

Large dams:

sharing the water, and the benefits

We all want to build good dams and together we can find the solutions. This is the message from Jérôme Koundouno who has been carrying out research into the benefits of large dam projects in West Africa. This will be possible, Koundouno adds, if the lessons learned from past experiences guide future decision-making. Mike Shanahan reports

“Every dam is different,” says Jérôme Koundouno, coordinator of the large dams project in West Africa for the Global Water Initiative (GWI), a US\$150M, 10-year effort funded by the Howard G Buffett Foundation. “But by learning from the past we can plan for the future.”

More than 150 large dams have been built in the region in the past 50 years and many more are planned. “They will displace hundreds of thousands of local people,” says Koundouno. “So it will be critical to ensure that the affected communities are resettled successfully and can rebuild their livelihoods.”

Past experiences in these areas have been mixed. When countries have built large dams, the goal of national development has often overridden the potential for local or regional development. The result is that many local affected people have been left dissatisfied with the degree to which the dam has offered development opportunities – and conflicts have arisen.

To find out why and what could be done to improve prospects for people affected by future dams, West African researchers, with funding provided by the Global Water Initiative, studied six large dams in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal. The book *Sharing the water, sharing the benefits* – published in 2011 – seeks to summarise the analysis and results of this work and identifies ways to share the benefits of future dams more equitably and create development opportunities for local communities.


“GWI is our foundation’s largest annual funding commitment,” says Howard G. Buffett, an American philanthropist and President of the Howard G. Buffett Foundation. “I made that commitment to support efforts like this dams study to understand and find solutions for issues that affect water access, particularly where there is a potential for transboundary dispute or internal conflict, and when the populations most affected are the most vulnerable and marginalised.”

The study’s findings are timely. Many of

West Africa’s planned dams are set to displace more people than those that have already been developed. The numbers speak for themselves: Mali’s Taoussa dam will resettle 55,000 people, while the Kandadji dam in Niger will move 38,000, and the Fomi dam in Guinea another 48,000.

Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso

The publication focused on the Niandouba and Confluent dams in Senegal, the Sélingué dam in Mali, and the Bagré, Kompienga and Moussodougou dams in Burkina Faso. In each study country, the researchers asked what the dam developers had originally envisaged the benefits of the dams would be and how they would be shared. They assessed the basis for secure livelihoods both before and after each dam’s construction and asked local people to assess the changes in their lives, both positive and negative. They also examined how displaced communities now accessed resources, and whether this affected their relationships with



The study focused on a number of dams, including Kompienga in Burkina Faso and investigated the benefits

each other and with host communities.

"The studies were thorough and inclusive," says Koundouno. "As well as analysing all of the available pre- and post-dam documents, the research teams used a mix of interviews, focus groups and local workshops to consult the different groups of local stakeholders. They shared their draft findings with local people and then before finalising the reports they presented the conclusions at national workshops." These meetings attracted participants from local and central government agencies, water managers, electricity generators, agribusiness and civil society organisations.

People in communities affected by large dams had various reasons to be dissatisfied. For some, the compensation for the losses they suffered because of the dam's construction and later impacts were simply insufficient, or had been poorly planned.

When people in Mali lost their land to make way for the construction of the Sélingué dam they were given plots of irrigated plots as compensation for lost rain-fed fields. But they received little support in mastering the new agricultural techniques needed to grow rice instead of millet. After poor harvests, many abandoned their plots or had them taken away for failing to farm them properly.

Other people the researchers interviewed said they found it difficult to gain from the benefits the dams offered – they could not access the electricity generated or the dams provided no programmes to enable communities to take advantage of the new potential for fishing in reservoirs. Other causes of concern were a lack of clear and agreed rules for resource management and clashes between national laws and local customary practices, especially over who has what rights to what land.

Lessons learned

The picture wasn't always pretty. But in painting it, the researchers identified several ways for future dams to overcome these challenges. Many of the lessons they learned can be applied to local, national or regional policies to improve equitable outcomes from dam projects.

"For starters, governments and dam developers should involve local people in the benefits the dam creates and in the major decisions about its construction, investment, compensation and resettlement that affect them directly," says Koundouno. "We also urge governments to replace compensation policies that reproduce previous living conditions with new ones that enable local people to adapt to the changes the dam will bring, and to benefit from them."

