



Legacy of Dams on the Zambezi: *Group Works to Right Wrongs at Kariba Dam*

By **Basilwizi Trust**

The Kariba Dam on the Zambezi River is one of Africa's largest dams, and one with a particularly sorry legacy for those forced to make way for it. Just miles from the huge reservoir in the Zambezi Valley live several tribes who are among the poorest, most remote and least developed in the country. Their predicament is largely attributed to their forced removal from their riverside communities in the late 1950s for the construction of Kariba. For almost 50 years, they have lived in isolation and with few significant development initiatives.

At least 57,000 Tonga people living along both sides of the river were moved for the dam. These people were not compensated for their removal and have never directly benefited from the project. Their lives have been dramatically changed by the harsh environment of the resettlement areas. Their new places are marred by low and erratic rainfall, poor rocky and sandy soils and tsetse fly infestations.

Kariba's resettlement process has been called a "poorly conceived and trauma-ridden crash program" by experts familiar with the case. A report on Kariba by the World Commission on Dams notes, "It was reported that the people to be resettled 'were treated like animals or things rounded up and packed in lorries' to be moved to their new destination ... The racist attitude of the time did not consider the resettlement of Africans as a problem." The dam's poor record of resettlement left a huge black mark on the project, which has never been adequately addressed by the parties responsible for building the dam. The colonial and post independence governments and the major funders and beneficiaries of the dam continue to neglect the relocated people on the Zimbabwean side of the reservoir.

Basilwizi Trust is an NGO in Zimbabwe committed to building the capacity of the people affected by Kariba Dam to help them change the conditions under which they live. We work towards empowering these communities – men and women, young and old, able and disabled – with knowledge and resources required to enhance their self-reliance and self-determination.

Telling their Story

Scores of people who experienced the inhuman displacement are still alive today and still narrate the story. Between 1957-1962 the entire population that lived along the Zambezi River was resettled onto the rocky and infertile plateaus on either side of the Zambezi

River to make way for the Kariba Dam and its reservoir. About 23,000 people on Zimbabwean side and 34,000 on Zambian side were relocated by the Kariba Dam. These figures could be a major underestimate, as they were derived from a census five years before the flooding. Some have suggested the figure of displaced persons could be more than 100,000.

As with many other large dam projects, more attention was given to the technical feasibility and national economic gains than to the well-being of displaced people. Families were separated. Homes, livelihoods, and traditions were lost to the reservoir. According to the WCD Report, about 57% of the land swallowed by the reservoir was arable land, previously owned by the Tonga people.

In Zimbabwe, dam-displaced people were moved into areas where crop production was very difficult due to low rainfall, poor soils and destruction by wild animals. At the time of the move, the then government promised that they would provide water and other social services. To date, little has been done to address these issues.

Today, the traumatic experiences of their forced relocation still grips the communities and the sad story of their inhuman relocation has been passed from one generation to the other. However, this does not imply that absolutely nothing has been done for the people in the Zambezi Valley. The post independence government, through the local authorities and other government departments in the districts, has made some developmental inroads in these areas. However, these fall far short of mitigating against the dam-induced problems, that the communities still face.

Laying a Case for Reparations

In 1994 a Catholic priest, named Father Mike Tremel, who was stationed in Binga among the relocated people, wrote a book on the experiences of the Tonga people and their forced removal from the Zambezi River. His book, *The People of the Great River*, revived the memories of the Tonga and revealed the socio-economic conditions the people are still experiencing because of the relocation. This was the first step toward uniting the Tonga around the issue.

In 1996 the Zambezi River Authority (ZRA) – a bi-national governmental body created to develop and administer the Kariba Dam and reservoir – acknowledged the need for reparations. While not accepting any liability for the forced relocation, the ZRA recognised that the resettlement did not take cognisance of the needs and concerns of the affected people, and that insufficient time and resources were made available for the massive relocation exercise. ZRA further acknowledged that compensation was not provided (the case of those displaced in Zimbabwe) or was grossly insufficient (the case of those displaced in Zambia).

