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In defence of big hydro

A RECENT report of three Sarawak activists making representations to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in Manila against its loan facility to build an electrical transmission line from Sarawak to West Kalimantan highlights how destructively myopic some lone-wolf, single-issue activists can be.

The representation comes a little too late, given the construction of the transmission line is progressing apace and is fast nearing completion. It also totally ignores what a boon the transmission line will be for the long-suffering citizens and businesspeople in the Indonesian province bordering Sarawak. They have long endured intermittent power which requires businesses to run their own expensive and highly polluting diesel-powered generators to avoid intolerable and frequent disruptions to power from the local grid.

It is exactly projects such as this, that promise to deliver

electricity with any consistency and certainty at reasonable cost from one energy-surplus country to another that suffers a supply deficiency, the ADB should fund more of.

The ADB is about banishing poverty among Asians and nothing does a better job of meeting that goal than helping deprived Asians get the electrical energy that is such a basic need for ordinary people going about their daily lives and businesses.

This writer derives some satisfaction from having initiated meetings, while with the business component of the Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia,

Philippines-East Asean Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) in the early 2000s, that quickly resulted in the institutionalisation of the Inter-Borneo Transmission Committee among related power utilities. It was then a key link in the mechanism for a fully interconnected Asean Grid, its previous absence a serious shortcoming given Sarawak was already on course as an energy powerhouse in Borneo, with clear prospects of exporting renewable hydro-electricity not just to other parts of the vast island but beyond.

Sarawak Energy Berhad (SEB) chief executive officer Datuk Torstein Sjøtveit recently told the media the construction of substations and transmission lines on both sides of the Sarawak-West Kalimantan border is progressing. "The project remains on track for completion

by the end of the year. This is consistent with our agreement with Indonesia's National Electric Company [PLN] to start exporting electricity before the end of 2015," he said.

"The new interconnection will deliver up to 230MW of renewable energy to West Kalimantan, replacing its current diesel generation. This will tremendously reduce carbon emissions and provide significant cost-savings for PLN."

Sarawak has, onstream or in the works, an electricity-generating capacity in excess of 10,000MW by the late 2020s. Sjøtveit revealed that last year, electricity demand in Sarawak stood just shy of 3,000MW while generation capacity was at about 3,250MW. That demand is projected to top 5,000MW by 2020 with capacity again slightly above that figure at 5,200MW.



Sarawak's biggest power prize would be the voracious energy appetite of Peninsular Malaysia – which was the rationale for the construction of the first mega-dam, Bakun (above)

While the bulk of that power – the target is 60% – will be generated by hydro-electric dams, SEB also aims to achieve a 60-20-20 ratio of hydro-, coal- and gas-generated capacity.

Work is also proceeding on the Balingian coal-powered plant which will generate 600MW on completion in 2018 and use coal deposits largely found in situ.

Sarawak is also eyeing the export of power to Sabah and Brunei. The biggest prize, however, will be the voracious energy appetite of Peninsular Malaysia – which was, after all, the rationale for the construction of the first mega-dam, Bakun.

At the time of Bakun's conceptualisation and that of the related undersea

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Submarine cable 'feasible'

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cable to transmit electricity to the peninsula, the transmission technology involved was largely untested and ultimately cited as a reason for abandoning the idea of exporting power from Bakun to the peninsula. However, technology has evolved in the ensuing years and reviewing this with the aim of reviving the idea of power export from Sarawak to the peninsula will do much to place Borneo at the heart of the Asean Grid.

Former minister and current Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) chairman Tan Sri Leo Moggie recently told this writer the import of electricity "from Sarawak hydropower sources to Semenanjung remains one of the options TNB is looking at". "HVDC (High Voltage Direct Current) submarine cable technology is not new," he says. "Technically, it is feasible."

Dam-building frenzy

Reviving such an option to export a large portion of Sarawak's hydro-electricity may also be a smart way to blunt a major criticism of the state's dam-building frenzy that recently attracted a powerful supporter in former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the figure who originally gave the Bakun Dam life.

The building of Bakun without the Sarawak-Peninsula transmission cable saw Sarawak actively courting major foreign industrialists to locate their energy-hungry and highly-polluting heavy industries in the state, forcing it to live with the contradiction of a cleanly-sourced abundant energy feeding dirty heavy industries.

The frenetic dam-building in Sarawak has already become an almost inalterable fact. Rather than objecting to it, interested parties and political activists may better serve the state's overall interests by suggesting and supporting practical ways the deleterious effects of huge dams can be ameliorated.

No ADB dam financing

The ADB, probably to its credit, is no longer in the business of financing massive dams. But that did not stop Sarawak's dam-building programme. Its non-financing of the Sarawak-West Kalimantan transmission line may have stopped the project in its tracks. Preventing people from across the Sarawak border from enjoying the results of the state's abundant energy would have compounded the original "wrong" that ADB did not commit with one of actual commission: Denying the truly needy energy already generated.

If Sarawak's dams in time contribute to an economic prosperity in West Kalimantan now so sorely lacking, the state will have done much to contribute to human welfare despite the controversies the dams spark in Sarawak and beyond its shores.

Exporting Sarawak's hydro-power is the way to go, as it is a positive contribution to reducing or offsetting carbon emissions region-wide. FocusM