WOMEN, THE GUARDIANS OF RIVERS AND

Fighting Big Dams

A guide for women activists in Africa
Introduction

African governments, corporations and development banks promote big hydroelectric dams as a clean energy alternative to fossil fuels. They say such dams do not add to climate change. They also say that by selling the electricity, big dams can earn much needed money for African countries, and that big dams will provide energy for African countries which have huge energy poverty. But the reality could not be further from the truth.

Big dams have a long and troubled history both on the African continent and globally. Big dam projects change how a river should naturally flow and have contributed to the destruction of river ecosystems. They damage people’s relationship with their land, water, way of life and livelihoods, and have impoverished and displaced communities. Dam projects increase national debt burdens— all while driving corruption and lining the pockets of developers. They are not the solution for a country’s citizens and economy. Dams pose an even bigger threat to peasant and working-class women who stand to lose the most from these projects. But women are fighting back against big dams to protect their families, livelihoods, and communities.

We hope this guide will help you in your struggles for a just and sustainable energy future.

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Cover photograph: Terry Hughes/Survival International. Aboriginal communities in the Omo valley are facing the threat of starvation in the name of sustainable development and clean energy.
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**Big dams**

A dam stops the flow of a river, creating a reservoir of water that can be turned into electricity (called “hydropower” or “hydroelectricity”) by using the pressure of falling water to turn a turbine. A hydrodam typically needs a large river with a significant drop in height.

The weight of water is powerful. When one or more sluice gates are opened the immense pressure of the water coming down through them turns the turbines. The fast-moving turbines turn this energy into electricity.

Dams are used for other human activities, like water for household use and irrigation, fishing, swimming and boating.

A large dam is defined by the industry as being over 15 metres high. A megadam is over 100 metres high. In this book, we refer to both large and megadams as ‘big dams’. Big dams are built to generate electricity. These dams are called hydroelectric or hydropower dams. In this book, we call them ‘big hydroelectric dams’, ‘big dams’ or just ‘dams’.

**Why women are pushing back on big dam projects**

Big dams are a bad idea for everyone and worse for women. Let’s look at why women and their communities are resisting big dam projects.

Big dams:
1. Are not clean and cause environmental harm
2. Grab people’s lands and water and leave communities at risk
3. Cost a lot and poor people don’t benefit from hydropower

**1. Big dams are not clean and cause environmental harm**

We are told that big hydroelectric dams produce clean energy. They don’t. They cause environmental harm and add to the planet’s climate change crisis. Organic material, like rotting plants, insects and animals, build up on the bottom of the water reservoir. As they rot, they release gases such as methane and carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the water and air. Methane is one of the strongest and most dangerous greenhouse gases. It is one of the biggest causes of climate change. CO₂ also adds to climate change.

Scientists believe that reservoirs in the tropics emit more methane than in other parts of the world because things rot faster in higher temperatures.

**What causes global warming and climate change?**

Climate change is the rise in average temperatures on Earth. The climate has always been changing, but it has changed much faster since the industrial revolution. Since the industrial revolution, industrialists used fossil fuels, like coal, to power machines that produced goods. Burning coal and other fossil fuels releases a large amount of (CO₂) and other greenhouse gases into the air. These gases heat up Earth and its atmosphere. This is called global warming. In big dams, rotting plants and animal life release the gas methane. Methane is another source of greenhouse gases and also increases global warming and climate change.

As industrial production and trade has increased and spread around the world under capitalism (an economic system where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer), carbon emissions have increased. We stand today on the brink of extinction. Unless we reduce climate change urgently from now, the very existence of all life on Earth, including its people, is under threat.
A study published in BioScience in 2016 shows that big dams give off about 25% more methane than experts estimated before. Nearly a billion tonnes of greenhouse gases are released every year.

There is good news. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018 report says that if we reduce methane emissions, we will be able, in the short term, to limit global warming to a safer level of 1.5 degrees Celsius (1.5°C). We have currently reached 1 degree of warming on the planet. At the same time, the methane reduction will improve people’s health because there will be less air pollution.

**Climate change will stop hydroelectric dams from working**

A 2018 study by Grantham, a climate change and environment institute at Imperial College London, found that climate change will have a negative impact on new big hydroelectric dam projects because of the increase in both floods and droughts. Hydroelectric dams will not be able to function properly as Africa gets hotter and wetter in the east, and hotter and drier in the south. The turbines that generate electricity are built at a certain level above the dam floor. This is to create hydro potential. When, due to drought, the water level in the reservoir drops too far (to what is called ‘dead capacity level’) the turbines stop working and electricity cannot be generated. In the case of flooding, this compromises wall safety and may in some cases flood power stations, especially small ones.

