

Hydroelectric Power Station Debate

An electricity company wish to build a new hydroelectric power station on the Shire River in Malawi. However, they need planning permission to build it.

You represent the group of people described below. Identify your reasons for and against building the power station. Write a short speech (no longer than 2 mins) explaining your opinions.

Structure the speech into several sections, so that they can be read out by different people.

Electricity Company

You want to build the hydroelectric power station. It will cost you a lot of money to build the station, but you hope to make a big profit selling the electricity you generate. The increase in electricity production could encourage more industries and businesses to be created. This would lead to the creation of new jobs.

You are concerned about the amount of trees being chopped down. During the rainy season, the top soil washes into the river. This in turn slows down the river's current and enables plants like water hyacinth to grow.

If the river slows down, the power station cannot make as much electricity and you will lose money. Dredging to unblock the river will increase the current, but will be a high cost.

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Rural dwellers

You are farmers living in the countryside. You cannot afford to have electricity in your home. Instead, you collect wood and buy charcoal for your cooking fires. Therefore, you do not feel that you will benefit much from the power station.

However, there are not currently any proper roads where you live. Roads would need to be built to get to the power station which could also be used by the locals. It will also create some passing trade of people building the station. They may wish to buy some of the food you could sell at the roadside.

You live downstream from the proposed site of the station. The river will be dammed to control the flow rate of the water. However, during the rainy season, the river level rises. If it rises too high the flood gates will be opened and could flood your crops and home.

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Urban dwellers

You live in a city and own a factory. You need electricity to power your machinery, computers etc. You are very keen on the new power station. Recent flooding has damaged one of the existing hydroelectric power stations causing regular power cuts. You are loosing money each time that your machines stop working. You hope that the new power station will ensure that future power cuts are prevented.

However, you are not happy about the amount you currently pay for your electricity bill. Prices have gone up recently as the rivers had to be dredged to make the current flow faster. The rivers are being clogged up with soil washing off the hills in the rainy season.

This is caused by deforestation as the tree roots used to prevent the soil from washing away. You therefore blame the rural community for cutting down trees and thus making the electricity prices higher.

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Charcoal sellers

You used to live in a city, but the business you worked for went bust. Part of the problem was the frequent power cuts and high costs for electricity. You have moved back to a rural area, but do not have enough money to buy some farm land.

Instead you make charcoal and sell it to the local people to use on their cooking fires.

You are happy about the new power station as it may enable you to have electricity in your home. However, this may cause a threat to your business because if other people in your area get electricity in their homes, they will buy less charcoal.

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Environmental Organisation

You are happy about the power station, as 90% of the trees cut down in Malawi are used as fire wood. If more people have electricity in their homes they will probably cut down fewer trees.

You hope that the energy company will support your campaign to protect the forests. Rain water that used to be absorbed by forests during the rainy season is now washing directly down the hills into the rivers. This can cause serious flooding that could damage the hydroelectric power stations.

Deforestation also causes topsoil erosion during the rainy season. This means that the soil washes down into the rivers. The rivers then flow slower and less electricity is made.

It costs a lot of money to dredge the rivers to increase the current. A simpler solution would be to replant trees, not just along the river banks but up the hills. This will help prevent soil erosion, keep the river unblocked and reduce flooding.

However, you are not happy about the high cost of electricity. If the cost came down, more people in rural areas could afford it, so would cut down fewer trees for fuel. This in turn would reduce the costs of dredging the rivers and repairing the power station.

Once you have listened to the opinions given by each of the groups you will vote on whether that power station should be built or not.

What compromises could be found to produce cheaper electricity and protect the forests?