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Community engagement & acceptance

Acceptance of change by people affected by hydropower scheme developments depends on community engagement, participation in decision-making processes, and the demonstrated manifestation of positive benefit from the development.

Issue

There have been a number of cases where a lack of public acceptance of hydropower scheme developments can lead to significant opposition to the project. This can arise where there has been a failure to engage communities impacted by dam building activities, and a subsequent lack of understanding and recognition of issues that communities face. Governments, development proponents, stakeholders and communities can all experience unnecessary, significant and ongoing negative consequences as a result of not gaining public acceptance for the project. More sustainable outcomes can be achieved when community rights are recognised and decision-making processes include effective participation by impacted communities.

Management

Local communities can be impacted in numerous ways by changes associated with new hydropower projects. Acceptance of change depends on effective and appropriate community engagement processes and the demonstration of benefit from the proposed development. Respect for, and knowledge of, communities and stakeholders is required.

Suitable processes need to be established and accepted to achieve the on-going consultation and participation of all stakeholders and impacted communities. Affected communities must view the engagement process as being open, fair and inclusive. They need to trust the integrity of government and development participants.

Environmental, economic and social costs and benefits need to be identified, documented and disseminated in a form that is relevant and can be understood. The opportunity for communities to make an informed contribution on issues such as the identification, planning and distribution of benefits and potential resettlement options, is required. Vulnerable or minority groups, and women in particular, should have their voices heard by adequate representation.

Acceptance of change takes time, and it is important for those communities that are affected to be given sufficient lead time to consider the consequences of proposals that have been negotiated. Further, it is important that the commitments that have been made to communities are followed through, ensuring that agreed milestones and performance targets are met.