

**RIVER BASIN DEVELOPMENT:
DILEMMAS FOR PEASANTS AND PLANNERS**

by

Bill Derman



CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
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ABSTRACT

In the Gambia River Basin, as in other parts of West Africa, the more effective utilization of the river system is seen as a key means to increase and intensify agricultural production and avoid reliance on the importation of fossil fuels. River basin development has been part of donor-proposed solutions for coping with Africa's food crisis.

This paper examines how planners in West African nations are caught between the donors and their own rural populations. The dilemmas for planners revolve around how to attain the necessary outside resources and funding to construct a series of dams, and how to increase both the presence and the power of the state in the rural areas. The dilemmas for the peasantries are to keep the state at bay while using both donor and national state programs and resources to increase the income and security of rural life. To illustrate the interactions between national planners, donor agencies, and rural populations, the paper examines the Gambia River Basin Development Organization (OMVG). Four nations are represented in the OMVG: The Gambia, Guinea-Conakry, Senegal, and Guinea-Bissau.

RESUME

Dans le bassin du fleuve Gambie, ainsi que dans les autres parties de l'Afrique de l'Ouest, une utilisation plus efficace du système fluvial est considéré comme un moyen clef pour accroître et intensifier la production agricole et éviter la dépendance à l'égard des importations de combustibles fossiles. Le développement des bassins des fleuves est une partie des solutions proposées par les donateurs pour lutter contre la crise alimentaire en Afrique.

Ce document examine la façon dont les planificateurs sont pris entre les souhaits des donateurs et de leur propre population rurale. Le dilemme pour les planificateurs est de savoir comment obtenir les ressources extérieurs et les fonds nécessaires pour construire une série de barrages, et comment renforcer à la fois la présence et le pouvoir de l'état dans les zones rurales. Le dilemme pour les populations rurales est de garder l'état à distance tout en utilisant les programmes des donateurs et de l'état pour accroître le revenu et la sécurité dans les zones rurales. Pour illustrer les interactions existantes entre les planificateurs nationaux, les agences donatrices et la population rurale, ce document examine l'Organisation pour la mise en valeur du fleuve Gambie (OMVG). Quatre nations sont représentées au sein de l'OMVG: la Gambie, la Guinée-Conakry, le Sénégal, et la Guinée-Bissau.

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INTRODUCTION

West Africa faces multiple crises: increasing hunger, environmental degradation, indebtedness, diminution of export revenues, rates of urbanization that stretch all available resources, among others. These crises are interconnected, although this paper focuses only on river basin development as one proposed option to generate solutions to some, but not all, of these problems.

With the decline in total rainfall since 1968 and the often poor timing of the rains, water availability is a critical constraint. In the Gambia River Basin, as in many parts of West Africa, the more effective utilization of the few river systems is seen as a key means to increase and intensify agricultural production and avoid reliance on the importation of fossil fuels. River basin development, which includes irrigated agriculture, has been part of donor-proposed solutions (for example, the Long Term Sahel Development Program and the Organization of African Unity's strategy known as the Lagos Plan of Action) for coping with Africa's food crisis.

In terms of development strategies, the late 1980s are a time of transition from emphasis on smallholders, direct assistance to the poor, and popular participation to increased production (both for domestic use and export), with less attention paid to how it may be done. Rural populations become a resource for production, not people who produce in order to live and whose culture and way of life have intrinsic value. It has become rare for planners and developmentalists to consider how rural people live rather than just how much they produce.¹

