his wife and 2 daughters) affected and displaced by the Hidroituango hydroelectric project, another large dam under construction near the city of Medellin in the north-west of Colombia. To that date, Nelson was the 67th social activist killed in Colombia this year. There are more than 50 large dams projected across the Colombian territory, 27 of them located in the Huila department.

Carolina Caycedo

The following are excerpts of interviews conducted during this ongoing research, only the occupation of the interviewee is specified for security and anonymity purposes.

FISHERWOMAN

... My grandfather, the father of my mother, was indigenous, pure blooded, and he left me something, not as a lesson, but in the blood, that is more beautiful. It's easy for me to interact with nature, with mother earth and with the river. The river talks to me through the sounds her waves make against the rocks.

... When you hear about something you are simply able to speak about it but when you see it you are [actually] able to bear witness to what is going on. I can also say that the multinational company is a death machine which is not going to bring about any progress.

... After they built Betania fishing stopped, now fish don't come up, there is no upstream migration. We used to be able to fish thirty pounds of chub fish, catfish, everything! It would be enough for our home and to sell. Nowadays we're lucky if we arrive home with two pounds. It was our sustenance, now there are times when there isn't enough to make a broth.

... The first thing we do when we go on strike is to make a communal food pot, we get the fire going. We light a fire in the middle of the road. We all have to add something to the pot and then something comes out of the pot for everybody. Because if we are not capable of agreeing around the pot, we won't be able to agree on other matters.

... We must defend our land at all costs. This is not a stubborn struggle, this is a struggle to defend life, we are not interested in money, we are interested in life. As long as we are united there is no money that can step on us. If we need to give up life, we are ready to give it up. If a leader falls, if she is removed, two new leaders will take her place. So that the work of the fallen leader was not in vain. So that future generations can say we struggled, and we achieved it. I want them to feel proud of the footprint we are leaving.

... I'll keep on with this struggle as long as Yuma gives me the strength to do so.

SENATOR AND OPPOSITION LEADER

... I don't take a position against hydroelectric plants out of principle, as long as they can be well used. They must be used to the benefit of social progress. In many places around the world (where things function well) rivers are interfered with but always under the supervision of a centralized governmental authority. If there is a place where the idea of privatization is absurd, that place is Colombia. The idea of privatizing a river is absurd because they are complex living bodies where these unilateral interventions are not viable.

... El Quimbo is an example of how an intervention shouldn't be carried out. But it is also a most beautiful example of civil resistance. It also represents the absolute disinterest in real national issues by those who govern us and it shows how these transnationals' business deals violate the true interests of a country such as Colombia. It represents the pandering of many political leaders who should have been at the forefront, defending their communities and didn't do so. It represents their disregard for people's lives.

... Multinationals only come to loot us. These transnational companies represent the big capitals of developed countries. The key question is why they come here. To answer this there are two theories: the idiot's answer, which is that they come here to save us from underdevelopment, backwardness and poverty. This is the official rhetoric but in actual fact they only come for one reason: the profit margins are higher here and they have been able to make this money come in freely through globalization. This gives them more reason to try to come here, because they don't risk jeopardizing their business due to a strike or a revolution. It's a process of imperialist re-colonization, meaning that the kind of relationship we have with them is similar to the one we had with Spain, but under the illusion of independence and sovereignty. What's new in comparison to the [Spanish] colony is that this time they rule through the natives.

... We forget that the Magdalena River runs through the country from top to bottom, but rivers get abused to such a degree, that in Colombia a river equals disgrace: flooding, death, pollution, homelessness. Whilst in developed countries a river means everything, here it only means disgrace. And El Quimbo does nothing but make the situation worse. As things currently stand the owner has the right to abandon the dam, even during the worst of winters, further aggravating flooding. They didn't even think about land irrigation or anything like that.

... They own the water (Egesa and Endesa) and they can do whatever they want with it. The government has been creating a legislation that allows them to privatise everything. Whatever they can't sell such as the electromagnetic spectrum or water, they give out as concessions, which is in fact the same thing.

... When the towns get flooded under El Quimbo, there will be nothing left; only memories, but even they will be erased by time, because memories only last while those who remember them are alive.

