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Vulnerable social groups

Maintaining cultural and spiritual identity, and social and economic integrity, requires specific measures to be implemented throughout the project life cycle to ensure that indigenous communities are not socially and economically marginalised and disadvantaged.

Issue

Implications of hydropower projects on vulnerable social groups is a highly sensitive issue. In some cases a hydropower development may intrude on indigenous land, and may be only one of a number of multiple pressures on vulnerable communities that can have social and cultural consequences. Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities can be disadvantaged in the development process, and their social and cultural identity eroded or even lost. A significant transformation of the physical landscape can destroy ancestral sites and conflict with basic belief and value systems.

The community may be directly affected by hydropower developments where relocation and resettlement is required. They can also be indirectly affected by increasing encroachment of outside influences on their traditional lands, the introduction of disease and the loss of self-determination. This can lead to loss or impacts on local subsistence resources, as well as community breakdown.

Management

Developers have an obligation to respect the right of indigenous communities. When considering alternative hydropower options, priority should be placed on alternatives that maximise opportunities for, and do not pose significant unsolvable threats to, vulnerable social groups.

Although it is difficult to mitigate or fully compensate impacts, they may be minimised through early involvement of affected communities in decision making processes. Indigenous people and minorities will need to be formally represented to ensure understanding and management of issues of cultural significance. A program of social impact assessment should form part of an overall environmental and social impact assessment process that leads to the development of socially acceptable enhancement programs with net benefit.

Sufficient lead time and resources for minority groups to adapt to changing conditions, as well as alternative means to support traditional ways-of-life where required, can facilitate transition to unfamiliar environments. Compensation funds and the development of appropriate health, education and social services should all be considered in the development of appropriate mitigation strategies. Long-term financial support is best directed at measures that help define and maintain local cultural identity.