



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Submission

Call for input | Special Rapporteur on climate change

"Human Rights in the life cycle of Renewable Energy and Critical Minerals: The Case of Hydropower Projects in Tibet"

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INTRODUCTION

This submission is based on extensive research¹ International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) conducted on 193 hydropower dam projects (operating or planned) across Tibet², currently an occupied territory within the People's Republic of China (PRC). The case study of hydropower expansion in Tibet is particularly suited to highlighting the range of human rights issues that can emerge in the exploration and extraction stage of the renewable energy life cycle. Notably for Tibet, the dangers arise immediately at the misrepresentation of hydropower as a clean and green renewable energy source. Tibet's experience with hydropower projects also underscores the broader systemic human rights considerations necessary for a sustainable energy policy that accounts for the health and resiliency of communities and ecosystems.

KEY POINTS

Hydropower in Tibet is opportunistically and incorrectly framed as a clean and green renewable energy source. This obscures the often irreversible hydrological, environmental and social impacts, questionable carbon reducing credentials, and broader water-scarcity induced geopolitical impacts of hydropower projects.

Misrepresenting the benefits of hydropower in Tibet comes at a high cost, as the numerous risks and costs are concentrated and disproportionately³ affect local Tibetan communities who live along the upper reaches of Asia's six major rivers: Yarlung Tsangpo/Bhramaputra River, Yangtze River, Yellow River, Nu Jiang/Salween River, Lancang/Mekong Rivers, and Indus River.

¹ International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), December 2024, 'Chinese Hydropower: Damning Tibet's culture, community, and environment, <https://savetibet.org/chinese-hydropower/>.

² Tibet is comprised of the three main regions of Amdo (northeastern Tibet), Kham (eastern Tibet) and U-Tsang (central and western Tibet). After the Chinese Communist Party annexation of Tibet, completed in 1951, Tibet was artificially segmented into different political autonomous regions. The Tibet Autonomous Region was established by the Chinese government in 1965 and covers the area of Tibet west of the Yangtze River (Tibetan: Dri Chu), including part of Kham, although it is often referred to now as 'central Tibet' in English. The rest of Amdo and Kham have been incorporated into provinces of the People's Republic of China, where they were designated as Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures and Tibetan Autonomous Counties. As a result, most of Qinghai and parts of Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces are designated by the Chinese authorities as 'Tibetan'. ICT uses the term 'Tibet' to refer to all of these Tibetan areas currently under the illegal occupation of the People's Republic of China.

³ Ahlers, R., Budds, J., Joshi, D., Merme, V., & Zwarteveen, M. (2015). Framing hydropower as green energy: assessing drivers, risks and tensions in the Eastern Himalayas. *Earth System Dynamics*, 6(1), 195–204, page 201.

Negative impacts of hydropower projects in Tibet

Hydropower projects produce negative impacts that can irreversibly alter the health of a river system and ecosystems. They often irreparably disconnect and deprive communities of reliable water and livelihoods at the site as well as downstream. Such impacts include⁴:

- Interruption to the natural flow of water, sediments, nutrients and aquatic life needed to maintain a healthy river system.
- The forced relocation of residents living nearby dams. In Tibet, if all 193 hydropower dams sampled in the ICT report are completed, up to 1.2 million residents will be forcibly expelled from their lands and disconnected from their livelihoods and communities.
- Flooding of arable agricultural land or natural habitats to create reservoirs
- Destruction of sacred lands and historical cultural sites such as monasteries
- Geopolitical tensions with downstream states develop due to dam-induced water scarcity. In the case of China, downstream countries such as India, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam have raised concerns about upstream damming.

Tibetans are disproportionately affected by hydropower dam construction because they have built their livelihoods, homes and communities over generations along rivers that China's perceives as a resource to geo-engineer and monetize. Tibetans are also perceived as easier targets for forced relocation, as they are one of the most political marginalised peoples in the PRC and can be easily silenced with accusations of separatism.⁵

Human rights impacts

The negative impacts of hydropower dam construction in Tibet are caused by an absence of political rights, avenues to access information, negotiate, and advocate for models of co-benefit and co-management of projects.

Hydropower projects in Tibet impact and infringe on individual human rights to a clean and healthy environment, right to adequate housing, right to culture and economic livelihood, right to food and water, as well as civil and political rights, such as the right to seek information, express opinions, and associate and assemble freely.

The Khamtok hydropower dam protests which erupted in Derge county, Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) TAP, in Sichuan on February 14, 2024 resulted in a harsh crackdown which included arbitrary detentions and an information blackout. The government response

⁴ ICT, December 2024, 'Chinese Hydropower: Damning Tibet's culture, community, and environment, <https://savetibet.org/chinese-hydropower/>.

