

The Relationship Between Dam Construction and the Rights of Original Inhabitants to Participation

Ge Quanzhao

Ge Quanzhao, villager affected by Hutiaoxia Dam,
Wuzhu Village, Jinjiang Township, Shangri La County, Yunnan Province, China
*Prepared for the UN Symposium on Hydropower and Sustainable Development,
Beijing, China, October 27-29, 2004.*

Abstract

As a villager living along the Jinsha River, I totally believe that the area of First bend of Yangtze River and Tiger Leaping Gorge is a real “Shangri-La”. The area covers the grandest scenery of the Three Parallel Rivers and owns abundant and unique natural resources, in addition, a great quantity of cultural relics and heritages can be found in this area. Many ethnic groups such as Naxi, Bai, Tibetan, Yi, Lisu live in the area, and create brilliant ethnic culture. From the viewpoint of economic development, the Jinsha River valley is the most fertile land in Lijiang municipality and Diqing prefecture. In order to protect the ecosystem of the river, we organized a villagers association on water resource protection. Recently, we heard that a big dam will be built in Tiger Leaping Gorge, which will flood a large area of land and a hundred thousand people will be resettled. The dam will have a big impact on the ecosystem and local culture.

The article is from the viewpoint of the local people interpreting how the people, as the most important stakeholders should participate in decision-making, so that the sustainable development of Jinsha River watershed can be realized.

Keywords: Dam building, rights of stakeholders, participation

Introduction

As a common inhabitant of Jinsha River watershed, I fully believe that the “First Bend of the Changjiang (Yangtze) River” – the Tiger Leaping Gorge – is a true “Shangri La”. Here we have the most spectacular landscapes, unique natural resources and plenty of historical relics. Several ethnic groups including Naxi, Bai, Lisu, Tibetan, Miao, Yi and Han having been lived here for generations. They have created splendid cultures and memorable histories. In economic aspects, here we have the most productive lands and favourable climate. It can be described as a “land of milk and honey”. The local people are rich and satisfied.

Recently we have heard that hydroelectricity projects will be built in the gorge. The construction of a dam will submerge plenty of farmlands and move 100,000 people. The project will have great impacts on the local ecological environment. As the biggest group of stakeholders, I think that we local people must participate in the decision-making process for the sustainable development of this beautiful place.

This article will provide suggestions for national policy research and local government decision-making on dam construction from the view of a common local inhabitant. It will focus on the relationships between dam construction and the benefits to people living in the dam area. The arguments and suggestions are based on the principles of sustainable watershed management and harmonious development between human beings and nature.

I. Rights and participation

Using stakeholder analysis to recognize benefits and risks and organising stakeholders' forum to ensure that all problems can be discussed and negotiated.

---- “Citizens Guide to World Commission on Dams”, *World Rivers Web*, p47

1. Rights of the people need to be resettled by dam construction

When a flood inundates our village, when an earthquake destroys our township, we are so appreciative of the salvations of government and the society. We truly feel the affection in human beings during the natural disasters. However, when our villages, our lands, our forests, our pastures and our dreams are drowned by the construction of a dam, how many benefits can we gain for the contributions we are making to make up our losses in this manmade disaster, which are greater than

what we have lost during natural disasters? For our own lives, for our survival, we must stand up and protect ourselves. It is our rights.

2. Legalisation of the rights of participation

This year, the State Council issued the “Suggestions on the establishment and improvement of the democratic administration system for village affairs” (*People’s Daily*, July 12th, 2004). It provides systematic suggestions for the protection of the “four rights” of farmers: right of being informed, right of participation, right of decision-making, and right of monitoring.

The construction of hydroelectricity projects in the Tiger Leaping Gorge are important events that seriously affect our benefits. The participation of local farmers in decision-making is out of the question. It is the right entitled for every citizen by the constitutions, and an important measure of public participation in the democratic political system. It is also the request of the scientific development view held by our party.

3. Learning new knowledge for the provision of reasonable suggestions

For the environmental protection and development of green agriculture, we organized “Green Watershed training workshop of ecological protection for farmers”. The purpose of the workshop was to provide useful information in ecological protection and green agriculture for farmers and village committees. When we got the information of hydroelectricity construction in the gorge, we immediately organised studies for relevant laws and regulations on resettlement, watershed ecological environmental protection, World Natural Heritage protection for “Three Parallel Rivers” and the “Citizens Guide to World Commission of Dam”. We collected and distributed materials about national policies, academic debates and media reports to farmers. Our purpose was to make the public know the reality so that to facilitate public participation in the discussion of the dam construction.

