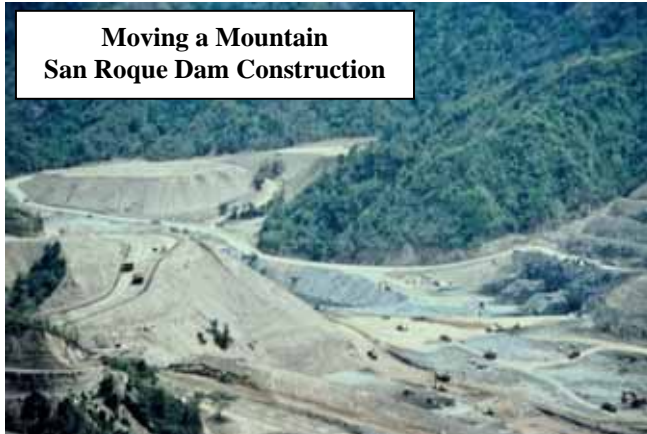


Getting to Know the Igorots - Making Peace

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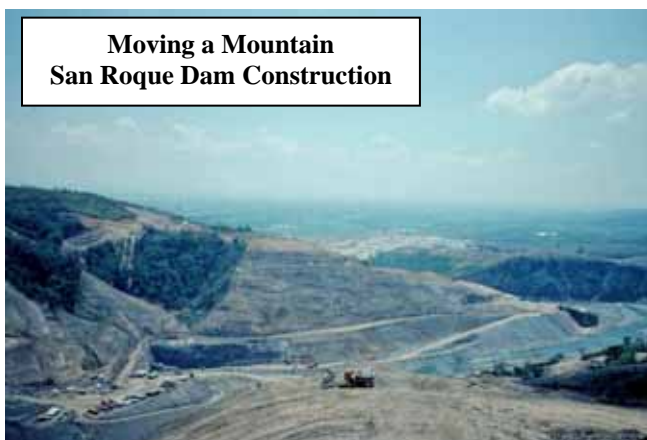
Before 1999 the Philippine government set about planning the construction of a major dam on the south end of the Cordillera that would inundate about 20,000 tenant farmers in Pangasinan. About 25% of the reservoir would also spill into the mountain valleys. The effect in the lowlands was minor. The dam was accepted as being needed. In the mountains, among the Igorots, it was a different matter. There was vocal opposition to the dam and there was a risk of violence.



To make matters worse this dam hysteria spread to the overseas Igorots too and became a hot issue by 1999. I got involved in the issue in December 1998 and by February 1999 I began to become uncomfortable with the issues. When I had asked why I would want to stop the dam I was inundated with material. When I asked why I would want to support the dam there was nothing forthcoming. The arguments and the issues were clearly one sided. Then I started to get suggestions that

12,000 people were not going to be displaced particularly since the entire region only had a population of 10,000. So something was fishy and this prompted me to fly to the Philippines to meet with local leaders.

The first surprise I had was arriving in Itogon and in Dalupirip, the two communities that were allegedly most affected by the dam. When I met with the elders and asked them what they wanted me to do to help them, they couldn't make up their minds. They said they'd like the dam to just go away and yet they understood and accepted that the country needed the power. If the people affected couldn't decide what they wanted, who was raising the ruckus about stopping the dam?



Meeting with congressional leaders, senators, governors and the mayor of Baguio was an interesting exercise too. One congressman was opposed to the dam and yet when I offered to have a senate hearing about allegations of wrong doing in terms of the dam he backed down and asked me to not to that. In the end he was looking for a handout. Six months after I had left he was suddenly in favour of the dam. The other political leaders felt the dam was a good idea and would not harm the cordillera. Meeting with the San Roque

Dam Corporation president and his engineers it was clear that the dam would deliver what was promised. What was also astonishing was that there weren't 12,000 people at risk at all, there were only sixty five at risk and they simply had to move 95 metres higher up the mountain.



To Dalupirip

So what was going on? Well, there was an NGO (a non government organization) that was behind all the noise and trouble. They allegedly represented the people. In fact they did go to the affected communities to ask the people if they would like help to stop the dam. And in the course of those discussions it was they who had spoken about the dire consequences that were to come. The people themselves, having already been relocated once in the sixties for another dam project, believed the NGO and

mistrusted the government. With that mandate the NGO started a major campaign to stop the dam. Curiously though, when legalities came up about the legitimacy of some of the decisions concerning the dam, the NGO didn't follow up. Why not? Here was a perfect opportunity to end the dam project and yet it was being ignored. Why?



Itogon

In the end the answer was shocking. The NGO had no intention of ever stopping the dam. Instead it was set to cause as much trouble as possible to drag out the protests as long as possible. Why? As long they were fighting the dam they were getting enormous amounts of international funding which did wonders for their bank account. For me this was an amazing lesson for it taught me how to identify who were my friends and who weren't. It also taught me how low some organizations will sink for the sake of funding. When I published my report the

issue ended.

The dam did get built and is operating today. The dam project was an amazing engineering achievement as can be seen in some of the pictures here. For the moment the dam is beneficial and will likely remain so but time will tell of course. The real lesson from this for all nations striving to develop is to be careful about choosing your friends.



Dalupirip



Dalupirip