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Social impact assessment

Generally conducted as part of the environmental impact assessment process, social impact assessment aims to identify who will be affected by a hydropower scheme, and in what way, so that siting, design and project planning can adequately address any potential social issues.

Issue

Without careful assessment and management, social impacts such as involuntary displacement of communities and breakdown in community cohesion can result from the development of hydropower projects. Identification of potential socio-economic impacts of projects and the development of appropriate planning, monitoring and adaptation strategies, as achieved through social impact assessments, can mitigate negative impacts and achieve more sustainable outcomes.

Management

Social impact assessment is best undertaken as part of a comprehensive, integrated, environmental and social impact assessment process. It is preferably guided by strategic priorities already assessed and established by governments. The role of both the developer and the government in the management of issues identified through social impact assessments need to be defined and agreed at the start of the development approval process. The overarching management objective should be to facilitate development that encourages empowerment, and generates benefits for people who are directly affected by a power scheme. This can be achieved through early consultation with all affected parties, equitable access to information, and transparency in decision-making processes.

It is important to identify who will be impacted, and in what way, so that entitlements are recognised and, where necessary, compensated for. To undertake such assessment local institutional capacities need to be developed and resourced. This in turn needs to be encouraged by appropriate and enforceable regulatory frameworks established by government.

Public health risks need to be identified and managed during the social impact assessment process. Local health care facilities such as clinics may need to be constructed and resourced as part of any resettlement program to ensure the viable establishment of communities.

Culturally vulnerable communities need to be identified through the initial social impact assessment. To maintain social cohesion of communities that have common cultural and economic ties, sufficient resources need to be made available to facilitate the transition into a new living environment. Developing alternative means of generating livelihoods will require long term financial support, skills training and educational outreach programmes.