4. Calling for professional evaluation through media

To common farmers like us, the high buildings and prosperity of cities are not our pursuit. What we need are bright sunshine, fresh air, clean water and fertile lands. We are wealthy in both feelings and substance in this beautiful natural environment. We are enjoying the comfortable life that we have benefited from the policy of development. As the people whose livelihoods depend on the river, we are sure that we can protect our lands well. Therefore, we are appealing for domestic and international experts, especially experts in environmental protection and sociologists, to openly discuss the advantages and disadvantages of dam construction in the Tiger Leaping Gorge. It is the right and responsibility for everyone to protect the integrity and nature of the gorge because the “Three Parallel Rivers” is not only the pride of China but also the pride of the whole world.

II. What will we lose?

Our scruffy home is better than homes made by gold and silver.

---- Chinese folk proverb

1. Losses have already occurred

The plan of dams has now become a great hindrance to the economic development of the region and has caused huge losses in social and economic aspects. Affected by the plan, the infrastructure constructions in this region were all cut, supportive projects for farmers were changed to other sites, county roads were changed to temporary pathways for resettlement, and the position of Jinsha Township Leader has been empty for more than half a year because no one is willing to take over the position. After the social reform, we have seen rapid social and economic development in this region. It will become a “garden-like” rural area if it is not affected by the plan of dam construction. The farmers all ask: “To whom should we ask for the compensation for these losses?” The signs for dam have now become “stings” in our hearts.

2. Losses in tangible and intangible properties

Through the discussions and analysis, we realize that the property losses of farmers caused by dam construction are impossible to be compensated for by governments or investors.

The homes of local farmers are traditional courtyard houses, with three or four buildings decorated with beautiful wood sculptures. The area of the home is normally one mu with vegetable lands, fruit gardens and surrounded by flowers and streams. The road and irrigation systems here are the results of achievements of generations. Some reporters from southeast China have commented that: “The living environment of farmers here is better than most places in southeast China. It just like the heaven on the earth”.

With the exception of farmlands, farmers here still have vegetable lands, contracted wasteland and forests. Public lands include pastures, forests and mountain meadows. The farmlands are all productive lands with high yield. The old people and disabled can also make their lives by animal husbandry. Local farmers have said that: “Our lands are so fertile, our mountains are so huge. It is so easy for us to collect firewood from mountains and get water and fish from the river. If someone makes us move to a place in which we have lands but no mountains, or have mountains but no rivers, we would totally disagree”.

The great mountains here have fostered famous villages and outstanding people. It is the best places for young girls from outside to move into through marriage. We have families who have lived here for generations, have famous doctors and respected masters. If they are forced to move away from this place, how can they keep their respects? They have said that: “Here now is a protected area for World Natural Heritage. Here is the place for people all over the world to yearn toward. We cannot leave here. Why should we leave?”

3. Losses of the harmony in ethnic groups

Several ethnic groups have grown up and lived in this place for generations. They communicate with others whilst retaining their unique characteristics. They live harmoniously through mutual respects and mixed marriage. It is very common to see a family composed of several ethnic groups. For instance, Mr. Yang Xingrong of Jinsha Township, whose family is composed of five ethnic groups including Pumi, Lisu, Naxi, Han and Yi. Such examples of harmony are very common along the bank of the Jinsha River and can be seen as the heritage of ethnic cultures. The construction of a dam will drown the lands and damage this unique solidarity among ethnic groups. If it happens, from where can we find another cultural heritage like this? Therefore I believe that the protection of the World Natural Heritage of “Three Parallel Rivers” is not only a task of river protection but also a task of protecting the stable living environment of local inhabitants. The value of world heritage protection should be based on the harmonious development between nature and human beings and harmony among all ethnic groups. This should be the really meaning of protection.

Through discussions and communication, farmers living in this region believe that in the residential places of multi-ethnic groups, the construction of dam will a disintegrate the harmony of minority ethnic groups, which will break the national policies for ethnic groups.

III. Problems after resettlement

Dam construction has contributed a lot for the development of human beings,, but such achievements are normally accompanied by unacceptable and unnecessary costs.

--- Citizen Guide to the World Commission of Dam, World Rivers Web,p2

I am now trying to discuss this topic from current resettlement polices and the experiences in other places of Yunnan (we have been to Manwan for investigation), although the argument is very difficult.

1. The compulsory resettlement has deprived the original livelihood of farmers

The resettlement policy in China is based on the principle of development. Most farmers were resettled in the agriculture industry in the previous experiences. The “moving back to inland” resettlement policy implemented in Manwan should be seen as an effective measure for farmers. The fundamental problem of the measure is the productivity of land. The previous lands of farmers have been cultivated for generations. They are fertile farming lands. The new lands allocated to farmers are newly cultivated on wasteland and slopes. Despite of the huge investment of government and

investors, the lands have low fertility with low productivity. The government has invested to solve the problem of drinking water but the problem still exists in some places. The resettled are disadvantaged groups, but not “cultivation troops” supported by government finance. The resettlement has pushed the farmers into poverty.