This paper examines how planners in West African nations are caught between the donors and their own rural populations. I argue that these planners are not unwitting actors in a play written in Washington, Paris, or Riyadh but are themselves playwrights, although they lack sufficient internal resources to produce their work. Moreover, their relations with the actors and actresses (the rural West African populations) are sullen at best, tempestuous at worst, as they try to engage them in roles which violate the canons of the profession. (Perhaps if peasants were regarded as professionals they might gain greater respect.) The concern here is to understand the central dilemmas for the planners, on the one hand, and the rural populations,

on the other. The basic issue of whether the overall Gambia River Basin development strategy is likely to succeed is discussed, but only insofar as it forms the essential background to the structure and content of what appear to be, at least for the present, intractable problems. In my view, the contradictory interests and perspectives simultaneously at work require enormous political mobilization to resolve, but at the present time rural populations and peasantries are disenchanted and suspicious of many of the current programs and policies of their central governments. Their past experiences with their respective national governments and their agencies tend to be viewed in negative terms; these include pricing policies, extension services, input supply and corruption. The dilemmas for planners revolve around how to attain the necessary outside resources and funding to construct a series of dams, and how to increase both the presence and the power of the state in the rural areas. The dilemmas for the peasantries are to keep the state at bay while using both donor and national state programs and resources to increase the income and security of rural life.²

Rivers and their drainage networks are natural energy systems for economic planning and development. The formation and implementation of river basin development plans has to overcome ecological, regional, and national differences. The nub of one set of difficulties concerns who does the planning. The planning process proceeds from the overall objectives (typically irrigation, production of hydropower, navigation) to the more specific questions of where the dams should be located, what their characteristics should be, whether turbines should or can be installed, where the electricity will go, and what kinds of crops should be grown with what technological packages on the proposed irrigated perimeters. The state or its agency seeks and maneuvers for control over the outcome of river basin development. It does this against both multinational donors, who want to maximize influence for their donations and loans, and peasants, who want to maintain the rural economy, as tattered as it is.

To illustrate the interactions between national planners, donor agencies, and rural populations I will examine the Gambia River Basin Development Organization.³ This organization reflects contemporary belief in the efficacy of top-down planning despite qualms from the rural sectors and some donors.⁴ Although many individuals in donor development organizations and

West African governments would prefer alternative planning models, this view has not yet penetrated the higher levels of decision making in The Gambia, Guinea, and Senegal.

THE GAMBIA RIVER DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION (OMVG)

The Gambia River Development Organization is currently made up of four nations: The Gambia, Guinea-Conakry, Senegal, and Guinea-Bissau. As an interstate organization, clear limits are set with respect to its power and authority. The latter resides, for example, in determining water-use policy but not the type of irrigation authority to be organized. The major policy decisions are made by the four presidents and a council of ministers. These two groups take the major decisions, informed by the head of OMVG (the high commissioner, currently Malik John) and a relatively large technical staff which includes expatriate experts. The four presidents, council of ministers, and the high commission have adopted a three-dam strategy as the keystone for basin development. The governments of the four nations have assumed they express the wishes of their respective populations and thus did not need to consult the rural population or solicit its input. This, of course, is not unusual in current postcolonial peasant-state relations or in most large development projects. One might add that since the rural populations are not well informed about planned developments and the results of studies, many rumors and much misinformation circulate in the countryside.

The development strategy for the Gambia River Basin is still being planned but has not been implemented. No dams have been built, although a design study has been done of one, a feasibility study has been made of a second, and the studies on the third have begun. The three projects are an antisalt barrage at Balingho in The Gambia and high dams at Kekreti (in Niokolo-Koba National Park), in Senegal, and at Kouya, near the confluence of the Litti and the Gambia River in the Guinean Fouta-Djallon highlands. No irrigation perimeters are being constructed, but there is a design for the prototype of such schemes after the dam. In addition, there is a relatively large (by West African standards) irrigation project at Jahaly Pacharr in The Gambia, which many Gambian officials would like to see serve as the model for future

irrigation projects.⁵ Because the present low water levels in the river lead to the advance of the salt tongue, it is currently not feasible to increase significantly the amount of land under dry season irrigation. As an aside, current plans to increase dry-season perimeters in eastern Senegal may jeopardize Jahaly Pacharr and other dry season perimeters in The Gambia under conditions of poor rainfall and low river flow.