In 2016, Lake Kariba, on the Zambezi River between Zambia and Zimbabwe, almost reached the dead capacity level. Many hydroelectric dams in Southern and East Africa had to reduce electricity production during extended droughts. The countries lost production in industry and on farms. Grantham says that a bigger reliance on dams for power could pose a risk for the supply of electricity.

**Lake Chad could collapse**

Over the years, Nigeria has built more dams and huge irrigation estates have been set up. These take water from the river basin that flows into the Yobe River. The Yobe River’s flow dropped a lot after the Tiga Dam was completed in 1974.

Before the dam was built, the river flowed for about 7 to 9 months each year. Now it only flows for 3 to 4 months. To add to the problem, there has been a significant drop in rainfall because of climate change.

The reduction in the Yobe River’s flow has harmed Lake Chad. It now only gets water flowing into it during the rainy season. Lake Chad gets less and less water each year from the Kamadougou-Yobe River and other rivers that feed the lake with water.

Lake Chad has shrunk by 90%. You can imagine how this has affected the approximately 20 to 30 million people who depend on the lake for their water and food. As the lake shrunk the quality of the water has changed. It has become more salty because of irrigation return flows, where fertilizer from the fields seeps into the dam. The damage to Lake Chad cannot be repaired. In a few years’ time, it will no longer exist.

Land erosion, which is also increasing all over Africa especially in rural areas, is threatening many houses and villages along the river. The situation has led to conflict over scarce farmable land and limited water between groups of people in the region and across countries.
Big dams cause water scarcity

Higher temperatures cause more and faster evaporation of water. Evaporation is when water changes from a liquid into a gas and causes dam water levels to drop. Dams create large surface areas for evaporation to take place. More water evaporates from dams than in natural flowing rivers. With high evaporation levels, people have less water to use in their homes and for their crops and livelihoods. Low water level dams cannot generate much or any hydroelectricity.

Big dams harm the quality of the water and kills fish life

Free flowing healthy rivers are filled with creatures and plant life (organic material) that make up the normal ecosystem that creates clean and safe water. As rivers flow downstream they dissolve oxygen in the water and keep the water purified and healthy. They self-clean. But dams stop this. Instead, they create a big non flowing reservoir of water. The dam walls trap the organic material in the water reservoir behind them. They prevent the river taking its natural route and the organic material to the ocean.

Dams cause poorer water quality. Poor water quality reduces the types of fish that can survive in dirtier water. Dams also block fish migrations. Fish that used to be able to swim upstream to mate and release their eggs to produce the next generation of fish can no longer do this. The downstream fish are also badly affected by changes in the rivers’ natural paths and by less water flowing. Big dams have, in all the above ways, killed more than 70% of all freshwater fish species.

Big dams cause safety risks

Very heavy rainstorms cause serious landslides. Soil is washed into and trapped at the bottom of dams, and because of this dams can no longer store as much water as was planned when they were designed and built. This is called siltation. Many dams have collapsed because of heavy rainstorms and siltation.

When building big dams is another type of landslide is caused. These are triggered when construction workers blast dynamite and drill tunnels. In some places, this has dried up natural water springs, increased dust pollution, and dropped the quality of crops.

Big dams increase diseases

A big dam has a massive body of water with very little movement. It is in such stagnant water that harmful germs and insects breed. Big dams increase the risk of bilharzia, malaria, river blindness and other water-borne diseases such as elephantiasis. Malaria is the most deadly and widespread of these diseases. Malaria kills over 1.2 million people each year. Most of these are African children under the age of five. Pregnant women are more especially at risk. A pregnant woman has lowered immunity to malaria and can cause anemia, miscarriages, low-birth rates, death of the newborn baby and death of the mother. Since women and girls are usually responsible for the work of caring for the ill, having sick members of families and communities creates even more demands on women’s time, energy and resources.

Big dam projects cause humanitarian crises

Communities who live downstream of the dam get less water than they did before the dam was built. People struggle to collect enough water for their needs. When there is less water and of a lower quality, people get ill more easily. It becomes a huge struggle to keep crops alive. People’s livelihoods are damaged in many ways. This includes people being forced to leave their homes as climate refugees or migrants. Refugees are always vulnerable to people who look out for ways of exploiting refugees’ vulnerability.