CIVIL ENGINEER AND DAM MANAGER

... Water is an energy source. A good portion of the energy Colombia uses is hydroelectric. This is where the importance of water lies.

... In current times a medium size hydroelectric plant of around three hundred or five hundred megawatts takes about four or five years to be built.

... There are two types of hydroelectric plants. There are hydroelectric plants with a large volume of water, where you have rivers with a very, very large flow or rivers at a very high altitude with a steep fall. In both cases there can be large amounts of energy.

... Normally, the reservoirs have some leeway, they can store some water for a certain length of time, but if they continue to be filled with a lot of water it becomes necessary to open the flood gates to let the water empty in a controlled way. If the gates are not opened, water can overflow past the wall and it can damage it, can destroy it. This is why opening the flood gates becomes necessary. It's a matter of safety.

... When we have several dams within the same river basin there are many advantages, the oscillating system from a control base can be used for another one. The resulting footprint generated by the hydroelectric plants is not multiplied when they are built in a chain. I would say that from the environment's point of view and in view of managing water resources, it is much better to have plants built in chain.

... I believe that there are several activities that perfectly replace those that were carried out previous to the construction of the dam. Fishing is a very important point for reservoirs (at least in Colombia). The same goes for tourism. Nautical activities also see intense development.

... Generally rivers have a certain capacity for recovery. Reservoirs can increase this capacity for recovery as the water is propelled by the great fall it goes through at a specific moment. The quality of the water can be improved in this way. However, if it is a very very polluted river, the best way to avoid contamination is through prevention and not through a corrective process.

... The reservoir has a great purification capability and it reduces a large quantity of organic matter carried by the river. However this generates a certain exchange within the environment as gases are released: Due to the decomposition of organic matter, and as oxygen is removed from water, a large production of hydro sulfuric acid is released.

... There are many [geological] faults near the foundations, there's a lot of seismic movement which has caused weakening within the foundation terrain and this must be fixed. Many concrete reinforcements must be made in order to stabilize the soil so that structures won't be affected by landslides, collapse or by terrain failure.

... Even when they have been completed, some plants must be abandoned either because there is too much sediment or because their operation is no longer economically viable. But in general, a well maintained plant can last very many years.

... What is left under the water? Soil. It's the same as any lake, there is soil, and above it there is water.

ENVIRONMENTALIST AND POLITICIAN

... Biodiversity can't be seen in isolation, it is part of a whole: geology, water, cosmology, it is the relationship amongst species.

... My work is to develop the integration of different disciplines for regional planning processes, for working with communities, the search for solutions for the protection of the environment and habitats but also for the protection of cultural territories.

... The construction of the dam affected many things. I have no doubt that even if compensation and benefits were demanded by the Constitutional Court, the ethnic territory would still be affected.

... Energy, I would say, is the main subject for the future of this planet. If we manage to find adequate mechanisms for sustainable energy we will be able to overcome many of the great challenges that we have. Amongst them -and a very dramatic one- is global climate change. We are seeing the effects of global climate change and the great natural disasters which are generated by this climate transformation. This has a lot to do with firstly, ecosystem usage and secondly, with the energy systems that feed the planet at present.

... The Prevention Principle in environmental law is a fundamental principle for any kind of action. When there is no complete security before an action takes place, it is better not to do it because of the risks that this action might entail. If there is scientific evidence which proves that a certain procedure is not going to have a future impact then it's not necessary to apply the prevention principle. But if we don't know what future impact an action might eventually have, because we don't yet have the necessary scientific knowledge, then we must apply the prevention principle. This means holding back until we get to know it and understand it.

GEOGRAPHER AND RESEARCHER

... They can't control water, it is a resource that flows, that moves, it is very difficult to establish its borders. It is a human right, they can't say that it doesn't belong to us.

... The company's original proposal was to favor the development of modern citizens with access to services. At the time many of the settlements were informal, taking basic services there was a way of formalizing and recognizing households, people feel it is a way of being acknowledged. This is why they pay for services. However, with the introduction of market strategies social aspects are disregarded and the focus is turned



to economic interests. You can see this happened with the company, they do nothing but look at the financial and economic reports in order to adjust their rhetoric and narratives in relation to the offer of water services.

