



PRESS RELEASE

(For Immediate Release)

1st February 2021

CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BATOKA GORGE HYDRO-ELECTRIC SCHEME (BGHES)

The Zambezi River Authority (Authority) has observed with great concern online public campaigns by some stakeholders aimed at frustrating the efforts leading to the sustainable implementation of this multi-billion-dollar 2400MW hydro power project, which seeks to address the adverse power challenges affecting the people and economic activities in Zambia, Zimbabwe and the SADC region as a whole.

In the recent past, the Authority's consultants, Environmental Resources Management (ERM), carried out an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) for the Project after which ESIA disclosure meetings were held with different stakeholder groups in the two Contracting States. The disclosure process is a Statutory requirement in the two countries, administered by the respective environmental regulatory agencies, namely, the Zambia Environmental Management Agency (ZEMA) and Environmental Management Agency (EMA) of Zimbabwe.

In view of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, engagement methods included virtual and in-person meetings as guided by the said Environmental Regulatory Agencies. The stakeholders freely expressed themselves and their concerns were documented. The draft ESIA report was released for comments on 3rd March 2020, and the public was given up to 25th January 2021 to submit any concerns and comments regarding the planned implementation of the project.

During the disclosure process which took the form of limited physical meetings (with COVID-19 protocols in place), Webinars and radio broadcasts, the Authority working with the Consultant clearly highlighted the project scope, benefits and also echoed the mitigation measures being undertaken to curtail any adverse project impacts. These mitigation procedures include but not limited to the following;

- 1) Limiting the dam height to 175m so as to prevent the backflow of water from reaching and impacting areas of special interest such as the Victoria Falls, the existing ZESCO Limited Power Station, the Victoria Falls and Mosi-O-Tunya National Parks.

- 2) The other measures highlighted included the adopted variable reservoir operation rules that were developed with a view to ensuring the balancing of power generation whilst allowing for the continuation of other river-based activities. This includes activities such as White-Water Rafting and provision for adequate ecological flow to sustain downstream ecology throughout the operations of the scheme.
- 3) The Authority also prepared the Livelihood Restoration Plans for the project components in respect of which it was established that households may experience economic displacement. Those economically impacted would be adequately compensated, in line with the Livelihood Restoration Plan to ensure their livelihood is better than before.

While some stakeholders might have viewed the disclosure process as a formality and casual activity, the Authority takes this process very seriously as it is also a critical condition precedent for accessing financing for Project implementation. It is for this reason that the Authority engaged one of the independent and internationally renowned Consulting firms, ERM, to carry out independent Environmental and Social Impact assessments.

In as much as face-to-face engagements would have been most desired, the unprecedented circumstances arising from the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic meant that this was not practicable. The Authority and the Consultant had to take into consideration the health and safety of the stakeholders and the staff in the context of the pandemic. Permission was sought from the National Environmental Authorities (EMA and ZEMA) to proceed with other suitable engagement methods under the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The adopted approach took into consideration the access to technology, literacy levels, ability to engage and other factors of our stakeholders. The stakeholder engagement undertaken included the following:

- 1) ERM and the Authority hosting four separate Webinars with different stakeholder groups from White Water Rafters to Government departments and special interest groups.
- 2) The Authority together with the local ERM partners undertaking limited in-person meetings with District and traditional authorities/ leaders in small groups in line with the COVID-19 guidelines issued by the Ministries of Health of the two Contracting States.
- 3) ERM and the Authority presenting six radio broadcasts on local radio stations (in local languages) to further share the ESIA findings with communities in the Project Area. Listeners were very engaging and submitted questions via the phone and WhatsApp.

Through the engagement process, the Authority received concerns that the construction of the Project had commenced. Currently, the construction of the Batoka project has not yet commenced as there are prerequisites that need to be exhausted, among them the submission of the final ESIA report. However, some pre-construction activities have been undertaken by the Developer on both sides of the River, but these should not be viewed as actual dam construction activities. About 100 local people were employed during these works, which are expected to come to an end by the close of January 2021. During the pre-construction phase, the Authority worked closely with the Developer to ensure that the few workers engaged on site were remunerated nothing less than the acceptable minimum wages applicable in each of the two countries and also operating under acceptable working conditions.

During the construction phase, contractors will be expected to comply with the Project's Environmental and Social Management Plan which is aligned with Good Industry Practice and includes management measures pertaining to the fair treatment and welfare of employees.

Going forward, the Authority will be undertaking further stakeholder engagements for the Livelihood Restoration Planning (LRP) activities associated with the economic displacement of individuals from the Project.

The Zambezi River Authority is a Bi-National organization mandated to harness and manage the waters of the stretch of the Zambezi River that forms a common border between Zambia and Zimbabwe for socio-economic development. It is also mandated to maintain the Kariba Complex and the development of any future dams or infrastructure on the same stretch of the River.



.....
ENG. MUNYARADZI. C. MUNODAWAFA
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

-END-

Issued by:
Fitzgerald Muchindu
Public Relations and Communications Officer
Lusaka, Zambia.
Email: pr@zambezi.org
Cell: +(260) 978 731 621
<http://www.zambezi.org/>