The Barro Blanco Dam will generate clean energy and destroy the habitat of an endangered rain frog. It will provide construction jobs and displace thousands of native people. Is this a "good" investment for Panama? This presentation applies the decision-making framework of the World Commission on Dams (WCD) to address the shortfalls of this controversial project. The criteria examines the social, environmental, technical, economic, and financial impacts of dams. Although construction of the Barro Blanco is already underway, this framework exposes the overwhelmingly negative impacts on the Ngöbe, the native people living along the Tabasará River.

Why is the Barro Blanco Dam controversial?

The recent surge in large dam projects drove the World Commission on Dams to create a framework to aid all actors in holistic decision-making. Applying the seven strategic priorities to the Barro Blanco Dam reveals egregious oversights at every stage of the project.

Hydroelectric power accounts for nearly 60% of Panama’s total energy production. Not including the canal system, Panama has four other hydroelectric dams which were constructed between 1907 and 1984. The Bayano Dam, built in 1976, displaced thousands of indigenous people and flooded thousands of square kilometers of rainforest.

A VIEW OF CONFLICT

Top Left: The Barro Blanco dam is located just south of the comarca on the Tabasará River. Top Center: Tribespeople protest the GENISA Barro Blanco environmental impact study. Top Right: The project towers over the nearby highway, more than half complete. Left: Manolo Miranda is seated on the sacred petroglyphs which will be inundated.

Sustaining rivers and livelihoods

1. Understand the ecosystem and community function together.
2. Value the ecosystem and use precaution.
3. Develop tributaries before rivers with high risks and value.
4. Avoid significant detrimental impact on endangered species.
5. Maintain the integrity of downstream ecosystems.

According to the latest UN report, three villages will be completely inundated, directly effecting 460 people and impacting the livelihood of at least 3,500 others. The assessment created by the Panamanian government claimed 5 people would be affected. Damage will occur to local fishing grounds, subsistence farming and hunting lands, and potable water supplies.

Recognizing entitlements & benefits

1. Recognize rights and risks of adversely affected stakeholders.
2. Insure all stakeholders in the assessment.
3. Negotiate a formal, legal contract with all affected stakeholders.
4. Recognize adversely affected people first among beneficiaries.

The Panamanian government is offered to pay one-time payment of $2,000 to every head of an affected household in the comarca Ngöbe-Buglé. However, the Ngöbe are largely subsistence farmers operating within a kínship system of land ownership. Offering a cash settlement is not a solution for farmers in a society where currency is rarely exchanged and land is not for sale.

Ensuring compliance

1. Prepare a completion plan prior to commencement.
2. Enable community views into the budget.
3. Provide reparation to right beneficiaries.
4. Ensure long-term compliance.

The comarca Ngöbe-Buglé was established in 1997, granting the tribe exclusive land rights and extensive administrative authority. Allowing contractors to build projects on the border of the comarca will impact the people inside the comarca ignores the spirit of the negotiated boundaries.

References

5. Google Maps, 2014
6. Arnoldo Sogandares, 2013
7. exchangingframeworks.wordpress.com, 2013
8. intersemantality.org, 2014
9. tukchamakers.wordpress.com, 2013

Gaining public acceptance

1. Comprehensive options assessment
2. Comprehensive public acceptance
3. Comprehensive public acceptance
4. Comprehensive public acceptance
5. Comprehensive public acceptance
6. Comprehensive public acceptance
7. Comprehensive public acceptance

Addressing existing dams

1. Identify safety development issues.
2. Value planning approaches that match development needs.
3. Consider social and environmental aspects along planning phases.
4. Prioritize improvement of existing systems.
5. Consider social and environmental aspects are important during design, and construction phases.

The reservoir will inundate several rocks with petroglyphs considered sacred by the Ngöbe.

Blanco Dam is located just south of the Tabasará River and is part of Panama's Panama's national reservoir system.

Is Compromise Possible?

Construction of the Barro Blanco Dam is unlikely to stop short of completion. Fully recognizing the human population impacted by the dam as well as taking steps to preserve the religious sites along the river could contribute to the overall sustainability of the project and other future hydroelectric projects in Panama. More appropriate compensation, such as expanded comarca boundaries or permanent contracts banning mining, logging, and dams, could help repair State-Indigenous relations.