... Now it [the company] invests a lot in the environmental side of things, constantly telling consumers that water is scarce, but water is not scarce. They put rates up using this argument and consumers feel forced to pay.

... They are now implementing pre-paid water services; they install a device which works using a top-up system. This system has been criticized because people are the ones who cut them-

selves off. The company relieves itself from the political weight of cutting off services: families have a direct relationship with the machine and the company is spared from this dispute. This technology is imported from South Africa, they are pioneers in pre-paid technology for the provision of basic services.

... The company claims that they are implementing technology which adapts to people's paying capabilities. In actual fact, they are fragmenting the city by generating inequality. It divides people into two groups: those who use pre-paid services and those who use the normal service. This can only be done by a company with a lot of money because installing pre-paid systems is very expensive.

... The company's energy production is already vast. This dam would be used for energy export or to supply the remaining rural areas, but I believe what we already have is sufficient. They have so much, the existing dams already supply the area. They take up 25% of the national market which according to the law is the maximum percentage a company can take to avoid monopoly. They would have to sell it abroad, it's certain that this project is about expansion for energy export.

... Circulating capital is necessary, dismantling dams is a way of making capital circulate, because there is a surplus of capital. If a company has an enormous cash flow, they buy other companies because they can't let that money stay still. They in-

vest in something that will make them more money. This is the market's dynamic: accumulation. This is how the economy has moved in the last years.

... Companies develop new visions for a country. You should see the rhetoric companies use. The rhetoric surrounding this project is very powerful, the narratives are very strong. They must be properly analyzed, they are narratives that people either support or reject.

YOUNG COMMUNITY ORGANIZER AND ARTIST

... We are very connected to nature. We are connected with life and the protection of the environment, with mother earth and water... Older people show us their way of farming with chemicals which, in our opinion, is completely illogical, wrong and mistaken. We are creating consciousness for good soil use and land rootedness.

... We work with Asoquimbo as a collective but our participation is as young people. This is not a way of avoiding older people, but it's just that we, young people, have a very different way of understanding the world. We also serve as intermediaries between our parents. If we farm using healthy ecological methods and if we eat something healthy, we are going to see the life-changes and the change in people's attitude.

... The company says that there are very few people in opposition and that they paid them off. These people feel they benefited from it and believe this is for the best. But for me it was a total disgrace, from the moment I knew that there were building it and that they came to do a survey based on stupidities. Some were satisfied with a pittance, they only sought to receive some money. Families are at stake here. This is what happened to me, I have a son, L.F., he has just turned four and now he lives in another city with his mum. She went there to look for work. When they purchased all the land surrounding the water they created unemployment as all the farms we used to work at stopped functioning. They bought them and then abandoned them. We have been reclaiming them to return them to productivity.

... Destruction, disgrace, dishonor ... and much poverty, too much poverty. They violate everything we have. Everything that belongs to our ancestors, what they left us. They have indiscriminately looted graves, they couldn't care less. The only thing they care about is being able to produce energy or very good energy, as they say. This energy which we are never going to see and in fact we don't even need. They came to destroy us and to make people fight amongst themselves, but we are stronger than them. People are uniting, indignation creates groups and we are one of those indignant groups.

LOCAL ACTIVIST AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPER

... I like to climb the hill and dive into the river. In those few seconds from the moment you leave the hill and before you hit the water's surface... for me there are few sensations in life that represent total freedom more than those few seconds.

... The territory is part of one's own body. I mean, in order for my body to survive many other factors are required, many elements are needed to sustain it. The territory is what gives this possibility to be able to live. But at the same time it is my home. My indigenous ancestors travelled through this entire territory, so it is an ancestral right to be able to move freely here. But you respect certain places, you wouldn't go looking around your mum's bedside table rummaging through her things, even if it is part of your home. Equally there are parts of the land, of my body, that must be respected.

... Water systems have existed much before borders existed between countries. Speaking of Colombia's water resources or the Brazilian or Ecuadorian ones is pure human stupidity. It should be thought about in terms of continents, or bio-regions, such as the Amazon, the Andean region, the Caribbean.

... The company has tried to determine who is affected in the narrowest possible way. At one point they wanted to consider only people who have been displaced as a consequence of the reservoir as affected. But they don't acknowledge the local economies that exist in the region and are dependent on it.

