



Water in Ethiopia

Sharing a river

Commentary:

The highlands of Ethiopia, rivers are the main source of water for nearby communities. At the end of the rainy season the fields are lush and there appears to be enough water in the river for all the people who rely on it. But away from this tranquil scene there's a conflict, battles are being fought over access and control over this vital resource. The farmers here are reliant on the river water to irrigate their crops. These subsistence farmers feed themselves and their families on what they grow. If there's any surplus, they sell it but it's a struggle.

Everyone here believes they're entitled to the water - but it's a limited resource and the population is growing. Neighbours compete, and even fight with each other, for the water they need to survive.

Downstream farmers

We'd rather die fighting for our right to water than die of starvation.

Commentary

Three farming communities share, or attempt to share, the water flowing through the Guder river.

At the upper end is Medintamariam village, which has a modern weir made of concrete. Around eighty-three households use the water at this point.

In the middle is the village of Debilte, which is twice as big and depends on a traditional weir built of mud. Every year it gets washed away in the rainy season, and has to be rebuilt. This has been going on for centuries.

Further downstream is by far the largest of the three villages, Zambalamariam, which like Medintamariam has a modern weir. But being downriver of two other weirs, the farmers' water supply depends on what happens upstream.

Relations between these three communities have not been running smoothly.

Woubshet

The problems along this river really started with the first studies that were done for the dams, and the conflicts have been aggravated ever since.

The research didn't properly identify users' needs, for example how many hectares of land had to be irrigated in each community.

Commentary

To add to the problem, the modern weir upstream - built only three years ago - doesn't provide enough water. The wall was built too low.

Upstream farmer

We have to dig up earth from our grazing land to build the wall much higher.

Otherwise, not enough water is diverted for irrigation, so we build an earth wall.

Commentary

This temporary solution worked upstream, but it had unintended consequences downstream. It reduced the water supply lower down at Zambalamariam. During the dry season, things came to a head.

Downstream farmers

We had clashes with our neighbours upstream, because they use the same water but keep too much for themselves.

Upstream farmers

The farmers downstream came and knocked down our earth wall to get more of the water. We finally had to resolve it through the courts, who said the farmers in zambalamariam had no claim on our water.

Commentary

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Downstream farmer

The population around here is growing. There was plenty of water but now, with more people, water is scarce and our crops are dying.

Downstream farmers

It's a big problem, because in march and april the farmers in the middle use almost all the water, and people here get really desperate.

Midstream farmers

They would come in the night carrying shovels and sticks to knock down our mud weir. But we kept eight people guarding it day and night because it's crucial to our survival

Downstream farmers

We're not asking to benefit at their expense, all we want is to share the water fairly. But they've said no.

Woubshet

The farmers at the lower end want the traditional weir destroyed. But the farmers in the middle have been building that mud weir for hundreds of years.

Midstream farmers

We have the right to this water and it's only fair that we should be able to protect it.

Downstream farmers

We tried to solve the problem by getting the elders to talk to each other. But their agreements never held up. The water would start to flow, then almost immediately they would withhold it again.

Downstream farmers

There have been some serious fights between us over this, it's got so bad that people have turned to violence.

Downstream farmers

We'd rather fight than starve to death

Commentary

The conflict grew so serious that the matter went to the local courts. The farmers in the middle were ordered to allow a third of the water to flow to their neighbours downstream. On appeal, this was increased to nearly half.

Downstream farmers

We're not satisfied with this result, even with half the water, and we're contesting the decision.

Woubshet

As a district authority, we have to sort out this problem. So we're doing a study to determine how much water is needed to irrigate the land around the traditional mud weir.

Midstream farmers

We all live side by side, but sometimes neighbours disagree, and we fight. This is the only issue that causes conflict between us.

Downstream farmers

It's up to the courts to decide what will happen. We hope for a satisfactory result, so we can live peacefully with our neighbours and end these quarrels.