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WORLD NEWS

Unable to Tap Power of the Nile, Ethiopia Relies on Fuel Carriers

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ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia -- Late every afternoon, as the sun begins to set, the traffic thickens on the roads coming down from the forested hills around this capital city. Not with cars, but with as many as 15,000 women carrying bundles of branches, leaves and twigs weighing between 70 and 100 pounds.

Their pace is a slow, stooped trot, propelled by the weight of the load balanced on their shoulders. The bundles are more than 6 feet wide -- wider than the women are tall. By the time the women reach the city markets, it is dark and they have covered as many as 10 miles on foot. If they are lucky, they will receive top price for their bundle: about 70 cents.



Roger Thurow
Fuel-wood carriers of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

These are Ethiopia's women fuel-wood carriers, and their backbreaking labor is one of the legacies of the inequitable Nile River politics of the region. Although Ethiopia has some of the best hydropower potential on in Africa, mainly on the cascading Blue Nile River, only a tiny fraction of it has been developed because of political animosity over who should use the Nile waters. Less than 10% of the country is electrified, and for many customers the cost is

so great that they ration use.

Thus, biomass fuels such as wood, charcoal and cow dung account for more than 90% of the country's final energy consumption. In electrified Addis Ababa, the women's branches, leaves and twigs provide about a third of the wood-fuel supply, most of which is used for cooking.

Ethiopia has proposed a number of hydropower projects to the Nile Basin Initiative, which would increase the supply of electricity and likely lower the cost. That, in turn, would damp the demand for biomass fuel and for the fuel-wood carriers. While fuel-carrier jobs would be lost, the wider electrification of the country would likely spur economic


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development and create other, more lucrative jobs.

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"I pray that all women fuel-wood carriers would find other means of employment," says Etenesh Ayele, 36 years old, the head of the Former Fuelwood Carriers Association. She carried wood for nearly 10 years, beginning as a teenager and stopping only when the association began teaching skills such as weaving, woodworking and food preparation to the fuel-wood carriers.

The World Bank and an Ethiopian government agency are trying to organize the carriers so they can arrange truck transport and retail depots for their bundles, as well as negotiate bulk sales and better prices. The Bank is also trying to round up donor support for the former carriers association, which hopes to expand its skills workshops and help more women find new work.

For the moment, though, many of the carriers are like Abonesh Haile, who says she is "20 or so" and has been carrying for seven years. She has one child and her parents to support. Broken bones from falls are common, she says. Still, she is picking up sticks every morning at 8 a.m. and by 4 p.m. she is making her way back down the hill.

She would like to join the ranks of the former carriers at the association, but she says, "There are no other jobs."

Nor are there other modern fuel alternatives, at least not yet. "If you don't improve the life of the people," says Gebremedhin Haderea, manager of the biomass inventory project in the ministry of agriculture, "the use of biomass fuel will continue."

And so will the stooped deliveries of the women fuel-wood carriers.

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