As the ones expected in patriarchal systems to keep households going, women experience enormous and additional stress. One of many stressors is being forced to walk longer distances to get water. Men and boys who choose to be violent use their power to sexually assault and rape children, especially girls and women, on their journeys to collect water. Sexual assailants cause terrible fear and trauma. They often pass on sexually transmitted infections (STIs), cause unplanned pregnancies and damage their victims’ lives. This happens in places where very few appropriate health services exist to support victims to become survivors.

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2. Big dam projects grab people’s lands and water and leave communities at risk

Traditional communities usually live near rivers so they have easy access to water for farming, fishing and household use. When big dams are built, vast areas of land are flooded, including forests and villages. People are forced to leave their homes, their ancestral lands and their sacred sites. This creates great hardship and suffering.

Forced to move with little or no compensation!

Compensation to families and communities forced to move because of a big dam project could be in money, land elsewhere, and basic essential services such as water, electricity, sanitation and schools. However, big dam construction companies, developers and governments do not give anywhere near enough – and in some cases don’t give any – compensation. People lose their families’ livelihoods, such as fishing and farming. Loss of fertile land is difficult to replace and so are fish rich rivers.

Big dam projects have plunged most resettled communities into poverty, which endures long after the dam is built. Women family members suffer the most when families are displaced. They have to increase their hours of work to make up for lost livelihoods. Their care work increases as family members and themselves live through the trauma of having to move their entire lives somewhere else. This has a huge impact on everyone’s wellbeing. The Merowe Dam in Northern Sudan is one such example.

Megadams have displaced an estimated 40-80 million people worldwide.

Dirty tricks, broken promises and force!

Even though communities do not usually want to leave their land, big dam companies and governments often use dirty tricks to make them.

One way that companies trick people is to divide members of the community. Companies often bribe individual leaders, often traditional leaders, who hold the most power in a community. This undermines people’s customary ways of making community decisions. The traditional leader and his counsel behave as if they are the owners of the land, which they are not. They sign deals without involving the whole community. Then the companies claim they have an agreement from communities to go ahead with the project and to possibly resettle them, even when they don’t have such an agreement.

Companies promise jobs, schools, hospitals and better housing. But they usually break these promises. Even when they do offer jobs, these are usually low paid, low skilled and don’t last long. People are left unemployed and without land, water, forests and access to fish for livelihood. They have been betrayed.

The Merowe Dam in Northern Sudan is one of the world’s most destructive big dam projects. It was built between 2003 and 2009. Its reservoir is 174 kilometers long. It displaced more than 50,000 people from the fertile Nile Valley. They were forced into extremely dry desert locations. The thousands of people who refused to leave their homes were flushed out by the rising waters of the reservoir.

This photograph shows the temporary camp where people had to live in.

The Hamdab were resettled in El Multaga, the Amri were resettled in Wadi El Muqadam, the Manasir faced difficult challenges which resulted in forced displacement. Some of them finally resettled by the reservoir of the Merowe Dam, with others moving to Al Mukabrabt and Khaila East. This photograph shows a Merowe Dam resettlement site.

Consent

Companies and governments don’t usually consult communities about these big dam projects. Communities never have the opportunity to consent (agree to) or say ‘No!’ to them. This is unbelievable because these projects change people’s lives forever – and usually for the worse. Communities must be able to say ‘No!’ Even if a country’s law does not say communities have the right to prior and informed consent, communities can find other ways to insist on being properly consulted and be able to stop a project if they don’t want it. In cases where land is held under customary law there are usually strict rules about if and how land can be given away. This gives communities the right to say ‘No!’
Women suffer the most

In poor communities, women’s lives are deeply connected to and dependent on natural resources: land, water, forests, and fish. In rural families, women are mainly responsible for their families’ livelihoods and putting food on the table. Big dams can affect their lives more than men’s lives. Big dams can reduce, or destroy, sources of food and household income from fishing, agriculture, and gathering and selling fruit or medicinal plants.

Compensation, if paid, is usually done according to patriarchal values, which means that it is directed to the men of the families. Even though women have strong informal rights to land and natural resources, and even though they manage and provide for their families’ livelihoods, compensation is usually channeled to the male heads of households. Women’s use of common resources, such as water and forests, and their unpaid contribution to the economy, is neither recognised nor considered in compensation.

