

# Cabora Bassa rethink

Its projected total generating capacity is 2,000 megawatts; the first five turbines (415MW each) came on stream in June 1979. But for all its splendour and power potential Cabora Bassa is still viewed with misgivings by many who are supposed to be its beneficiaries.

During the liberation war, pro-Frelimo groups agitated against the scheme.

They argued that as the Zambezi cuts Mozambique in two, the dam was planned as part of a military strategy to stop Frelimo guerrillas from crossing into the southern region.

The same aim was said to be behind the scheme to settle white colonists in the valley, once irrigation was available. Moreover, it was pointed out that the scheme was envisaged as serving the needs of South Africa: yet South Africa had its own coal-based energy resources and the US\$800 million Cabora Bassa project was simply part of South Africa's grandiose scheme of a regional "co-prosperity sphere" — the ultimate aim being the linking into one power grid hydro-electric schemes such as the Orange River dam, South Africa, the Oxbow scheme, Lesotho, Kariba in Zimbabwe, the Kunene scheme which straddles the river between Namibia and Angola and Cabora Bassa.

In this way, South African planners hoped to "capture" the region and become its "natural" engine and powerhouse. The Portuguese in Angola and Mozambique saw much merit in the scheme: it would link South African interests to their own.

By attracting Northern capital — inevitably involved in major construction projects such as Cabora Bassa — the North's interests too would be identified with anti-Frelimo or anti-MPLA action.

In the event, the military coup in Lisbon of April 1974, abruptly ended

the Portuguese/South African/Rhodesian alliance. When the new Portuguese government and Frelimo signed economic agreements in the course of 1975, those who had previously defended Cabora Bassa against its critics smugly pointed out that now it had become an asset for Mozambique. It would be a trigger for industrial and agricultural development and would provide power where needed.

And yet one visit to Songa, the dam's site in Tete Province, bolsters all the old criticism. First, there is Songa itself, a mini-town with its own homes, power, school, clinic, shops and foreign experts. It seems like, and is, an island in the country. There are frequent flights out to South Africa. The food served in the canteen is mainly flown in from South Africa — there is wine, a luxury not easily found in Mozambique's capital, Maputo. The shop shelves are lined with made-in-South-Africa tinned foodstuffs.

But this is only a symptom. The fact is that the main transmission line traverses a length of some 10,000 kilometres to Apollo in South Africa. Because of the distance the power has to be transmitted, it is a DC (direct current) line — and therefore cannot be "tapped" en route. To benefit from Cabora Bassa, Mozambique must obtain AC (alternate current) through a new transmission line. One, together with the requisite sub-station, has already been built for Tete.

Work on a longer line commissioned from a French-Italian consortium has begun and is expected to be completed by December 1982, when it reaches Mocuba, in the north, where it will serve a textile factory. Mozambique at present uses a mere 100MW from Cabora Bassa.

"Five km outside Songa it is dark." This comment by a disillusioned Mozambiquan engineer working at Cabora Bassa is the real indictment of the scheme. It proves the critics' point: the dam was not built for the people of Mozambique. Almost all the power is exported to South Africa.

Because of the way the power station has been built, converting AC power to DC in a sub-station, before transmitting DC energy to Apollo, where it is again converted to AC for use in South

Africa, it is virtually impossible not to stick to the original agreement which provided for the supply of energy to Maputo from South Africa. This runs for a period of 20 years and the price is fixed — at a figure estimated to be well below current world prices.

Portugal has assumed responsibility for running Cabora Bassa, by means of an 81.5 per cent shareholding in HCB (Hidroelétrica de Cabora Bassa, SARL, Pty) in which the Mozambique government holds 18.5 per cent shares. HCB sells the energy and from the proceeds disburses payments to the contractors involved in the first phase of the construction.

"Because of this arrangement, it will be closer to 20 rather than 10 years before we will have any real benefit", said the Mozambiquan engineer, who added that apart from anything else, he also considered the management inefficient. Decisions were made by the Portuguese board members and not on the spot.

There was no company policy or company plan; every individual in a responsible position worked "in a void." He said: "We make our own limitation; I for example do not know what my budget is in my section. I have never worked in such unsatisfactory conditions. Also, there was no training scheme whatever during the first phase — this is quite unheard of in a project of this kind in a developing country."

Another criticism is the fact that the scheme was "imposed" on Mozambique from outside, without considering all the factors involved.

"For instance, do we really need this sophisticated level of power supply? In a country where all rural areas are without electricity, where small rural industries are needed and where even small mines run by means of diesel generators? It will take far too long for us to exploit this dam. We should have been allowed to consider smaller hydro-electric or even thermal stations — we have coal, more than enough."

Criticism of the running of HCB applies also to the fact that the important meetings concerning Cabora Bassa take place in Europe or South Africa, with the 50 or so engineers working on the dam rarely if ever invited to attend a meeting.

"Yet HCB could be used as an excellent means of promoting good relations between Mozambique and Portugal — if the HCB board was not basically hostile to an independent and socialist-orientated Mozambique.

"The DC line to South Africa was nothing but a political ploy", he said. "What is needed now is a series of sub-stations, about two to three, connecting Songa with the south of the country. We must be sure from now on that we get the right level of technology at the right investment level."

Talks between Mozambique and Portugal on various points are in the pipeline — and it seems obvious that Cabora Bassa and HCB must figure on the agenda.

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