

Venot, J.-P. 2010. Book review of Skinner et al. 2009.
Sharing the benefits of large dams in West Africa. London, UK:
International Institute for Environment and Development.
Water Alternatives 3(2): 463-465



BOOK REVIEW

Skinner, J.; Niase, M. and Lawrence, H. (Eds). 2009. Sharing the benefits of large dams in West Africa. Natural Resources Issues No. 19. London, UK: International Institute for Environment and Development. ISBN 978-1-84369-717-6, ISSN 1605-1017, 70 pages, US\$25.

(URL: www.iied.org/pubs/display.php?o=12555IIED)

Jean-Philippe Venot

Postdoctoral Scientist, International Water Management Institute (IWMI, West Africa), Accra, Ghana;
j.venot@cgiar.org

INTRODUCTION

The World Commission on Dams (WCD) clearly highlighted the duality of large dams. On the one hand, they are thought of as engines of growth, providing among other services water for hydropower generation and irrigation development. On the other hand, they can also induce social and environmental disturbances that negatively affect local populations (WCD, 2000). A consensus has now been established that these benefits and costs are not equally distributed. While local communities suffer from negative externalities and remain sidelined from dam development projects, benefits accrue to distant users that dwell mostly in cities and downstream irrigated areas. These spatial disparities have led to a growing debate on how the benefits of large dams can be shared in a more equitable and sustainable way (for instance, Egré, 2007). Alleviating the negative direct impacts of large dams (displacement and relocation) on local populations is the focus of a growing body of literature.

This new (published in 2009) and concise (70 pages) report from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) enters into this debate and contributes to the fundamentals of the Global Water Initiative (GWI), which aims to provide long-term access to clean water and sanitation, as well as protect and manage ecosystem services and watersheds for the benefit of the poorest in society.¹

This report reviews "the experience with displacement of affected people in West Africa over the last 40 years and examines mechanisms for distributing the benefits of dams more equitably and ensuring that affected people are better off". It postulates that, firstly, dams are crucial for the development of Africa; secondly, the construction of dams has often led to complex displacement and relocation problems; thirdly, there have been only limited assessments of resettlement projects; and, fourthly, future projects must be informed of past experiences to stimulate multi-stakeholder dialogue on ways to introduce benefit sharing in large dam projects in West Africa. This report is concerned mainly with benefit sharing at the local level, although it recognises the need for transboundary dialogues among states that share river basins.

¹ The GWI consortium for West Africa covers five countries: Senegal, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. It includes the following partners: the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), CARE International, SOS Sahel (UK) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

STRUCTURE AND CONTENTS

The report, comprising nine short chapters, is structured in two parts. The first part deals with the "West African experience in managing people displaced by large dams", while the second part reviews the tools and approaches currently in use around the world to "improve benefit sharing around large dams and make proposals for moving forward on this issue in West Africa". An executive summary recaps the main argument, and a short reference list is provided. Two annexes give useful additional information: a list of large dams in West Africa and worldwide examples of benefit sharing experiences.

The first part of the report focuses on the limits and achievements of past and current resettlement schemes in West Africa. Until the 1980s, little attention was paid to the interests of the displaced. Since then, voluntary relocation policy instruments have been progressively developed with the support of the international community, notably the World Bank. However, resettlement programmes have seldom been conceived as instruments of development, and they have rarely included mechanisms to ensure long-term benefits for the local population beyond relocation. Social-anthropological insensitivity and implementation problems are identified as major flaws of past dam and resettlement projects. Despite short-term benefits in terms of access to water, health and education, longer term living conditions have often deteriorated. Recent initiatives in the Senegal, Volta, Gambia and Niger River basins hold promises of better living conditions for local populations, by taking into account local development plans.