The report recommends that dam projects should also develop local production systems, by ensuring access to land and resources in ways that are compatible with both national law and customary practices. It says local

stakeholders should have a say in agreeing local rules that will enable communities to make fair and sustainable use of resources – such as fish from the reservoirs – and to avoid conflicts between users.

To enhance a dam's benefits to local people, the report calls for systems that allow them local access to irrigation and electricity and recommends creating a local development fund that is financed by the dam's economic activity. Such funds can be used, throughout the lifetime of the dam project, to support the changing needs of affected people as they resettle and re-establish their economic activity.

Global Water Initiative

These kinds of solutions are what the Global Water Initiative was created to seek. With support from the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, the GWI aims to address the challenges of providing long term access to clean water and sanitation, as well as protecting and managing ecosystem services and watersheds. Its focus is on the poorest and most vulnerable people.

In its West African projects, the GWI brings together major international organisations – such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), where Koundouno works, and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

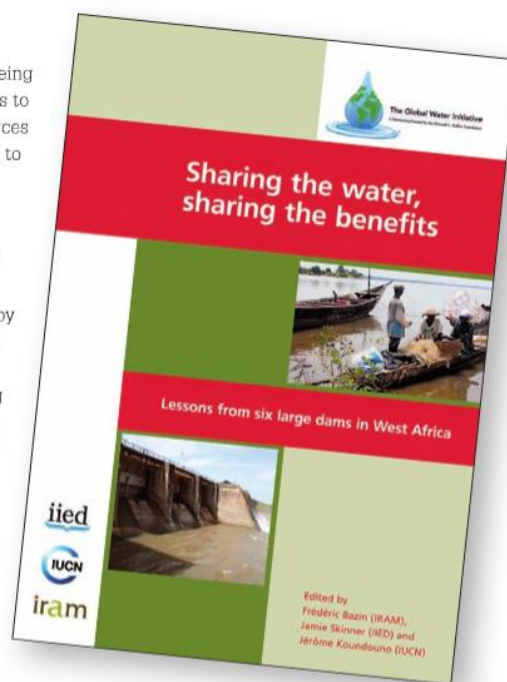
"Large dams have a bad-name because too many have brought serious environmental and social impacts," says the report's co-author Jamie Skinner, who leads IIED's water team. "But large dams are here to stay and more are being planned. Countries are choosing them as an adaptation to food insecurity, rising energy prices and climate change so it is essential that they build 'good dams', where the benefits are widely shared and the harmful impacts are minimised.

"Efforts to ensure that local communities benefit need not clash with national development objectives, nor do they need to be very expensive," he says. "Developers need to work with local people, and not see them mainly as an obstacle to national progress."

Skinner says the challenge will be to ensure that displaced people benefit through the lifetime of the dam – as much as 50-80 years – and not just for the first five to ten years when the project's main financial backers are still engaged.

He sees some positive trends in the region. In October 2011 the Niger Basin Authority adopted a social and environmental Annex to the Water Charter that lays the foundations for improved social and environmental planning in the vast basin of this 4180km river that flows through nine countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Nigeria).

It obliges states to assess environmental



The publication seeks to improve prospects for people affected by construction of new dams

impacts, consult local people, and adopt progressive tools, such as formal written agreement from people displaced by dams, in a bid to improve social and environmental outcomes.

"Future dam projects urgently need to make resettled people tangibly better off as a result of the project, and for the long-term," says Skinner. "The good news is that many mechanisms for sharing benefits already exist and can be readily implemented if there is sufficient political will."

Such mechanisms that engage and support affected communities can also benefit governments, investors and dam operators by promoting good community relations, public support for infrastructure development and improved livelihoods.

"We all want to build good dams and together we can find the solutions," adds Koundouno. "And this will be possible if the lessons learned from past experiences guide future decision making. Our research shows that large dams could bring greater benefits to local populations, and this ultimately will lead to greater social acceptance of new dams that are deemed essential for sustainable national development." ■

Further information

Mike Shanahan is the press officer at the International Institute for Environment and Development in London, UK.

The report *Sharing the water, sharing the benefits: Lessons from six large dams in West Africa* can be downloaded at <http://pubs.iied.org/17510IIED.html>