

## **Dam Controversies: The Discourse of Development on the Omo River Dam Project ('Ghibe III') in Ethiopia**

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### *Dam controversies: the discourse of development on the Omo River dam project ('Ghibe III') in Ethiopia*

The Ethiopian government started construction of a third large dam in one of the country's largest rivers, the Omo River in Southwestern Ethiopia. The dam is envisaged as a classic modernist infrastructural project and will re-engineer social relations and systems in the region (recalling J. Scott's analysis in *Seeing like a State*). It is aimed to generate huge amounts of hydro-electricity and the project is defended as such without serious awareness of the impacts its construction might have on landscape, land use, and eco-systems of the peoples in the downstream river basin. The latter include several ethnic groups or 'tribes' famous among tourists, such as the Mursi and the Kara, who depend mostly on pasture and flood plain cultivation along the Omo river banks and see the land also as part of their cultural and historic 'heritage'.

Debates between the Ethiopian government and its hired advisors/consultants, donor countries, and opponents to the scheme – locals, civil society organizations, concerned foreign groups – center on classic *topoi* of the 'development' discourse, often most opportunistically used. As the project is a top-down development venture, local peoples were not approached or deemed worthy as legitimate 'stakeholders' in the development of the dam, but have their own views on it.

The paper presents an analytical interpretation of the various arguments and viewpoints of the parties involved, as well as of the policy (and political-legal) processes and the legitimizing discourse that will push this dam through and that will open up the lands impacted by it to outsiders – including commercial agriculture – and thus transform local livelihoods and group relations.