Abuse of women increases

When dams are built, there is usually a flow of migrant workers to seek work on construction sites. The migrants, because of traditional gender jobs, are mostly men. This influx brings about many changes in affected communities. The communities come into contact with new influences, pressures and stressors. Whereas before a big dam project started, communities were self-sufficient, the new context forces people into multiple vulnerabilities. With loss of livelihoods, some are reduced to begging and accommodating migrants as a way to bring in money. Having more single men in their midst causes particular vulnerability for children, girls and women. There is evidence of patriarchal power being used: increases in unplanned teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted and other communicable infections (like tuberculosis) and violence. Within the violence, men exert toxic masculinity through sexual assault and rape. There are few basic services in these communities to provide the range of medical and social services the men’s victims urgently need.

Reference: International Rivers

Kariba Dam

“We shall die in our land we don’t want to be moved.”
- the words on a note written by Tonga resisters in the days leading to the Chisamu War (1958)

The British Empire developed this colonial-era dam. They built it to supply hydroelectricity for the new industries coming up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and the copper mines of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). The big dam project developers did not allocate much money towards the communities they were forcing to move from their land. And the communities did not benefit from the dam. Kariba Dam was the first of many World Bank-funded dams in Africa.

For the Gwembe Tonga and Kore Kore peoples, the Kariba Dam was a death blow to their communities, culture and livelihoods. For centuries they had lived in the Gwembe Valley, along the northern and southern banks of the Zambezi River. But in 1958, this wide valley turned from being a fertile river valley into one huge reservoir of water. The colonial authorities did not give the communities much information about the dam they were building and the people were left with no choice but to move. In the end, whole villages were flooded, displacing 57,000 indigenous people.

Some displaced communities resisted resettlement, but the colonial authorities defeated them in a short battle known as the Chisamu War. The authorities burned villages so the people could not return. Today, those who remember the displacement are old. Along with new generations, they still struggle to survive. These communities were promised irrigation and electricity at their new sites, but most still live without these basic services. Many people suffer from hunger and malnutrition. The safety net of the community has unraveled.

Reference: International Rivers

Dams leave once self-sufficient communities in deep poverty and reliant on government and charities for handouts.

Talking points

• This chapter identified different ways big dam projects shatter poor people’s lives. Have a discussion about each one and the particular stressors the construction of big dam projects has on women’s lives.
• What different strategies for organising and mobilising do you think could be effective in dealing with each stressor?
• How can you and your organisation strengthen the struggle to prevent big dam projects?
3. Big dams cost a lot and poor people don’t benefit from hydropower

Big dams are extremely expensive to build and pay for. Countries sign up for huge loans to finance both the dam construction and the extensive transmission lines. The transmission lines typically provide electricity to mines and other industries, tourist sites and large cities.

Big loans are a big debt trap. Governments prioritise paying interest on debts instead of prioritising education, health care and other essential services for its citizens.

Big dams take a long time to complete. It is common to have long delays which cause a rise in the original estimated cost. A study, by Oxford University in 2014, found that the actual costs of big dams turned out to be 96% higher than the original estimate. On average, the building of big dams took 44% longer than originally planned. The Grand Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia is such an example in Africa, which should have been completed in August 2018 but is still under construction to date (see below).

When a big dam project is planned and motivated for, those who have a business interest in it being built estimate high profit targets and electricity generated. They present a best case scenario. But in real life, most big dams perform much worse than a best case scenario. When a big dam underperforms, profits are low or nil. Government budgets are messed up. Governments struggle even more with debt repayments because they didn’t earn the revenue (income) they budgeted for. There are power outages because the dam underperforms. Power outages are bad for the economy. Governments may even have to import power after having spent billions on a big hydroelectric dam. When companies sell a big dam idea to a government, they don’t usually include long, extreme droughts. These types of droughts are becoming more common. What happens next? Even heavier burdens land on countries who are trying to balance the need for water with energy security for its people.

Why do big hydroelectric dams not benefit the poor?

Electricity is transmitted from hydroelectric dams through expensive grid systems. For electricity to reach a place there has to be a transmission lines to it. The network of transmission lines in sub-Saharan Africa was designed by colonialists. They created grids to reach heavily populated urban areas and industrial centres, where the colonialists lived.

Sixty-three (63%) of people in rural Africa live further than 10 kilometres from electricity grid connections. For a grid connection to be cost effective, the population densities need to be more than 19 homesteads per square kilometre. African governments do not have the money to connect most rural areas to the grid. Decentralised grids (which don’t need a connection to the main national grid) is a better solution to light up rural Africa.

Communities still don’t have electricity. Probably never will.

In Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), donors spent billions of US dollars in the 1970s and 1980s on the Inga 1 and 2 big hydroelectric dams on the Congo River. Eighty five percent (85%) of the electricity the dams generate is used by high-voltage consumers. These users are mostly industry. But fewer than 10% of DRC citizens have access to electricity. Fifty years later, the communities displaced by the dams are still fighting to get some kind of justice through compensation and some kind of economic opportunities.

The villages of Kilengo, Lundu, Lubwaku and Mvuzi 3 in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) do not have electricity. Yet they live inside a 20 kilometer radius of the Inga 1 and 2 hydroelectric dams. The women still have to spend hours collecting fuel. They use firewood and charcoal to cook, and candles to light their homes.

It’s a no-win situation for peasants, subsistence farmers and other low income citizens.
Big dam projects in Africa

Many African governments promote big hydroelectric dams as a clean source of energy; a good way to store and save water; and a way to earn money and improve access to electricity. As this booklet has already pointed out, we know this is not the way things go with big dams. But this thinking has led to more hydropower dams in Africa and many more in planning.

Who is financing dams?

The World Bank stopped financing big dams after a report in 2000 raising major concerns from its own World Commission on Dams. But, under the banner of promoting clean energy, the World Bank has started to finance big hydroelectric dams again.

The African Development Bank (AfDB) has been involved in financing destructive dam projects such as Bujagali Dam in Uganda, Inga Dam in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, and a power line that supports the damaging Gibe III in Ethiopia.

Over the coming years, the AfDB hopes to increase its support for large infrastructure projects like big dams and regional electricity transmission grids and lines. It said, ‘Hydropower provides around a fifth of current capacity but not even a tenth of its total potential is being utilized.’ International Rivers says these plans are extremely worrying, especially because they don’t have faith in the AfDB’s capacity to responsibly manage environmental and social impacts from such projects. The AfDB has yet to implement and mainstream gender issues in its funded projects.

Alert!

In Eastern and Southern Africa, an additional 31GW of hydroelectric power (from 43 new dams) is being planned so as to increase electricity supply by 2030. Around 82% of the new capacity in Eastern Africa is planned for the Nile River basin, and 89% of Southern Africa’s for the Zambezi River basin.

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. This is the biggest of the big dams currently under construction in Africa. It will be 145 metres high when completed. Construction began in 2011 and has yet to be completed. This dam is expected to produce 6,000 megawatts or 6GW of power – the equivalent of six nuclear reactors. Many oppose it, including Egypt, who say that it will affect the River Nile’s downstream flows because it will dam up the river upstream. The dam is already experiencing delays.

International Rivers is tracking many of the proposals for large dams across 54 countries. People from Kenya to Ghana, from Sudan to Zambia, from Uganda to Lesotho are under threat from big dam building. This river protector and clean energy advocacy group says that dams are the biggest threat to African rivers right now and one form of infrastructure that displaces thousands of communities.

South Africa’s colonisation of Lesotho’s waters and electricity

The Lesotho Highlands Water Project was constructed through a deal between South Africa and Lesotho in 1986. This was during a particularly brutal time of the apartheid regime in South Africa. The deal had its share of corruption incidences. The deal was that the dam would provide water to South Africa and some hydroelectric power to Lesotho. Up until today, South Africa’s Gauteng Province receives most of its water from Lesotho Highlands Water Project. While South Africa and the Lesotho government benefits from the project, the displaced communities continue to suffer the impacts of the project. The word ‘hydrocolonisation’ has been used to be describe how South Africa took over its neighbour’s water.
China backs many of the new big dam projects in Africa. Between 2001 and 2007, China committed more than $3 billion to African dam projects. This figure has likely increased since then. India, Brazil and some European countries are also entering the region’s dam financing. India Exim Bank has given financial support to the Tendaho Dam in Ethiopia, Itezhi-Tezhi Dam in Zambia (USD 50 million) and, the Nyabarongo Dam in Rwanda (USD 60 million). Brazilian companies Odebrecht and Camargo Corrêa Group have made major big dam construction deals in Angola and Mozambique. In Ghana, Brazilian company Andrade was awarded a contract to build a 90 MW dam on the Oti River.

Understanding power and who benefits
Map out the different groups of people who stand to gain, or lose, from a new dam project in your community or country. You can use these base questions for any ‘development’ plan:

- Who stands to benefit? How would they benefit?
- Who stands to lose? What will they lose?
- Who needs electricity most?
- What different sources of electricity generation can be harnessed in your country?
- Which sources are clean?
- Which sources cause climate change and other ill-health?
- Which sources can the majority of people afford?
- Why do some people seem to have more power to make life-changing decisions for communities than others?
- What does power look like in patriarchal and capitalist systems. How is gender and power related?
- Will women’s situation be impacted positively by the development?
- What needs to be changed for women to be equals?