The essence of OMVG's strategy for the moment rests on the three dams, which are to provide adequate water in the dry and rainy season for the irrigation of more than 85,000 hectares (53,500 in The Gambia, 16,500 in Senegal, and 15,000 in Guinea-Conakry, although this latter total has not been subject to the same detailed studies as those carried out in Senegal and The Gambia). Most of the land is slated for double-cropped irrigated rice, but other crops will be grown on soils less suitable for rice. The two high dams are to produce hydroelectricity to be used for potential mines and urban areas. The antisalt barrage is also to serve as a bridge to facilitate transport within Senegal and between the Gambia River's north and south banks (the nearest bridge being Goulombo, 450 kilometers upriver), and boat locks will be constructed at Balingho to improve and increase river transport. The subsidiary aspects of OMVG's program, including forestry, livestock, and rainfed agriculture, take a distant second place to securing funding for the dams, which are the centerpiece of the current strategy.

The logic for the dam/irrigation strategy rests on a model developed by Clark Ross for OMVG and the UN Development Programme, which examined the outcome for projected continued population growth. This model, which projects increasing food dependency without basic changes in the basin's agricultural systems, helped form the base for developing programs to increase agricultural production. Since the model was developed (and subsequently updated) there has been no diminution of population increase in Guinea, The Gambia, and Senegal. It might be noted however, that the rate of population increase in the rural areas of at least The Gambia is much less than in the urban areas. Nonetheless, most agree that the consistently high importation of basic foods by Senegalese, Guineans, and Gambians both within and without the Gambia River Basin is a major problem reflecting an overarching agrarian crisis. Deteriorating patterns of rainfall, dramatic population increases, and high rates of urbanization, have led to the conclusion that intensification of agriculture must proceed as rapidly as possible.

West African governments currently place highest priority on food security and self-sufficiency, combined with self-sustaining agricultural growth. This represents a shift in focus from the pre-drought 1960s in West Africa. While not questioning the importance of these goals, it is unclear the extent to which they have been developed to fit with changing donor analyses and requirements. Thus, while relatively isolated agricultural areas may not have been given the highest priority by national governments, they may be important to some donors, who then create new opportunities for projects that national governments may not want to undertake by themselves. River basin development fits more with national priorities, however, than do other rural development projects.⁶ I have suggested elsewhere (Derman 1977 and 1984)⁷ that the donors have undertaken projects in areas considered peripheral to national governments. Partly this is due to concerns for rural peoples who were not benefitting from externally provided assistance and partly to West African governments' leveraging donors to provide resources that those governments themselves were unwilling or unable to provide. This approach has led to some tensions between national governments and donors over control and management of these projects. In addition, many of them are abandoned by national governments if funding is not continued.

The fact that outside funding is necessary for river basin development often means that the official rationale for such projects is different from that envisaged by national planners. This is a complex, multilayered issue. Often, political goals are hidden behind donor requirements or other masks, making project analysis difficult. Quite clearly, the major issue for West African governments is not the nutritional well-being of peasants, but the provision of cheap food for urban populations (including the large number of state employees) and the politically volatile popular classes, combined with sustaining national revenues. Although difficult to assess at present, there is a strong desire among government employees to invest in rice production and own land, an urge historically lacking but now spurred by the likelihood of donor backing and anticipated price supports for rice crops.⁸ This is not to say many members of West African governments are not concerned about the well-being of rural populations, but that political concerns dictate other priorities.

What, then, are the dynamics underlying the Gambia River Development Organization? Embedded within OMVG is a vision -- even as one disagrees with the specifics -- of a West Africa less subject to the vagaries of climate, enjoying a more productive agriculture, and having a greatly enlarged hydroelectric grid. This vision has its roots in industrialization and the power of advanced technology to overcome constraints to economic progress (development). It is also a vision of controlling and mastering water to overcome what is conceived as the decisive limitation to intensifying agriculture. The Minister of Water Resources for The Gambia visited the Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States and upon his return observed that environmental and socioeconomic studies must have been done there to avoid the negative consequences of such vast construction. He went on to comment sharply that those who would deny West Africa dams are denying Africans the same technology they themselves used to industrialize and achieve economic progress. Whether the minister is factually correct is not the issue. What is important is the political point he made and the responsive chord he struck among many Gambian planners.

