



CONSTRUCTION OF THE NACHTIGAL HYDROELECTRIC DAM: FROM ENTHUSIASM TO DESPAIR IN THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES

POLICY BRIEF



October 2022

Introduction

The Nachtigal hydroelectric dam on the Sana River in Cameroon has been under construction since 2018 by the Nachtigal Hydro Power Company (NHPC), a Cameroonian company created on 7 July 2016. The construction of this dam is financially supported by several partners such as Electricité de France (EDF), AFRICA50, STOA, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the Netherlands Development Finance Company (FMO). The project aims to develop, build and operate a 420 MW hydroelectric power plant in Cameroon. According to the project promoters, the dam will be connected to the Southern Interconnected Grid and, when operational in 2023, will provide low-cost electricity. The electricity will be sold to the national electricity company of Cameroon (ENE) under a 35-year power purchase agreement. The project is a national priority to further secure Cameroon's electricity system.

From the outset, the communities bordering the dam enthusiastically welcomed the project. They also performed traditional rites to ask the ancestors to bless the project. The support of the communities was justified by the fact that the company in charge of the construction of this work had promised a significant improvement in the standard of living of the populations.

However, as the end of the work approached, the communities who were proud to welcome the project yesterday fell into total despair. They denounce numerous violations and/or non-respect of commitments by the NHPC.

This briefing note is written to give an account of the various social and environmental impacts that the communities and socio-professional bodies are experiencing in relation to the construction of the dam.

1. Inadequate Consultation of the Riparian Communities

The analysis of the information and data collected in the locality allows us to understand that the riparian communities were not adequately consulted. This poor consultation of the communities is the central pillar that has amplified all the problems related to the construction of the Nachtigal Dam. Indeed, communities claim to have been influenced or even intimidated during consultation meetings. The first studies conducted for the project did not take into account the fishing activity, which was considered to be an itinerant activity. Consequently, fishermen and fishmongers were not consulted at the time. In addition, not all the people impacted by the project were registered, resulting in the non-valuation or under-valuation of properties and sand quarries, and a lack of information on the implementation stages of the livelihood restoration plans and the resettlement plan. Also, communities are unaware of NHPC's

compensation and complaint management mechanism, as no complaint filed since 2015 individually or collectively has received a favourable or unfavourable response other than acknowledgements. Furthermore, the basis for calculating compensation is not clearly explained to the impacted population. For example, the basis for the price of quarries was XAF 6,600,000 without taking into account profitability or surface area. In addition, as time goes by, the communities feel they were not sufficiently informed about all the impacts of the dam, the modalities of compensation and that communication is opaque between them and NHPC.

¹ Environmental and Social management plan, final version October 24, 2016 P.09; PP.218

² Ibid, p. 11.

2. Major Socio-economic Impacts

The social and economic impacts related to the construction of the dam are multiple and varied.

2.1 Physical Displacement and Problematic Resettlement

The physical displacements concern the households and the sacred sites followed by their resettlement, which was done in violation of the rights of the beneficiaries. Approximately six (06) households, including two in Ndokoa, two in Ndji, one in Ebang and one in Nyom 2 were physically displaced by the dam's right of way. Numerous complaints from relocated people are recorded and persist. One person who was relocated due to the project in Ndji village points out the narrowness of their new space. Previously established on 900 m², they are now on 400 m² and suffer from the lack of space for manure, planting lost fruit trees that were not taken into account during compensation, no convenience. They "reclaim from the NHPC the rest of the plot of land which is 502 m² and nothing more'.

In Ndokoa village, a traditional practitioner who lived on the banks of the Sanaga River is not happy with her relocation. With tears in her eyes, she says «the roof of the house that NHPC put at my disposal is leaking». "the water point is unusable and often dries up; I no longer have easy access to the plants I use to treat my patients, I am obliged to pay children on a canoe to go and get these plants from the other side of the Sanaga, which is very expensive for me and my patients suffer enormously." She added. She also reveals that she was not consulted about the choice of her new site or the construction plan of her new house.