On the basis of its own assessment of the chronic problems in the Zambezi Valley, the ZRA established the Zambezi Valley Development Fund (ZVDF) in 2000, and made recommendations to both the Zambian and Zimbabwean governments for the implementation of development projects to address basic needs in the region.

However, the funds raised by ZRA have been grossly inadequate compared to the development needs of the communities. To date, only a few grinding mills have been provided from monies raised through golf tournaments and the sale of books and videos. Tariffs on water usage and electricity generated by the dam – originally meant to form part of benefit sharing with the local communities – have never been implemented.

Moreover, although genuinely sympathetic to the Tonga plight, the ZRA did not have the mandate of the affected peoples, and effectively excluded them from the advocacy processes. As a result, the ZRA efforts died a natural death without achieving any meaningful results in Zimbabwe.

The study conducted by the World Commission on Dams (WCD) among the affected communities also inspired the Tonga to take up the challenge. The WCD report provides invaluable insights into the social and ecological impact of the Kariba Dam in Zambia and Zimbabwe. (See www.dams.org for the full report.)

Thus, the study conducted by ZRA and its failure to spearhead the issue of reparations, coupled by the WCD study, both inspired the Tonga in 2002 to form their own organization that would represent them effectively. Then Basilwizi Trust was formed. Basilwizi is a Tonga word meaning "People of the Great River."

Basilwizi Trust believes that the people affected should take the lead in the advocacy process and Basilwizi should act as facilitator for empowering the people through training in advocacy and lobby skills, negotiation skills and conflict management skills which are all key to the success of the reparation issue.

Firstly, empowerment through advocacy and lobby skills is crucial to enable them to determine their own destiny by influencing decisions and national practices that have a bearing on them, and also have control over their resources for the development of the Valley. This is being done through Basilwizi's Advocacy & Lobby Programme. Secondly, we work to enhance the capacity of local communities to meet their basic material needs like economic justice, food security, water, etc, through the Community Development Programme. The group's objectives include the following:

- Secure reparations in the form of sustainable development programmes/projects for the Tonga and Korekore people who were displaced by the Kariba Dam;
- Assist beneficiaries to improve their economic well-being through people-centred projects, and by helping them utilize and control their natural resources;
- Promote the cultural development of the beneficiaries;
- Improve the quality of education of the beneficiaries by providing modern education infrastructure and services;
- Provide an education fund for professional training of the beneficiaries

Our Advocacy & Lobbying Programme is working to obtain national and international recognition of the fundamental injustice of the project's forced relocation, and of its

continued negative impact on the livelihoods of the affected peoples; to empower affected people to successfully advocate for developmental changes in their areas, and to press for legislation and policies which ensure that the affected peoples have access to, and benefit from, the resources generated by the Kariba Dam.

For Basilwizi to accomplish these objectives, it has to advocate from a well informed position in as far as the Kariba Dam Project is concerned and all the facts that are needed to convince the national government and the international stakeholders like the World Bank. To accomplish this Basilwizi commissioned a desk study in late 2003. This study analyzed the legal implications of the relocation process and also the socio-economic impacts of the displacement on the people. We are now following up with a Field Study to collect primary data from affected communities. The Field Study should be complete by May and then the lobby process will begin.

The Education Programme

Basilwizi promotes the empowerment of the beneficiaries by providing access to education through sponsorships for both formal and non-formal education. The Programme provides scholarships to disadvantaged children, orphans and those from low-income families.

The communities affected by the Kariba Dam are among the poorest in the country hence they cannot afford to send their children to school. Illiteracy has been always one issue that even delayed the process of advocating for the reparations because it was not until the 1990s that the first university graduates emerged among the Tonga people. Before that, educated people among the Tonga were very few. Thus, Basilwizi would like to overcome this problem by assisting as many children as possible. Schools are very few among the resettled people. This has led to many Tonga lacking formal education as they have to travel long distances to schools and in some cases outside their districts.

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