Talking points

Organise, research, mobilise, protest and build a successful movement

Communities are organising and mobilising to resist big dam projects using big and small protest actions. Collective organising is part of success in building a wider, powerful movement. Movements against big dam projects exist in Africa in places such as the DRC, in Asia in places such as the Mekong region, and in many places in Latin America. The anti-dam movement achieved a huge victory for people and the planet when they organized and lobbied the World Bank to create the World Commission on Dams.

World Commission on Dams

In the 1980s and 1990s, civil society organisations, social movements and affected communities started and built huge anti-dam campaigns. They put pressure on financiers, and in particular, the biggest sponsor at the time, the World Bank to look at the serious problems that dams were causing and to ultimately get them to stop financing big dams.

In a victory for the campaigners, the World Bank created an independent commission called the World Commission on Dams (WCD) in April 1997. The chairperson was Kader Asmal, the South African water minister at the time. The WCD was made up of civil society organisations, academics, research institutes, the private sector, professional associations and government representatives. They did research on the impact of big dams. The report was published in November 2000.

The report said that, while ‘…dams have made an important and significant contribution to human development, and benefits derived from them have been considerable …in too many cases an unacceptable and often unnecessary price has been paid to secure those benefits, especially in social and environmental terms, by people displaced, by communities downstream, by taxpayers and by the natural environment.’

The report recommended key guidelines for all dam projects. The World Bank stopped funding big dams for a long period. Unfortunately, under the guise of financing clean energy, this decision has recently changed.
Regional routes to justice
Communities can approach the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights and the African Court of Justice and Human Rights to claim their legal rights. This can be especially valuable for communities who experience intimidation and violence and who aren’t able to access local courts, or impartial courts because of political influence. Before communities go to the African Commission on Human and People’s rights or the African Court, they have to be able to show they first tried all legal channels in their own country.

International route to justice
The United Nations is developing the ‘Treaty on transnational corporations and their supply chains with regard to Human Rights’. This document aims to hold companies accountable for human rights abuses, wherever they are conducting business.

The push for climate policies and clean energy plans without big dams
Many communities are pushing for:

- stronger reduction of climate change policies and laws in individual countries as well as within regions
- policies that will:
  - phase out, or ban, big dam projects
  - increase renewable energy projects that have very little or no negative social and environmental impact
  - benefit many more people
- governments to listen to them and include their perspectives, interests and demands in national policies and plans
- being respected as decision-makers in projects that do, or will, impact on their lives. Communities are claiming for their Right to Say NO! The participation of civil society in the drafting of the electricity plan, called the Integrated Resource Plan of South Africa 2018, to ensure that harmful projects such as the fossil energy plants and the Inga 3 hydro are not included in the IRP
The media as a tool

Communities are using a variety of media platforms to inform people about the harmful impacts of big dams and to build public support for anti-dam campaigns. Examples of media strategies:

- Circulate petitions and hold well-publicised protests.
  - The Congolese Civil Society Organisation submitted a petition to the department of Energy in SA with over 10,600 signatures of communities affected by Inga 3.
- Write open letters to newsletters, newspapers and on-line news platforms.
- Hold public profile meetings and events to highlight issues.
- Share updates, research findings and company / government responses through community and other radio stations and on social media
- Hold press conferences with influential people.

Build solidarity locally, regionally and internationally

Share knowledge, tools and strategies. Seek and build alliances with organisations that can assist with research and support.

Regional events, such as The Permanent People’s Tribunal (PPT) and social forum spaces, can be used to build solidarity with like-minded people, organisations and movements.

In 2013, DRC and the South African (SA) governments signed a treaty, where SA committed to purchase 2500 MW of electricity from the DRC. Congolese nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and grassroots organisations attended two events in South Africa: the Permanent People’s Tribunal and the Thematic Social Forum. At these events, the group shared their testimonies and lived experiences with a jury of peers and delegates. Everyone present was astounded by the two governments’ disrespect of people’s human rights, the lack of information given to the communities affected by the big dam project, and the lack of accountability and transparency. The group sought support from South African activists. Delegates held a powerful demonstration in Pretoria. This demonstration revealed the power of information to cement solidarity and achievements of working together to amplify the voices of the people in opposition to the project.

The right to say NO!