Problems are also serious for farmers who are “urbanised”. They are the unemployed dwellers in cities but not the beneficiaries of the Lowest Living Expenses Insurance for urban dwellers. The government cannot force the enterprises to give job for them since the independence of the enterprises to the government. The farmers are experts in cultivation and animal husbandry but ignorant in other fields. It is so difficult for them to compete with other people for employment. The “laid-off farmers” have become a new problem of the government.

After resettlement, the farmers cannot adapt to the change of environment. They lost their fertile lands and sometimes even health, and have become reliant on government. Facing the problems of resettlement, local government usually feels puzzled and fails in afterward support. Take Menglan village of Yun County as an example. The village was moved to Maka because of the dam. Before resettlement, the government had promised the supply of water, power and road access. The water channeled from Yongde County that passes through villages of Yi ethnic groups were often cut by these villages, and the government could not solve the conflict. For many years, the living and production of resettled villages depend on rainfalls. This situation has improved in recent years but the problem still has not been solved completely. The road access promised by the government is hard for transportation and the power is very expensive. In their previous lives, farmers had enough grain for food and sale, but even maize is now not enough. Local government had invested more than 2 million yuan in the village but problems are still there.

2. Resettlement should be supervised by legal framework

The over-development of hydroelectricity has tightened the cooperative relationship between the government and investors. The resettlement expenses are contracted to local governments. Governments resettled the farmers with planned economy measures and then pushed them into the market economy. These two kinds of economic models have caused the inequality to the resettled.

To solve the problem of resettlement, I suggest that government must follow a single economic model. The model can be planned economy measures, with which government should take the full responsibility of the production, employment and living of immigrants, and to ensure the improvement of the living conditions of farmers. It can also be market economy measures, in which farmers’ rights of participation and decision-making are fully guaranteed by legal framework. They can negotiate with the investors for their lives and share the profits of hydropower development.

Today we are living in a period of a transitional economy. Reforms are expended and deepened in all sectors. We believe that the problems of Manwan resettlement can be settled well under the efforts of government and public since the party and country leaders have placed high emphasis on farmers. Dam resettlement under current policies will create new problems in rural areas. The achievement of sustainable development for dams could be reached only when the problems of resettlement are solved with the principles of a market economy and the rights of immigrants are guaranteed by legal framework.

3. Immigrants need the protection from legislation

In the construction of dams, local government and investors usually use the slogan of “ensuring the overall strategy of party and state, and the benefits of most population” in the mobilization of resettlement. Lacking of information transparency, farmers usually signed the agreements that are harmful to their rights. When problems occurred, they cannot protect their rights through legislation. In the case of Manwan, the farmers and their lawyers could not find any suitable legal documents to support them. The corruptions of previous provincial leaders (Li Jiating and Gao Yan) had seriously decreased the accountability of government to local farmers. The problem of Manwan has worsened the situation. Farmers do not believe local governments and hope that the central government can

stipulate relevant laws and regulations to protect the rights of farmers.

We believe that in a market economy, farmers' benefits cannot be sacrificed by the excuse of "to ensure the benefits of most people and the state". The sacrifices made in the period of war can no longer be the leading value of economic development. Dam construction cannot be carried out with compulsory resettlement of farmers under the name of party and state, particularly when people have understood the damage of dams to ecology and social development.

We hope that the process of legalization in the country can place dam resettlement on the schedule for discussion and relevant laws and regulations can be stipulated as quickly as possible, especially for involuntary resettlement. The establishment of a legal framework is the fundamental guarantee for the "four rights" of farmers.

IV. Suggestions

Arguments in this article are the opinions of a farmer who is now facing the threat of dam construction. Some of the views maybe are hard to be accepted by hydropower experts and investors because of the short-term financial profits that dams bring. Even though, I still want to suggest that:

The state administrative department should set up a strategic planning system for dam projects. The planning should give more priority to environmental impact assessments and social impact assessments, in which the rights and interests of farmers in the dam areas can be expressed completely. The veto right should be entitled to the two assessments to avoid the disorder in the planning period. It can also avoid the negative impacts on society and economic development as well as unnecessary losses of governments and investors.

I also suggest that the administrative departments, local governments and investors should adopt the report of the World Commission of Dams "Dams and Development – A New Framework for Decision-making" for the policies of dam construction. The purpose of the suggestion is to facilitate the collection between Chinese experiences and international advanced methods and views.