

Sharing the benefits of large dams



Project objective

To improve dissemination of information on the social consequences of large dams for local development, and build the capacity and understanding needed for government and other authorities to strengthen inclusive, participatory and accountable decision making.

It's been nearly 50 years since the iconic Akosombo dam was built in Ghana in 1965, flooding the lands and homes of 80,000 people, creating the largest manmade lake in the world, and securing Ghana's electricity supply. Since then, West African countries have built more than 150 large dams. Like Akosombo, many have stimulated national development while also bringing considerable environmental and social challenges. Some local grievances have even passed down through the generations, clogging up government offices and courts with complaints over the way aging dams were built.

Large dam construction largely went out of fashion among major donors after 1990, as global concern grew over local impacts. But the past decade has seen the World Bank and other major multilateral banks renew their support for large dams in the face of increasing energy and food demand. Can these projects avoid repeating history? As part of the Global Water Initiative (GWI), the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) set out to help communities and governments learn from past experience to improve dam planning, benefit sharing and resettlement practices in West Africa.

The new dams face a very different economic and political climate from those built before 1990. The 1983 Sélingué dam in Mali was constructed under military dictatorship, for example, whereas region-wide decentralisation and democratisation surround the country's latest dam project, at Taoussa. Donors' policies

have also evolved to give much more attention and funding to safeguard the environment and people.

Yet flawed planning can still cause tragedies, and donor-funded megaprojects like dams lack the financial flexibility to respond to unexpected social consequences. Lessons from past projects could radically improve the impacts of dams being planned now, which might start construction in five years and stand for another hundred. And while authorities sometimes resist addressing the legacies of dams built 20 years ago, many are more open to considering better ways forward.

Rethinking goals

GWI and local researchers reviewed documents from West African dams and talked with people who had to move out of the dams' paths. Focusing on six large dams in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal, we asked about the effects of resettlement, the dams' perceived benefits and who profited from them. Could these benefits be shared more fairly and effectively to allow development for all, and give affected people a stake in the project throughout its lifetime?

National workshops, involving both government and local stakeholders, discussed the emerging stories and drew out lessons for national policy. One broad message was that governments and donors should put dams' local development objectives on an equal footing with national objectives. Large dams are built for nationwide goals such as supplying electricity or irrigation, and people living near dam sites have often

Project summary

More than 60 large dams are being built, or are on the drawing board, across Africa, 39 in West Africa. In this project of the Global Water Initiative, IIED and IUCN are engaging local and national actors in learning from experience around large dams in West Africa, including detailed case studies of six dams. The studies show how planners could better manage resettlement and avoid costly disputes by sharing benefits from dams with affected people. We are discussing these lessons with communities and governments involved in dam building, as well as regional bodies, and helping to design new benefit-sharing mechanisms.

The Global Water Initiative (GWI), supported by the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, addresses the challenge of providing long term access to clean water and sanitation, as well as protecting and managing ecosystem services and watersheds, for the poorest and most vulnerable people dependent on those services.

The Regional GWI consortium for West Africa includes the following partners:

- International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
- Catholic Relief Services (CRS)
- CARE International
- SOS Sahel (UK)
- International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

GWI West Africa covers five countries: Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Niger and Senegal. Some activities also take place around the proposed Fomi dam in Guinea.

For more information, see www.iucn.org/gwidams and www.globalwaterinitiative.com



been seen as mere obstacles – needing to be moved and then compensated for their losses. Disputes over compensation and resettlement lands dragged out and sometimes turned violent. Claims from Akosombo are still being submitted to land tribunals, for instance, while in Bagré, Burkina Faso, local chiefs are trying to protect what they regard as their customary land, ejecting immigrants attracted to new jobs and markets around the dam.

Instead of bearing the costs of conflicts – in both money and lost development opportunities – governments could channel a portion of resources created by dams to displaced communities, ensuring local people gain directly from the projects. For example, based on insights from the case studies, GWI is now helping Niger authorities design a local development fund receiving two to three per cent of hydropower revenues at Kandadji. Over the dam's 100-year life, this fund can meet the changing needs of local people – such as additional schooling, investments in agriculture or better water supplies – and provide flexible support that reduces dependence on the government to resolve resettlement conflicts. Besides hydropower revenues, shared benefits might include access to irrigated land, a share of electricity, or a structured fishery.

Get it in writing

The research shows another crucial step is to codify legal rights to the land, houses and other resources that dams redistribute. In many cases, such as at Sélingué, immigration has added pressure on resources, and the transition from customary resource tenure to modern legal rights has been complicated. Decades into a dam project, traditional chiefs who allocated land to immigrants or watched the government do so may come to believe their own groups were left behind in the resettlement process.



The reservoir at Kompienga (Burkina Faso) provides a rich fishery and dry season grazing for cattle

In oral cultures, colourful predictions by government speakers can also sow tensions. A resettled village head at Sélingué recalled, 'We were told there would be so much rice that we'd be able to eat it and sell it to buy millet if we ever needed any.' In reality, irrigated rice plots proved harder and more expensive to cultivate than rain-fed millet. To ensure that plans for land rights, compensation and benefit sharing are clear and binding, governments must put them in writing.

The GWI initiative is working with dam development authorities, civil society and local communities to build these lessons into dam plans in Guinea, Mali, and Niger. It also contributes to thinking by international river basin agencies and the 15-country group, Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS), on good practice for large water infrastructure in West Africa. And with the new wave of African dam building still gathering momentum, GWI should have more opportunities to encourage future projects to learn from the past.

Key lessons learnt and innovations

- Better sharing of the benefits from dams is in everyone's interest – government, local communities, private sector, and donors. Supporting local development alongside a dam's national goals is not costly or complicated, and prevents protracted disputes that drain government resources over the long term.
- The transition from traditional resource tenure to management of lands under modern law is the major source of tension, combined with the challenge of managing inward migration due to opportunities offered by dams.
- Local people affected by dams need their rights codified and protected by written agreements to avoid accusations of broken promises, conflicts within host, resettled and immigrant communities, and litigation around compensation.



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