



The social side-effects of the upper veda dam project

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The Upper Veda Project involves the construction of a dam and the creation of an irrigation facility for 9900 ha of agricultural land in 71 villages in the command area of a dam to be constructed across the river Veda (a tributary of the river Narmada in western Madhya Pradesh, India). It is a Rs 870 million medium-sized irrigation project being implemented by the Narmada Valley Development Authority (NVDA) and financed by the National Bank for Rural development (NABARD). At full capacity the back waters of the dam would submerge 1258.59 hectare land in 14 villages, affecting a total population of 1585 people in 577 families. Most of the affected families belong to local tribal communities.

The project-affected people had opposed the construction of the dam and proposed that an alternative solution should be found. As a result, the state government constituted a committee including representatives of the affected people and Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a NGO advocating the cause of the affected people. In its first meeting held in 2000 the Committee unilaterally concluded, in the absence of the NBA, that there was no alternative to the dam. The NVDA announced the rehabilitation package in the year 2000, which was not accepted by the affected people. However, the project authorities initiated the process of land acquisition, and compensation for the people of most of the affected villages were finalized. The Chief Minister of the state laid the foundation stone for the construction of the dam on 3rd June 2003 and the contract for the construction of the dam was awarded on 1st October 2003, i.e. even before the award of compensation was announced. However, actual work was delayed due to opposition of the villagers, who were insisting on a review of the project proposal

and finding alternatives or to provide at least 2 ha of irrigated land in the Upper Veda Command area for all the affected people. The NBA even asked the NABARD to cancel the sanction for the project. They had also filed a Public interest litigation (PIL) in the High Court of Madhya Pradesh demanding settlement of compensation before the construction of the dam.

The state government initiated steps to resolve the conflict through awareness programme, contact drive and communicating the real picture regarding the compensation to the affected people. However, conflict continued since the affected people remained dissatisfied with the government proposal. Consequently, the district administration proposed the government to reconsider the proposal to find the alternative to the dam or to allow a joint survey of the submergence area with the affected people to demarcate the affected area and to provide 2 ha of irrigated land in the command area of the project to each affected family.

On 23rd May 2004, the affected people held a demonstration at Khargone against the land acquisition for the dam site by the government. In retaliation, the government arrested 125 demonstrators and started the work of construction of dam after crushing the agitation of the affected people. Land required for the project was acquired paying compensation to the affected people.

Lessons Learned â€” Dam projects, such as this one, which directly affects the livelihoods of a large number of people, need to have developed a well defined rehabilitation plan during the project planning stage â€” Simply employing the routine government system of obtaining sanction and execution of sensitive rehabilitation projects can lead to resentment among the project affected people, and thus conflict between the affected people and the project implementing authorities. â€” Consultation with the project affected people at every stage of project implementation starting from proposal stage is necessary to resolve the conflict and reducing the human suffering. â€” There needs to be scope to allow for changes in the packages, as per local needs, within the policy and need for quick decisionâ€”making at the lowest practical level in regard to these changes. â€” There is need for transparency and proper publicity of project action at all levels.

Importance of case The case reveals common lacunae in project planning and highlights the need for rational approach in dealing with social issues.