
India: Ravaged Landscape, Devastated People - Tales of Hydro Power CDM projects in Himachal Pradesh

India continues to be one of the 'hottest' locations for carbon 'offset' projects despite the global carbon market slump: as of now, about 1700 projects claim to have achieved emission-reduction, and hence eligibility to sell carbon credits. Large Indian corporations control most of these projects irrespective of sector and geographical location, and instead of cleaning up the atmosphere the projects almost uniformly pollute people's lives and the environment.

Hydro-power projects are prominent in India's Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) kitty: 176 Dam projects in various parts of India have applied for CDM status. More than half of these are in the Himalayas, perhaps the biggest ones. The tiny state of Himachal Pradesh to the North of the India alone hosts 55 projects.

How clean are these 'clean' projects? Most of the CDM projects in Himachal Pradesh have led to direct and indirect displacement of local people and triggered of disastrous environmental impacts: around the project areas mudslides have become more frequent, water table is going down, and perennial springs are drying up. The wholesale damming of important rivers and dam builders' ownership control over river water inevitably mean less or no water for river valley agriculture. Besides, there are socio-cultural impacts: large number of outsiders flocking to the hitherto closeted mountain villages and irreversibly disturbing the fabric of community life.

In Himachal Pradesh, a paradise of rich biodiversity and beautiful mountain landscape, there is a plan to set up more than 850 hydroelectric projects. With loans from agencies like the Asian Development bank and the World Bank, these projects are being established with huge infrastructures involving many private sector companies. The story repeats itself from one project to another: tall promises of village development and plentiful jobs for the locals during the time of land acquisition, all conveniently forgotten once the project works start.

People living in Sawra Kuddu in Shimla District of Himachal Pradesh are angry with the hydroelectric project (111 MW) on the Pabbar River: "We have lost everything to the project and yet have not even given any decent compensation". The Dam badly affects several villages where digging of tunnels through mountainsides have made the entire area unstable and yet people living in these villages do not fall under the PAP (project affected people) category. Villagers of Bhadot have been living in constant fear of their village collapsing because of such a tunnel right beneath their village. This area witnessed massive devastation caused by an earthquake few years back: the huge boulders in the mountain still threaten to tumble down anytime. People here equate the tunnel underneath with a ticking time bomb that can explode any moment. The villages on the banks of the river had to bear the brunt of the heavy construction work: the dust and muck affected the production of cash crops like apple, pear and peach.

The environmental clearance to the project was given in 2007 but local residents say that work began much before the clearance in 2004, which means that the project is clearly non-additional ['additionality' refers to the condition that a project should only be eligible for carbon credits if it

would not go forward without the benefits it receives from these credits]. The project will inundate 45 villages in 9 Panchayats (local self-government) and the government claims (evidently falsely) that all project-affected people have been compensated.

By far, the largest among registered CDM hydro projects, the Allain Duhangan Hydro Electric Project (2 x 96 MW) in Kullu district is expected to generate around 4.94-million Certified Emission Reductions (CERs), a type of 'carbon credits'. The project is built on two tributaries of the Beas River: Allain and Duhangan, both are surrounded by biodiversity-rich alpine forests and meadows. The project, funded by the World Bank, had its environmental impact assessment in 1996. The central electricity authority gave the 'in-principle' techno-economic clearance only in 2002.

In a glaring display of non-additionality, the Environment and Social Impact Assessment for the project done in May 2003, states (page 7) that "The project would be one of the cheapest sources of power generation in the Northern Region as compared to alternative of thermal and nuclear generation." Why should a project that is supposed to be the cheapest source of power be even considered for CDM credits that are supposed to help make relatively unviable projects viable?

The entire project area is fortified and anyone who wants to go in has to take permission from the company. The local people have their orchards and villages inside. Though access to the area has become easier now because of the road built by the company, no other benefit has come from the company. The locals who live inside the project area describe how their livelihood is affected as outsiders are not allowed to come in. Most of them earn a living from tourism as it is an area known for skiing and trekking. The project work has already destroyed most of the pristine meadows and forests in the locality.

The Hydro Electric Power Project by Sutlej Jal Vidyut Nigam (SJVN) Ltd located at Rampur is a 412-MW project on the Sutlej River. Huge tunnels are being built: the Local Area Development Authority (LADA) is implementing the project and has given construction contracts to large private companies. More than ten thousand people were affected and 220 families already lost fertile lands to the project; the statutory public hearings were held as a matter of formality in 2005 as only 125 people attended it from among a population of at least 15 thousand. The entire mountain landscape has turned into huge dumps of muck and dumping yards for raw materials or machines. The locals no longer have access to the project area.

People raised their voices against the projects although there has been no organized resistance. In June 2010, the local residents of Averi village had staged a demonstration demanding compensation for damages caused by the construction work. The protests were met with severe brutalities – physical violence – by police who did not spare the young girls and women either.

An area which was once a self-sustained economy, the state of Himachal Pradesh is hit by the skewed notion of 'development'. It is hard to find a place without an earth-moving machine digging the earth – to build a dream that caters to the rich and the powerful sitting somewhere else. The CDM projects signify neither cleanliness nor development: at least for the local communities they constitute an unmitigated curse.

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