All over Africa, communities are likely to be affected by plans for big dam projects and other large mining and infrastructure projects that will cause devastation in their lives. People are rising up in resistance. They are mobilising and organising to claim their right to say NO to destructive projects.

The right to say NO means:

- Governments, banks and corporations must not be allowed to make decisions about big dam projects on their own. Communities demand the right to give, or withhold, consent to big dam projects (see section on free prior and informed consent).
- In saying NO, Communities say YES to their right to development on their own terms. This means a right to say YES to projects that provide clean energy from the sun, such as solar power, and the right to farm their own land using indigenous and traditional methods.
- Communities rejecting big dam projects whereby the companies and local authorities do fake consultations, make false promises, steal land, destroy livelihoods, and make people vulnerable and sick by polluting basic rights resources such as water, land and air.
The right to free prior and informed consent

Communities are making claims based on their right to free prior and informed consent (FPIC). FPIC is an important principle which indigenous and affected communities can apply against big projects. Communities making claims on the basis of FPIC can use their country’s constitution and laws as well as international and regional human rights policies. Across many countries in Africa, consent rights are most powerfully located in customary law and its rules around how land and natural resources may be used, distributed or sold.

The FPIC says:

- decisions about projects must be taken freely which means without threats or force of any kind
- communities must be fully informed about the project and its impacts
- consent for a project must be agreed to before corporations are given any licences to start work
- consent does not only happen once. Corporations and governments must seek consent all through a big project if it goes ahead.

After reading Strategies to stop big dam projects:

- Discuss the various strategies:
  - Have you used any of them in a campaign? How successful were you? What would do differently next time?
  - Are strategies you think you might want to develop in your campaign?
  - What evidence-based research would you need to do to back up your arguments against a project?
  - What support would you need to build your strategies into a strong campaign? How can you get that support?
  - How could you strengthen your solidarity with other affected communities?

Stand with women’s resistance!

When big dam projects threaten to affect communities in Africa, women are often at the forefront of the fight to defend land, water, and forests as well as the wellbeing of their families and communities. They are using many of the strategies mentioned above and others addressed below.

International Rivers’ Africa Programme

The Programme works to protect rivers and the rights of communities affected by destructive infrastructure, such as big dams. We want a world where:

- people’s water and energy needs are met without harming nature or increasing poverty
- people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives
- African rivers are valued and protected
- energy choices made within Africa directly lessen rural and marginalised groups’ energy poverty
- nations’ risks to climate change is reduced,
- projects are planned with public participation, transparency and accountability.

We believe in a development model that protects the livelihoods and improves the quality of life for the poor. It is a model which puts into action ways to improve the environmental benefits and ecosystem services provided by rivers.

International Rivers’ Africa Program focuses on the Congo, Zambezi, Niger, and Omo Rivers. We work in the DRC, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Niger and Guinea. We work to:

- Strengthen people’s movements and networks to generate widespread support for valuing rivers and their ecosystem and livelihood services.
- Increase people’s awareness of and knowledge on African rivers and their importance to the general public and citizenry. This would contribute to gaining legal and practical protection for our rivers.
- Discourage high-profile financial and corporate actors from destructive dams.
- Encourage countries to develop energy plans and strategies that increase energy generation from renewable energy sources that make energy affordable, reliable, and easily accessible to people living far away from towns and cities.
- Promote women’s voice and agency in protecting rivers and increasing energy access.
Women Building Power

The Women Building Power Energy and Climate Justice campaign is an initiative of the WoMin African Alliance and is active in six African countries: The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda. The campaign:

• supports women activists in communities fighting dirty energy
• helps unite their struggles
• empowers women to research, consider, propose and fight for just and clean energy alternatives.

The campaign in the DRC is specifically about supporting women’s fight against the Grand Inga Dam project.

The women of Inga:
Building a women’s movement against the mega dam

A movement of women resisting the Grand Inga Project is developing along the Congo River. The Solidarity of Women on the Congo River (SOFLECO) was formed as an association of rural women living on the banks of the Congo River and its tributaries. They are mobilising to defend the Congo River which is of their ancestry and part of their livelihoods.

The disappearance of Congolese rivers would cause millions of people to become impoverished. These are people who are connected to the rivers in one or more of many ways: traditional irrigation, soil fertility, food (especially fish), navigation and religion.

Women’s resistance against big dams and other big anti-people and environment development projects can be strengthened within wider community struggles. Here’s how:

• Undertake research, like Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), to understand the key issues for you and your community and what action you want to take for what goal. If you need it, ask support organisations to assist you to undertake the research. Make sure your research includes questions which will highlight women’s perspectives, experiences and needs. Use evidence and facts and figures from your research to lobby government and companies.

