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Facilitating dialogue for sustainable dam development

A project supported by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) brought together local communities, hydropower authorities and government ministries to create West Africa's first inclusive dam planning forum.

Dams provide a renewable source of energy for development, water resources for agriculture and potentially mitigate severe seasonal flooding. However, these benefits come at a cost: dam construction can create huge challenges for nearby communities. Historically, dam-building has displaced populations, altered customary practices, interrupted livelihoods and changed ecosystems. It has also led to social tensions, and even conflict. To achieve potential development gains from dams while minimizing the costs to dam-affected communities, IWMI supported a dialogue process on dam-building in Ghana.





Photo Credit: Edmund Kyei Akoto-Danso, IWMI

IWMI's Project Leader of the Ghana Dams Dialogue (GDD), Liqa Raschid-Sally, was awarded the title 'Nana Afua Bui' (or Development Chief of the Bui Community), by Chief Nana Kwodjo Wuol II, in recognition of her work, at a special ceremony in April 2011.

Dialogue to overcome the social costs of dam development

Inspired by the process and findings of the World Commission on Dams (WCD), on whose steering committee IWMI had served, the Ghana Dams Dialogue (GDD) was created in 2006. The founding principle for this was that, increased interaction between key stakeholders was critical for sustainable dam development. The project successfully brought together dam-affected communities, hydropower authorities, government ministries and other organizations by facilitating a transparent and non-confrontational dialogue.

Five years after its inception, the GDD is the first successful inclusive planning tool for dam development in West Africa. It has provided multiple stakeholders with opportunities to discuss their once irreconcilable differences and contributed to the development of equitable solutions. This has meant that the negative impacts of hydropower dam construction on communities have been mitigated or even avoided. Under the GDD, dam-affected communities were able to articulate their needs, while hydropower authorities and the government have responded positively, supporting initiatives for community development and minimizing the disruption of cultural practices. The GDD has helped to ensure that past mistakes will not be repeated in the construction of the Bui Hydropower Dam and other planned future dam sites in the country.

Taking lessons from Ghana to the global level

In addition to reducing the social costs of dam-building in Ghana, the GDD also contributed to the development of improved global protocols for more sustainable dam development. The GDD was the only African organization advocating this inclusive approach to participate in the 2009 International Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Forum (HSAF). Recommendations from the GDD team were incorporated into the International Hydropower Association's (IHA's) Sustainability Assessment Protocol, which will improve sustainability assessments for international hydropower development and operation.

Strengthening local dialogue processes for sustainable dam development

As IWMI's role as host of the GDD came to a close in 2011, an external evaluation report found that the Dialogue has established a very vibrant and functional national network addressing sustainable dam development. A stakeholder analysis demonstrated a high commitment of partners. After only five years, the GDD was able to become an entirely Ghanaian process, fully independent and seeking to generate its own resources. The GDD is viewed as a model for dialogue and shared learning in dam development globally.

Donors and collaborators

Funding for the GDD was provided by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH (formerly Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH), on behalf of Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development) (BMZ), Germany. IWMI administered the process jointly with the Volta Basin Development Foundation (VBDF), a Ghanaian nongovernmental organization. IWMI acted as both advisor and host for the GDD. IWMI researchers acted as facilitators at local and national forums, and provided inputs from dam-building experiences in other areas. IWMI continues to participate in the GDD on its National Coordinating Committee (NCC).

For more information

For more information on this and related projects, you can contact Edmund Kyei Akoto-Danso at e.akoto@cgiar.org or visit the IWMI website (www.iwmi.org).