... I don't have any romantic ideas about how the past was, things weren't perfect. There were a few land owners and the land was, perhaps, not being used in the best way, but this is not a logical reason to bury the entire territory.

... If people were previously living, they are now just surviving and this survival is becoming more difficult and complicated with more challenges. Slowly more and more people are leaving the region. Some leave because they accept money from the company and others leave in despair of what's happening.

... The biggest impact caused by projects such as El Quimbo is that they affect communities which to a large or small degree are self-sufficient, communities that can live from their own work in the land and river. Generally these communities are not as dependent; they don't pay much in taxes and don't create much money for the government and to support the political classes. So these communities of producers which are more autonomous must be turned to being consumers. The social fabric and the food chains in the local economy, on which people depended and lived well from, are destroyed. On the other hand there is environmental destruction at a regional level through the loss of biodiversity, the loss of vital ecosystems and the destruction of the river as an ecosystem.

... From a personal point of view, the geography of my childhood and my family will remain under water. Neither my children nor my nephews will get to know it. We'll have to scuba dive to try to get to know what it used to be like. This is [an act of] uprooting, it is a result of dismissing that there are entire communities, populations, individuals, there are ecosystems, sacred sites, archeological sites, all of this is also lost within the reservoir. We didn't even mention that a ring of more or less one hundred meters surrounding the dam will belong to the company and the general public will lose access to this area. It will be illegal for us to get to the dam even to fill a glass with water, because even water will become the multinational's property. Many things get lost under the surface of a dam, from a personal, social and territorial point of view.

... The state and companies have a monopoly over these concepts. They are the ones who have the right to define what progress is, what development is and not the population in question. I believe that "agro-ecology", what is known today as permaculture, would mean progress and development for this region. We

also need electricity, we are not radical primitivists. The hydroelectric plant called La Pita is not so far away. It's a plant that doesn't have a wall, or a reservoir. It cuts in half the basin of the Garzon River. This branch that it creates moves some turbines that create electricity and then the water returns to its natural course. Fish migration is not affected.

... As time passes it becomes harder to deny the role that projects such as mines and dams play for climate change, which is speeding up. Even though climate change is a natural process, human beings, industrialization, extractive projects and consumerism are accelerating and deepening it. The most affected by these planetary changes are the least implicated in the development of the industries that are causing it. The perpetrators have enough money and privilege to be able to look after themselves and their close ones, while the others are just at best surviving and at worst suffering.

... I have photographed more than two hundred species, when the company took its first census of affected biodiversity they acknowledged less than twenty species.

... In contrast to my other colleagues from this movement, I am not interested in the government giving us subsidies for the support of agriculture or to support food producing rural communities. In the end it will be the urban communities who will need the subsidies. We don't want subsidies, we want autonomy and the space to exercise our self-determination to carry out life-sustaining projects.

SHAMAN

... The change of the planet is due to nature being sick, its veins have been cut, and nature is connected to its rivers in the same way our veins are connected to the brain. When these veins explode, when they are sliced, nature begins to fail. The blockage is a spiritual knot; a dammed river is a river which is disconnected from the planet. Rivers are born from lagoons, when the river is tied up, the lagoon becomes disconnected from the sea and from other lagoons around the planet, people become disconnected.

... As far as mitigation is concerned it will become very difficult to understand each other because we are two very different cultures. One is a culture which, under the guise of progress, puts a price on everything: on water, land, air, everything. For us, water can't be bought by anybody; nobody owns the air, the earth, the trees. Whilst in one culture there are many owners and administrators, in our culture the owner is the creator, who created [resources] for people who live here. But if a price is put on nature, diseases begin to spread together with disagreements about wealth. It will end, every day there is less nature. Material wealth is all that's thought about but the fact that the earth has a spirit is forgotten, a tree has a spirit, nature has an order for its waters, but today this order is broken.

... The mother is going to tax us and when she taxes us we won't have anything to pay her with. We must look after and sustain nature's order.

... There will only be the sun, not a green thing, no water, only deserts.

... We must think from now to many centuries ahead, not from one day to the next. What will happen to this planet many centuries from now? Will it be alive? Or will it be ill? A leader, indigenous or not must have some knowledge of nature, in order to be able to guarantee the conservation of species.