The second part of the report presents benefit sharing as a "way of thinking and a practical approach to catalyse and fund local actions (...) under the Integrated Water Resources Management framework", allowing for a more equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of large dams within society. The report states that benefit sharing is a win-win situation for local communities, government, dam operators, investors and consumers. It signifies a shift from 'compensation thinking' towards the assertion that local communities can be development partners. Benefit sharing can take multiple forms such as the sharing of project services and revenues, and supporting alternative livelihoods and investments that benefit local communities. The report highlights that there is no single, standard model for implementing benefit sharing, but some common principles can serve to ensure desired impacts, namely 1) enabling regulations and legislations; 2) transparency and accountability; 3) ensuring a stream of financing in the long term; 4) local participation in decision making about the uses of project services and revenues; and 5) multi-stakeholder dialogue and good governance. Finally, the report highlights that benefit sharing around large dams has become a hot topic and offers perspectives for the sustainable management of large dams in West Africa. According to the authors, the first priority is to set up multi-stakeholder platforms "to kick start and maintain momentum to introduce benefit sharing mechanisms".

CRITIQUE

The report targets mainly the general public rather than a scholarly readership, which explains some of its shortcomings for an academic audience. First, while it mentions that West Africa has 150 large dams, the review of experience remains incomplete, as most of the assertions are made on the basis of ten cases. A comprehensive list of large dam projects that have implemented resettlement programmes would have been interesting, but this constitutes a daunting task – beyond the scope of this report – due to a lack of readily available information. Second, statements on the scale of resettlement programmes remain unsubstantiated. While the report states that displacement and relocation have demanded enormous human and financial efforts, no figures are provided on the absolute or relative importance of such investments. As a result, it is difficult to measure the success or failure of relocation efforts. Moreover, it is impossible to ascertain readily the commitment of nation states to resettlement schemes.

More substantially, the report is based mainly on a review of a still sparse literature and on expert knowledge. No primary data seem to have been generated directly from the 'field' or the projects themselves, which undermines strong statements about "the prospects for better living conditions" and the perspectives offered by "benefit sharing for promoting social equity and sustainability". This seems a lost opportunity, given the ongoing initiatives that promote *Dialogues* on large dams in West Africa. Initiatives such as the *Ghana Dams Dialogue*, supported by the GTZ (see Seeger et al., this issue), could have indeed offered some insights from the ground, although there is no substantiation that such dialogue can lead to introducing benefit sharing. It is true that mechanisms, policies and legislation for a fair sharing of the benefits of large dams may have been introduced in some countries and basins of West Africa, yet the report fails to assess the changes that such initiatives have actually induced on the ground. The effective implementation of formal frameworks to address the needs and demands of the local displaced populations remains, at best, uncertain. The politics of the projects – issues of power, access and control of resources – are rarely made explicit or addressed by state or basin initiatives, even though they may act as major impediments to the true participation of the poorest and most vulnerable.

The diagnosis of the issues is good, if not novel, but the remedy proposed – benefit sharing supported by a favourable political environment – remains somehow fragile. It is not clear whether a benefit sharing approach would induce and guarantee a renewed political pledge to address past failures and honour social and environmental commitments, or if it is simply a repackaging of the notion of sustainable development. The practicalities and limitations of the recommendations are not investigated, and it is not established why and how "benefit sharing is a practical policy tool to achieve greater social inclusiveness and improve the livelihoods of local people". The report acknowledges that there is no single way to operationalise benefit sharing, and lists potential approaches; however, several key questions are left unanswered if the objective is to assess critically the perspectives offered by these approaches. Those include how to address the politics of water resources development and how to stimulate multi-stakeholder dialogue and the proactive participation of the most vulnerable in practice, even though the report aims at the latter.

For the general public, the report remains, nonetheless, a valuable introduction to the issues of displacement, resettlement and sustainable management of large dams in West Africa.

REFERENCES

- WCD (World Commission on Dams). 2000. *Dams and development: A new framework for decision-making*. The report of the World Commission on Dams. London: Earthscan www.dams.org/report/contents.htm
- Egré, D. 2007. Benefit sharing issue. Compendium of relevant practices-2nd stage. Report for the United Nations Environment Programme, Dams and Development Project. Montreal, Canada: Dominique Égré Consultants. www.unep.org/dams/files/Compendium/Report_BS.pdf
- Seeger, K.; Nyman, K. and Twum, R. 2010. The role of German Development Cooperation in promoting sustainable hydropower. *Water Alternatives* 3(2). This issue.