⁵ Ibid.

highlighted the lack of cultural and economic rights, as well as basic civil and political rights.⁶

Interrogating the sustainability of hydropower as an energy source

What is most concerning about the life cycle of hydropower projects is the basic premise and treatment of hydropower as a clean, green, and sustainable renewable energy investment. The economic and financial viability, efficiency, and carbon reducing potential of hydropower dams is highly questionable given Tibet's vulnerability to climate change and earthquakes; climate change is causing unpredictable water flows and greater siltation, while earthquakes cause highly destructive landslides and flash floods. Both vulnerabilities threaten the structural integrity and productivity of dam structures.⁷

Barriers to the protection of human rights in the renewable energy life cycle

A sustainable energy policy accounts for the health and resilience of the environment, climate, and community. However, decision-makers in the Chinese hydropower sector are often driven by a single-minded pursuit of short-term economic gains.⁸ To counter this bias, national governments should adopt and enforce an energy system-level planning and management practice that accounts for connectivity and hydropower capacity considerations, as well as river flow, community impacts and ecosystem health before new constructions are approved.⁹ This allows investors and governments to more practically enumerate and internalize the system-wide costs to rivers, co-dependent communities and ecosystems. This can shift developers, investors and governments away from short-term profit-seeking and siloed decision-making toward more long-term efficient sustainable economic decision-making.

A key component of an energy system-level planning policy is the "low carbon, low cost, and low conflict" (known as LowCx3) promoted by conservationists. Multilateral financial institutes should signal that they will only invest in projects that have been assessed to be LowCx3.¹⁰

Good practice

⁶ 'Derge protests put dams back on the agenda', International Campaign for Tibet, 30 April 2024, <https://savetibet.org/derge-protests-put-dams-back-on-the-agenda/>.

⁷ Ahlers, et al., 2015, page 199.

⁸ SCMP, 'China's drive to build dams for green power threatens homes and sacred mountains', 26 June 2017.

⁹ Opperman JJ, Carvallo JP, Kelman R, Schmitt RJP, Almeida R, Chapin E, Flecker A, Goichot M, Grill G, Harou JJ, Hartmann J, Higgins J, Kammen D, Martin E, Martins T, Newsock A, Rogéliz C, Raeppele J, Sada R, Thieme ML and Harrison D. (2023). Balancing renewable energy and river resources by moving from individual assessments of hydropower projects to energy system planning. *Frontiers in Environmental Science*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fenvs.2022.1036653>

¹⁰ Opperman, 2019 in Opperman et al, 2022., page 13.

Meeting the Paris Agreement goals, including accelerated emissions reduction, equity, and poverty reduction, hinges on three essential factors. How, where, and what energy sources are developed. However, these interventions can only be effective when involving an empowered and informed civil society.

Upfront, independent and robust environmental impact assessments coupled with an inclusive decision-making process is substantively crucial. Only such an assessment allows those affected to weigh the costs and benefits and distribution of proposed projects and consider alternative options.

Siting that fails to consider sensitive ecosystems, wildlife needs, and the costs versus benefits to local communities may produce low emission energy but will perpetuate inequities and can exacerbate short- and long-term environmental harm. This can be mitigated through three methods: upfront consultation with impacted communities, analytical assessments of broad, cumulative impacts, and localized evaluation of potential impacts.¹¹

When identifying the most suitable renewable energy source for decarbonization, two key considerations are critical. First, the emission “payback” period between upfront emissions and carbon positive generation. Second, flexibility in the development of energy sources to enable adaptations that achieve ecological benefits and comply with human rights standards.

Finally, individual rights such as the right to seek information, freely express their opinion, associate, assemble, and participate in decision-making are critical.¹² Empowering civil society not only protects the lives and integrity of local communities, but it also empowers civil society to advocate for new innovations such as co-management of energy projects.

Co-management is a renewable energy development process that reduces emissions while supporting human rights. Co-management captures the process of siting, constructing, and managing renewable projects to facilitate pastoral animal husbandry and other agriculture. For example, solar arrays can facilitate grazing because animals are able to graze beneath the panel structures (wind functions in a similar way).¹³ In the specific context of Tibet, combining solar installations with grazing has the potential to

¹¹ United Nations Development Program (UNDP), ‘UNDP Social and Environmental S Toolkit’, 2023, <https://ses-toolkit.info.undp.org/>, and Stockholm Environment Institute, ‘Water Evaluation and Planning System’, 2024, (weap21.org).

¹² Articles 19 and 22, International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (1966), UN Declaration on the Right to Development (1986), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).

¹³ Leroy J. Walston, Tristan Barley, Indraneel Bhandari, Ben Campbell, James McCall, Heidi M. Hartmann, and Adam G. Dolezal, ‘Opportunities for agrivoltaics systems to achieve synergistic food-energy-environmental needs and address sustainability goals’, *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 16 September 2022.

simultaneously support utility scale renewables, while supporting traditional Tibetan pastoral rhythms.