

[youtube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IOw9tsS-aI>]

Ikal Angelei is one of the world's pre-eminent environmental justice activists: she is the founder of [Friends of Lake Turkana](#), which (as the name suggests) seeks to preserve [Lake Turkana](#) from the massive [Gibe III Dam](#) planned by the Ethiopian government and World Bank. As the name does not suggest, the issue is about human beings as much as about ecosystems: the indigenous peoples of the Lake Turkana region rely on it for fishing and water, and if its tributary river is dammed, then it could wipe out the entire people.

Angelei is in California this month to receive the 2012 Goldman Prize, and came through UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs to talk about her work. I am particularly happy that Friends of Lake Turkana was bankrolled early by the American Jewish World Service, which has supported many of the world's most innovative and effective NGOs. (For example, Nick Kristof's book *Half the Sky* contains an entire chapter on [Tostan](#), the pioneering group that has successfully fought female genital cutting: in its early years, Tostan was also largely supported by AJWS' venture philanthropy).

I couldn't resist pushing back on the environmental critique of hydroelectric power and the policy critique of Gibe III generally. First, if one is interested in combatting climate change, how can you oppose renewable energy such as hydro? Second, perhaps stopping the dam will help the people in the Turkana region, but without that power, conceivably thousands of low-income workers in Nairobi and Mombasa will go without it. Is this really about environmental justice and sustainable development, or is it just a matter of regional and ethnic politics?

Ikal wasn't fazed by these questions (which is part of why she is such a good advocate): she said that she gets these more than any others (so much for any originality on my part). On the subject of climate change, her answer was similar to those provided by climate activists who oppose hydro-projects: focus on solar, wind, and geothermal. She noted accurately that hydropower has massive negative ecological impacts. Interestingly, she also argued that more ecologically-friendly [micro-hydropower](#) projects could be feasible on the Omo River without destroying the lake, but that the contractors standing to benefit from Gibe III are uninterested in these alternatives because micro hydro does not require the same large infrastructure. Certainly [Lake Turkana itself has enormous potential for generating wind power](#), so much so that the World Bank did not need to step in to finance Africa's largest wind farm there.

Regarding the distributional question of Gibe III, she argued that it makes much more sense for a maternity hospital in Nairobi to rely on its own solar panels than to hope that the Kenyan government will acquire and then equitably distribute hydro power from Ethiopia.

Given the Kenyan government's record of corruption, [particularly](#) in the Turkana region, one need not be much of a skeptic to question whether any potential benefits from Gibe III will ever trickle down to Kenyan or Ethiopian citizens.

Underlying much of the conversation was the question of the democratization of access to power. Activists like Ikal argue that mega-projects like Gibe III reflect special interest and corrupt-government self-dealing masquerading as attempts at development. Distributed power generation, be it micro hydro or solar panels on maternity hospitals, appear to offer win-win alternatives that promise greater access to power without destroying indigenous communities. The problem is that it seems a little too good to be true, which means that it probably is.

That said, it seems to me that there are two obvious answers to the skeptical questions that I posed.

First, it is possible that from a developmental and ecological perspective, balancing out the costs and the benefits, that Gibe III dam might still be justified. But given what appears to be an exceedingly shoddy environmental and social impact review process, no one has ever had that conversation. That is a reason to suspend the project at this stage.

Second, even if we think that it might be better overall to move the project forward in the long run, before embarking we need to ensure that its benefits and burdens are equitably distributed. Assuming that the overall case is justified, why should the impoverished indigenous peoples of the Lake Turkana region have to shoulder the entire environmental and social cost of development? No Gibe III supporter has answered that question — perhaps because they have not asked it.

So it seems to me that while there are hard questions to ask about Gibe III on both sides, the immediate decision is pretty easy. Stop the project. If it is worthwhile, it can be restarted. But once the Lake Turkana ecosystem is destroyed, it cannot be restored.