There has also been a loss of local traditional knowledge due to the displacement of Binandjengue and Ndokoa sacred sites. The communities feel that the powers of the spirits that were on these sites have been reduced and that there is more illness and death cases in the villages because they no longer have access to certain pharmacopoeia products that they used to take from the sacred site and from the water since

they no longer have access to water. The latter complain about the amount received of three (3) million CFA Francs, which is considered derisory for the compensation of the sacred sites, and demand compensation for their sacred sites with due consideration for what they have lost.



³ Cf. Livelihood restoration plan for sand miners.

⁴ Cf. Resettlement and Compensation Action Plan (RAP)

2.2. Devastation of the Main Economic Activities in the Area

The construction of the dam has resulted in the loss of livelihoods and activities that the communities were engaged in before the dam was installed. The communities had

many activities that kept the local economy going. These include **fishing, sand mining, fish trade, cartering, NTFPs collection, farming.**

2.2.1. Ordeal of Fishermen and Fishmongers

Since March 2019, fishermen in the dam construction area have been forbidden to continue their main income-generating activity, which has completely destroyed their economy. Project documents indicate that 117 fishermen have lost their business and have not received much compensation from NHPC.

Prior to the construction of the dam, the average daily income of the fishermen was estimated at CFAF 16,700, monthly income at CFAF 500,000 and quarterly income at CFAF 1,500,000 depending on the fishing seasons.

For the compensation, fishermen were divided into three categories: the vulnerable, i.e. those who had to stop fishing because of age or illness; those who had to stop fishing but switch to other income-generating activities; and those who had to continue in another area. Only a few vulnerable people and a few people who had chosen to continue fishing received a symbolic compensation from NHPC ranging from 150,000, 250,000 and 450,000 CFA francs to buy fishing equipment or start a new business. This amount could not cover one third of the cost of equipment. For them, this is very insignificant compared to what they used to earn in the past when fishing was functional in the area. The fishermen who had opted to move into other activities have so far received nothing from NHPC, which is still asking them to wait after more than 3 years. In March 2022, NHPC decided on a new amount of 1,500,000 CFA francs to compensate the fishermen after several claims instead of the 10,000,000 CFA francs that they were asking for. It was in July 2022 that some of the fishermen surveyed received this money, but they found it insufficient for their entire lives. Most fishermen

in the area are completely helpless due to this situation.

According to the environmental and social management plan of the Nachtigal dam construction project, 83 fishmongers are affected. In 2016, NHPC promised to give the sum of 100,000 CFA francs to fishmongers so that they could carry out other activities while waiting for the implementation phase when they could resume their business. Only a few so-called vulnerable women (3 people) received this money, but they feel that it does not represent much. Before the installation of the dam, they earned about 100,000 to 200,000 CFA francs per week from their activity. In March 2022, NHPC revised the amount of compensation for fishmongers to 850,000 CFA francs after numerous claims, instead of the 5,000,000 CFA francs that they were demanding. It was in July 2022 that some of the fishmongers surveyed received this money, but they found it insufficient for their entire lives.

2.2.2. Ordeal of Sand Miners

According to PGES, 908 sand miners lost their income. Only a few of them received financial compensation from NHPC. Those in the red and green zones received the same amount of compensation on a project basis.

While the majority of the sandminers are still waiting for their compensation, those who received financial compensation feel it is small and does not amount to much compared to what they used to earn when the sand business was flourishing in the locality. For each sand canoe, the quarry owner earned 10,000 CFA francs, the diver earned 3,500 CFA francs, the canoe unloader 1,000 CFA francs and the team of truck loaders (4 to 6 people) 6,000 CFA francs. These sandmen are now demanding not only the payment of the compensation promised by NHPC, but above all the revaluation of the quarries and sand deposits. It has been established that the census of the various quarries and sand dumps did not sufficiently take into account all the people involved. Indeed, NHPC carried out three censuses without clearly explaining to the com-

munities the census methodology adopted. As a result, the final list either does not include the names of the quarry proprietors or the number of quarries and depots does not reflect the reality. The sandmen have insisted that NHPC take the census again.



