



CASE STUDY

India: Social side effects of the Upper Veda Dam Project



Summary

The Upper Veda Project involves a dam that would submerge 14 villages. Opposing the project, affected communities took action and urged for alternative solutions. The dam was eventually constructed, but the process was characterised by conflicts between project authorities and communities. This case illustrates that dam projects, which directly affect the livelihoods of large numbers of people, need to have developed a well defined rehabilitation plan prior to construction.

Background

The Upper Veda Project involves the construction of a dam and the creation of an irrigation facility for 9900 hectares of agricultural land in 71 villages in the command area of a dam to be constructed across the river Veda (a tributary of the river Narmada in western Madhya Pradesh). It is a Rs 870 million medium-sized irrigation project being implemented by the Narmada Valley Development Authority (NVDA) and financed by the National Bank for Rural development (NABARD). It is one of the 30 large dams being constructed in the Narmada valley. Additional benefits of the project would be drinking water supply to Bhikangaon and other villages and water supply for industrial areas.

The proposed development activities has its share of socio-economic problems, at full capacity the back waters of the dam would submerge 1258.59 hectare land in 14 villages, affecting a total population of 1585 people in 577 families. Most of the affected families belong to local tribal communities. The affected people had opposed the dam construction and proposed that an alternative solution should be found. As a result, the government constituted a committee including representatives of the affected people and Narmada Bachao Aandolan (NBA), a NGO advocating the cause of the affected people.

Actions taken

In its first meeting held in 2000 the Committee unilaterally concluded, in the absence of the NBA, that there was no alternative to the dam. The NVDA announced the rehabilitation package in the year 2000, which was not accepted by the affected people. However, the project authorities initiated the process of land acquisition, and compensation for the people of most of the affected villages were finalized.

The Chief Minister of the state laid the foundation stone for the construction of the dam in June 2003 and the contract for the construction was awarded in October 2003 (even before the award of compensation was announced). However, actual work was delayed due to opposition of the villagers, who were insisting on a review of the project proposal and finding alternatives or to provide at least 2 ha of irrigated land in the Upper Veda Command area for all the affected people.

The NBA had also filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the High Court of Madhya Pradesh demanding settlement of compensation before the construction of the dam. The government initiated steps to resolve the conflict through awareness program, and communicating the real picture regarding the compensation to the affected people. However, conflict continued since the affected people remained dissatisfied with the government proposal.

Outcomes

Consequently, the district administration proposed the government to reconsider the proposal to find the alternative to the dam or to allow a joint survey of the submergence area with the affected people to demarcate the affected area and to provide 2 ha of irrigated land in the command area of the project to each affected family.

In May 2004, the affected people held a demonstration at Khargone against the land acquisition for the dam site by the government. In retaliation, the government arrested 125 demonstrators and started the work of dam construction after crushing the agitation of the affected people. Land required for the project was acquired paying compensation to the affected people.

Lessons Learned

Dam projects, which directly affect the livelihoods of a large number of people, need to have developed a well defined rehabilitation plan prior to construction.

Consultation with the affected people at every stage of project implementation starting from proposal stage is necessary to resolve the conflict and reducing the human suffering.

Simply employing a routine government system of obtaining sanction and execution of sensitive rehabilitation projects can lead to resentment among the project affected people, and thus conflict between the affected people and the project implementing authorities.

There needs to be scope to allow for changes in the packages, as per local needs, within the policy and need for quick decision-making at the lowest practical level in regard to these changes.

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Year

2013

Country

India

GWP Region

South Asia

Other Tags

Stakeholder engagement , Veda river

Thematic Tagging

Gender , Youth , Water services

Language English

Supporting Materials

GWP South Asia

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