What kinds of dilemmas are faced by national political leaders and planners in the effort to secure funding for the dams and implement an irrigation strategy? A major set concerns the difficulties of multinational cooperation, both in forging an alliance of interests among four nations and with potential donors who have their own interests in their development assistance programs. Neither task is easy, and both currently border on failure. What holds the four nations together is that each wants, first and foremost, its own dam,⁹ which is perceived as the key goal (and symbol) of the development program for the basin. This has become more complicated than anticipated because the ecology, topography, and soils along the river imply different strategies for each part. These strategies are, in the final analysis, determined by each nation and then have to be integrated. At best, planning takes into account and protects the interests of each nation.

At one level, OMVG and its member states are saying: In an imperfect world, give us the best of what is available and let us try. At another level, they are not in a position to generate the capital internally or provide the material and knowledge necessary to plan and implement the proposed strategy. This renders them dependent on donors, which leads to

conflict. In the case of OMVG, it is questionable whether the organization would have been created and sustained without donor assistance, yet when one of the donor contractors, the University of Michigan, reached conclusions inconsistent with the pace and scale of OMVG plans, considerable controversy arose. (I will return to this in the conclusion.) Given the larger economic crisis in which the four nations involved find themselves, they are dependent on donors to implement their development strategies.

The initial political climate in which OMVG was formed is very different from the current one. OMVG benefitted from the multilateral and donor cooperative emphasis of the late 1970s. For example, the UN Development Programme and the Sahel Development Program stressed an integration and coordination of donor efforts, partly due to the reluctance of any single donor to commit to a strategy before it was fully developed. Then the political and economic climate began to shift, and (for different reasons) Senegal, Guinea (Conakry), and The Gambia had to renegotiate their foreign debts and comply with IMF and World Bank requirements. The donor perception of the Gambia River Basin possibilities changed greatly between the late 1970s and 1986, with the result that OMVG has had to find alternative donors and play one against another. This strategy is inevitably quite limited due to the weak leverage of these nations. Furthermore, the donors seek not only to influence OMVG but also one another, which has produced conflict among OMVG, UNDP, the French, the British, and USAID. USAID has been ambivalent about the river basin development although a major donor of OMVG. In addition, USAID funded the controversial studies by the University of Michigan. The coordination of donor activities has been difficult for OMVG and ironically has relied on expatriates provided by donor organizations to OMVG. The consequence has been an extraordinarily time-consuming effort to meet donor wishes and needs, even if contradictory. (I will return to this in the conclusion). The outcome for rural populations in this process is clear, if painful. In the search for financing, it is difficult to focus on the rural population's long-term needs, and the degree to which they are included in the thinking of planners, other than rhetorically, is problematic.

DEVELOPMENT DILEMMAS: THE PEASANT SIDE

On the other side of the arena are the producers, the rural populations, in whom there has been little interest to date. Space limitations preclude details about the rural history of The Gambia, Guinea, and Senegal and the various efforts by the state to increase rural production. In general, The Gambia and Senegal have tried to control peanut production, the major agricultural export of both nations. Guinean agricultural history within the basin is quite different, since the state relies on mineral exports for its revenues; agriculture, particularly in the isolated zones of the basin, has played a peripheral role, nationally but not necessarily for local units of government. Partly in response to excessive reliance on groundnut production, combined with low prices in the export market, increased food imports, and a decline in rural productivity, Senegal and The Gambia seek to diversify their agricultural production. One must add the desire by bureaucrats to buy land and hire labor, a tendency which remains embryonic basinwide but is increasingly a factor in specific local areas. Throughout much of the basin, peasants retain control over land and the range of associated productive decisions. The proposed shift toward double-cropped irrigated rice entails changing the relationships of peasants to land and to labor.