• Encourage more women to get involved and strengthen local resistance. Find common ground across women from different spiritualities and faiths, ages, cultures and other diversities.

• Find like-minded people and organisations to build alliances and people power in the fight against new big dam projects.

• Insist on women’s right to be heard, respected and listened to.

• Make sure women are represented in every leadership structure at every level, are represented in every meeting, and have a say in all decisions.

• Find out when, where and with whom government, corporations, and traditional leader meetings are happening that address the proposed project. Insist that women take part as observers, participants and decision makers.

• Arrange exchange visits to other affected areas to learn and build solidarity with other women. Return to report on what you learned and strengthen your own movement at home.

Feminist participatory action research (FPAR)

Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) is a way to gather information that is led by affected people themselves. Women identify the issues and questions they wish to explore collectively through the FPAR. The research is conducted by women in the community. It is an important method in which women reach out to each other, build understanding and solidarity, and work towards supporting women’s organizing. FPAR is about action. The information and analysis which women build together through the FPAR method informs the planning of actions targeting government, corporations and community-level decision makers.
Changing women’s roles: a chance for transformation?

When a dam is built in their area women are usually forced to resettle in new communities, where they can no longer rely on traditional livelihood activities. For example, women at resettlement sites are forced to take up casual labour to keep their families going. They step out of their traditional roles. This could become a transformational time for them as earners and living a different life. But it more often means that they do this work on top of all their traditional unpaid labour of cooking, cleaning and caring for their families. More often than not, the entire resettled community has to pay for utilities, such as water and electricity, and house maintenance, which they didn’t pay for before, because in their previous livelihood they had access to land, water and forests. This places a burden on earning incomes through casual or other paid work.

Patriarchal, social and cultural ways do not melt away when women go into casual or other paid labour. Neither do they melt away when women take up struggles in the interests of their families and communities. Rather patriarchies broaden and justify this participation in the market economy or resistance movements as these actions are seen as contributing to the cohesion and survival of the community or household. In other areas, like control of women’s sexuality in particular, patriarchies continue to uphold values that do not necessarily see women as autonomous entities.

‘Overspeak’ to get women’s voices heard

While women may be at the core of resistance, their contributions often go unrecognised and unacknowledged. For example, women are seldom in key leadership positions. A small circle of men usually dominate the media spotlight. Women experience this as silencing. To resist silencing, women have used the tactic called ‘overspeak’. They deliberately speak loudly or sing over men’s voices. This stops men speaking. Once the men are silenced, women enter the discussion again. Overspeak is a response to men’s domination, which is central to holding up the patriarchal system. Overspeak can also be used to address inequalities, like class or age, among women.
WOMEN AND THEIR COMMUNITIES ARE CONTINUING TO PROTECT RIVERS AND FIGHT AGAINST BIG DAM PROJECTS! THEIR VOICES ARE GROWING. JOIN THEM IN TURNING A VISION FOR A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE INTO REALITY.

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Main mission
WoMin’s main mission is to:
• support the building of women’s movements to challenge destructive extractivism
• propose development alternatives that respond to the majority of African women’s needs.

Our approach
Our approach to making change happen includes:
• political education
• participatory research
• women-led grassroots-driven campaigning
• alliance and women’s movement building
• solidarity.

Our focus
Our focus areas are:
• fossil fuels energy and climate justice
• extractivism, militarisation and violence against women
• women’s rights, consent and democratised socioeconomic decision-making.

Our values
• Collaboration: We see ourselves as a part of a global movement to protect river ecosystems, and our colleagues as partners with whom we collaborate and consult to strengthen our collective efforts.
• Integrity: We conduct our work honestly, keep our commitments, and expect others to do the same.
• Accountability: We hold ourselves accountable to affected communities, partner organizations, funders, and the public at large, to act in accordance with our mission.
• Inclusiveness: We promote open dialogue and decision-making that is transparent, inclusive and consultative.
• Courage: We recognize and accept the responsibility to act on our mission even under difficult circumstances, and to confront our adversaries openly, while also protecting the safety of our staff and partners.
• Accuracy: We are committed to rigorous research and analysis, providing accurate information, and basing our work on the best available evidence.
• Creativity: We seek new, imaginative ways to inspire and maximize our effectiveness, both internally and externally.
• Sustainability: We seek to maintain an organization that is dynamic, strong, just, and sustainable in its finances, programs, practices, leadership and administration.