2.2.3. Agriculture in Peril

The number of farmers affected by the loss of their agricultural land due to the dam project is 856. These farmers, after the census of their crops (cassava, plantain, papaya, etc.) by NHPC, received financial compensation and agricultural land of their choice was purchased by NHPC and made available to them in the various localities. NHPC also provided them with (banana and plantain) seeds so that they could continue their activities. In the field, some farmers impacted by the construction of the Nachtigal Dam are not satisfied with the compensation they received from NHPC, while others found that the banana and cocoa seedlings handed over were not of good quality, i.e., they were fragile and could easily wither if not properly cared for. In total, the dam has caused great losses of agricultural land,

which has slowed down the cultivation and sale of food products as a source of income. Also, this agricultural land is increasingly lost due to the overflow of the initial boundaries of the PUD which has led to the destruction of plantations and for which the communities are demanding compensation.

All these different activities that used to enable households to meet their needs in terms of education, health, food, etc. are no longer carried out in the different localities across the Nachtigal hydroelectric dam; this is only a memory as the communities are forbidden to enter the water within the perimeter of the dam.

⁵ Cf. ESMP 2011

2.3 Escalation of Social Ills

The loss of income-generating activities and the devastation of the economic structure has led to unprecedented unemployment in the dam construction area. The problem of employment is truly acute. Among the compensatory measures in favour of the communities proposed by NHPC was the recruitment of local populations as a priority. Nowadays, the promises of employment made have not been kept because the local people do not account for

even 10% of the labour of the dam construction project. «Our children are unemployed, those who used to get by in the river no longer have access to it, life is becoming very hard for us, whereas the dam can offer us work,” a local resident exclaimed.

Thus, in the area there is an upsurge in theft, juvenile delinquency, prostitution and divorce in households.

3. Environmental Impacts in the Nachtigal Dam Construction Area

According to the environmental and social impact assessment report, the construction of the dam should result in the release of about 186,800 tonnes of CO₂ per year due to the clearing of land and about 14,000 tonnes of CO₂ per year in the water reservoir. In contrast, a study conducted by Action for a Sustainable Environment (ASE), a Cameroonian civil society organisation, shows that the construction of the Nachtigal hydroelectric dam will release approximately 469,342.97 tonnes of CO₂ per year, a rate that is far higher than that predicted by

the project’s ESIA. Adding to this CO₂ emissions from the overflow of the PUD and you have huge amounts of greenhouse gases being released into the environment, leading to climate change. Communities are already noting the scarcity of rainfall, increased temperatures and high winds in the town of Batchenga.

The destruction of more than 2,000 hectares of forest has also been noted. This forest contained medicinal plants and other non-timber forest products such as djansang, marantaceae leaves, tree bark, wrap leaves and plants.



Conclusion and recommendations

The Nachtigal Dam project was designated category A from the outset because there were several risks involved in the implementation of the project, which could result in significant adverse environmental and social impacts. These impacts were to be offset by the implementation of a number of measures advocated by some of the project's donors such as the World Bank's environmental and social standards, the AfDB's safeguards policies and many others. Unfortunately, the reality experienced by PAPs on the ground shows that this project is in contradiction with the environmental and social standards of the donors. Considering the magnitude of the observed and decried impacts, we recommend

The NHPC:

- To conduct an independent audit of the project's implementation from its inception to the present day;

- To consult the communities on an ongoing basis in the selection and implementation of works that affect them;
- To regularly inform the communities on the evolution of the project;
- To scrupulously respect the social and environmental safeguards of the project's donors;
- To make the project specifications available to the communities.

The project's donors (the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the Dutch Development Bank (FMO), in short the group of lenders) to:

- Closely monitor the implementation of the Nachtigal Hydroelectric Dam project, as well as all the projects they fund.



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International Financial Institution Synergy Group (IFI SYNERGY)

IFI Synergy Group is a Cameroonian civil society platform created in 2015 and whose secretariat is provided by Green Development Advocates (GDA). Its mission is to ensure that the rights of local and indigenous communities are respected in the implementation of projects financed by international financial institutions in Cameroon (World Bank, AfDB, AFD, FMO, etc.). IFI member organisations include: GDA, ASE, SYNAPACAM, RADER, SAILD, DYPAMAK, YPD, WOAC, ASTRADHE, CNCD, COMAID, RELUFA.