I found no evidence that members of state agencies view peasants as other than objects to be taught, educated, guided, and coerced into following state plans. Peasants were not viewed as resources from whom one could learn. The ideology of development as expressed by bureaucrats does not include peasants and their concerns, except as they touch upon the functioning of a given agency. It is fair to say that peasants are seen as enemies of progress and often are treated as such, even though they are crucial to the material well-being of their respective nations or regions.

I emphasize this point not because it is new or even surprising, but because of the persistence of the hierarchical relationship between state and peasants. The current development framework within OMVG (and that of the donors) reflects the wider problem of the state's inability to reorganize or "capture" the peasantry. What would this mean specifically for the Gambia River Basin? It is difficult to project plans and tendencies into what will actually happen, for it is important to recall that none of the dams is

currently under construction. Nonetheless, there is a history of irrigation in both Senegal and The Gambia, along with the ambitious development plans in the Senegal River Basin. In areas along the river in The Gambia and in small zones of Senegal, rice is already cultivated through tidal irrigation and flood recession and in low zones which flood. These have been areas for agricultural expansion since the nineteenth century, first with the spread of groundnuts and then with the exhaustion of upland fields. These zones are predominantly cultivated by women, who do not "own" the land but have use rights. It is precisely this land which will be affected by the antisalt barrage, preventing tides, and the high dam in Senegal, preventing floods. Much of this area will be developed for irrigation, changing land tenure and land-use patterns. So far, efforts to develop double-cropped perimeters have not been successful (with the exception of Jahaly-Pacharr).

The development plans emphasize the utilization of national land law to wrest control from those who now have rights in perpetuity in order to lease the land back to those who will follow an irrigation authority's or larger scale farmer's production schedule. This will alter the peasants' relationship to the land and to one another. Even if production is increased, and rice can be exported to the cities, there will be an intensification of labor and inputs for rice producers. This will put the current ecology at risk.¹⁰ In sum, peasants will be asked either to assume virtually all the risks associated with double-cropped irrigated rice production and large-scale environmental changes or to participate in schemes which remove most of the risks, such as Jahaly Pacharr. But those schemes are not expected to recapture the initial capital investment and are dependent on their donors for infrastructure, seeds, fertilizer, technical expertise, and fuel. The replication of Jahaly-Pacharr under current world and Gambian economic conditions is highly improbable.

CONCLUSION

No final conclusion can be drawn since I have been discussing dilemmas associated with river basin planning, not implementation. The plans remain plans only, and conclusions must be speculative. The fact that peasants are

voiceless is, unfortunately, not exceptional. Nevertheless, greater attention must be given to targeting beneficiaries, even if benefits may never flow. I am not sanguine about prospects for a change in strategy. Bureaucratically, OMVG and member states are committed to dams, which they view as largely positive; any negative features can be mitigated. The raising of new concerns about the viability of The Gambia River Basin development strategy has not pleased either member states or OMVG. From their perspective, to question their rationale breaks with several years of study, beginning with the UN Development Programme's multidonor mission, which formulated the preinvestment program.

In addition, organizations such as OMVG rapidly create their own environment and importance while seeking to expand their resources and influence. OMVG has not at all been a passive actor in the face of what it perceives as inconsistent donors. Neither donor agencies nor national bureaucracies value rural history or the political and historical conditions of West African rural populations. Left to itself, OMVG and member states would construct the dams as soon and as quickly as possible; but they are constrained by shifts in capital availability, the deterioration of their own economies, and their incapacity to undertake any further loans. They cannot make decisions independently of donors. In a more global context, they claim that they act in the name of the rural populations. Without early, consistent involvement, without strategies for listening to and learning from those who actually cultivate, without respect for the knowledge of those who, for better or worse, provide both food and cash crops, cooperation between bureaucrats and peasants is improbable.