INDIGENOUS LEADER

... A dam and a few ports are threatening our sacred territory. The constitutional court's decision favoured the company. There was never talk of a preliminary consultation but only of direct agreement and nationalisation. The court claims that we took too long to respond and that we didn't take part in meetings, but at that point there were armed and paramilitary groups in the area where there was support for the company. Political leaders and their allies intimidated us in this area and a few leaders were killed. They silenced us.

... Preliminary consultations and environmental licenses all happen very fast, four months are not enough to analyse all the information. This affects the core of the population, from a social, environmental and cultural point of view. We don't accept compensation or mitigation. How is the government going to make this up to us after undermining people's rights?

... As a result of the construction of infrastructure many indigenous populations have been left without their "father". They have been left without their ancestral law, their own system, their own order, their paradigm. They are now dependent on the national government's system. They are waiting like animals, like pigs that depend and feed from the hay that the government gives them. These populations have lost their sacred place and spiritual process together with their communities and cultural practices. It's the same for farmers, they need to grow crops and harvest, not simply receive money to get by. This is not enough.

ENVIRONMENTALIST AND PROFESSOR

... Hydroelectric plants are like great sculptures, they are monumental.

... Water demands in Colombia are of different kinds and this creates divisions for water management. In Colombia there is bad management of ecosystems and therefore bad water management. Water cycles are destabilized by the deep disturbance of ecosystems in the Andean area, and the Magdalena's basin. There has been disturbance in the water cycle which produces large amounts of sedimentation in the Magdalena River, and as the climate changes this is becoming taxing. The wet season brings us flooding and the dry season brings drought.



... Around 35% of the Magdalena River's sedimentation is caused by deforestation. This is a morphological change which goes hand in hand with bad water management, bad agricultural management and excessive waste: 70% of water is used for agriculture. There is also enormous backwardness in terms of decontamination and water treatment.

... Colombia has a large wealth of water resources and I believe that there is a culture which treats water as if it was an infinite resource and this is no longer the case. These attitudes and these ways of seeing the world go far beyond the situation that created them. The abundance of the past is very relative nowadays.

... There is a very simplistic vision of the land and hence a very simplistic and antiquated vision of ecosystems. The ruling classes don't recognize Colombia as a mega diverse country, geographically complex, with hundreds of different ecosystems. They treat those ecosystems as if it was a homogenous country, and big mistakes are made through this process. Re-education is necessary.

... Energy and agriculture are fundamental facts of civilization. [The development of] contemporary civilization is connected to the moment in which mankind is able to control energy, to catch it and manage it. Many of us think that [currently] it is not managed efficiently; there is an enormous energy waste. But whatever the situation might be, energy continues to be a fundamental need and this is why in Colombia the production of more energy is necessary.

... In Colombia the benefit-cost analyses which are required by great mega-projects such as El Quimbo, are unfortunately not carried out. One knows that a dam such as this, approved without a strict analysis of social, environmental and economic benefit-cost - will always bring a great human tragedy with it. My impression with El Quimbo is that they didn't carry out enough studies and that they didn't manage the communities with any kind of sensitivity at all.

... Colombia is a country that continues to be administrated from Bogota. Bogota is hugely insensitive to those out of their sight, because amongst other things they don't know their country, they barely know it. Many of the big decision-makers in Colombia who are economists and who have those kinds of professions have a very limited vision of what this country is like in a region such as El Quimbo.

... El Quimbo symbolizes the great conflicts which are approaching Colombia in relation to the use of hydroelectric power. I believe that Colombia's great hydroelectric potential must be used, it would be absurd not to. However the point is that not all of it can be used because in the end the social and environmental costs which are not justifiable, but one can't forget that hydroelectric energy also has great benefits. It is very cheap, renewable, low emissions energy, although there is also an ongoing discussion about emissions due to the decomposition of organic matter.

... Hydroelectric plants and mines have been declared of national interest, or eminent domain, which gives priority to those projects over fundamental and collective human rights as well as everything that is stated in the constitution. The national interest wipes out all the other rights. It is enough for the president to sign a decree to declare a project or a region of national interest.

RESOURCES:

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