It becomes clear that reaching solutions means a shift in the relationship between donors and hosts and between nations and their rural majorities. Under present circumstances, the likelihood of either is small. Evidence from the social sciences concerning the staying power of rural elites and their links to an increasingly powerful national bureaucracy leads one to be cautious concerning the benefits of local participation. Not because it is wrong, but because it is hard to see why and how this will benefit those who hold power.

The dilemmas are, for the moment, unresolvable. National planners are unwilling or unable to reorient programs and projects to meet local interests

and concerns. Peasantries are themselves powerless to alter state strategies except in relatively passive ways. Some donors holding the critical resources have shifted their priorities, creating greater tensions and divisions among the planners. Planners then have to attempt to ally with those donors who are most likely to provide resources. In the national and international arena, the peasantries have no voice. If past experience is a guide for the future, voicelessness leads to passiveness, which will prevent the use of the human energies necessary to intensify agriculture while sustaining a deteriorating environment.

NOTES

¹This is paraphrased from Arturo Warman's elegant study of the peasants of Morelos, We Come to Object: The Peasants of Morelos and The National State (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). While there are many important differences between Mexico and West Africa, there are also important parallels concerning state efforts to control and direct peasant energies and organizations.

²I use the terms "rural populations" and "peasantries" to emphasize rural differentiation and to avoid the connotations of the term "farmer". Farmers and farms can imply a productive and social organization like that of European and American farm enterprises which is not the case in most of the Gambia River Basin.

³The Gamiba River Basin Development Organization is usually known by its French acronym OMVG, L'Organisation pour la mise en valeur du fleuve Gambie.

⁴The project has achieved high yields of rice for its first two full years (eight tons per hectare per season, or sixteen per year), but it is capital intensive. The irrigation part of the project requires full water control. There is an improved swamp rice component which utilizes the tidal action of the river. The consequences of the project on those who participate are currently being studied. Two primary concerns have been raised about its long-term success. First, the high level of capital input can never be recovered, and therefore similar projects cannot be begun in the current economic situation. Second, the high level of management activity required to get plot holders to their fields on time and to carry out all the necessary tasks cannot be sustained. In addition, I understand there has been a problem this year in the timely delivery of fuel to keep the pumps going. The Gambia suffers from chronic shortages of hard currency with which to purchase fuel, combined with an aging and inadequate fleet of fuel trucks.

⁵The Gambia River, due to its relatively level topography and the reach of tidal influences, can be saline quite far upriver. The degree of salinity depends primarily on the river flow. During August and September, the salt tongue is pushed quite far west but returns almost as far as Jahaly Pacharr by the end of the dry season.

⁶The Gambia River Basin is of differential importance to the four nations. It is peripheral to Guinea-Bissau, marginal to Guinea-Conakry, important to Senegal (but not compared to the Senegal River Basin), and absolutely critical to The Gambia. The latter's survival depends upon the river and its utilization, which is not the case for the other nations.

⁷Derman, William, 1977, "Agrarian structures, class formation and development in the Sahel" (unpublished paper). Derman, William, 1984, "USAID in the Sahel: Development and Poverty" in The Politics of Agriculture in Tropical Africa edited by Jonathan Barker (Sage, Beverly Hills, CA).

⁸The problem with government employees using their political positions to obtain land lies less at the "productive level" than in its consequences

for rural peasantries, already under severe pressure. Indeed, one might project that one could have increased production while increasing poverty in the countryside. The urban private claims on land are becoming apparent in the lower Senegalese River Valley. It is a highly sensitive subject, and therefore its extent and overall importance are difficult to assess.

⁹With the exception of Guinea-Bissau, which is marginal to the basin. But Guinea-Bissau shares many rivers with Guinea-Conakry outside the Gambia River Basin, and contains the potential to increase rice production, which would assist all member states of OMVG.

¹⁰In particular see Aquatic Ecology and Gambia River Basin Development by Russell Moll and John Dorr (University of Michigan Gambia River Basin Studies, Center for Research on Economic Development, Ann Arbor, 1985). For a longer discussion of dam impacts see Rural Development in The Gambia River Basin by William Derman, et. al., same series.

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