

How can renewable energy development trigger violent conflict in Uganda?

Introduction

Renewable energy consumption and production are rising across African countries, and Uganda is no exception. Uganda relies on a mixture of sources to meet the energy needs of its population. According to the World Bank, less than half (42%) of the Ugandan population has access to electricity. As a result, most Ugandans rely on biomass to meet their daily energy needs. Electricity generation has historically been based primarily on hydropower and remains so due to its large riverine resources (including the Nile River). The government's Renewable Energy Policy of 2007 and its 2022 Energy Policy both prioritize increasing the country's use of renewable energy sources. Uganda is ranked number 13 in Africa's total installed hydropower capacity (IHA, 2022).



Whereas the development of renewable energy projects brings benefits, especially for the surrounding communities and the country at large, it also causes negative effects ranging from cultural, socio-economic, and environmental aspects, particularly when the development process is poorly managed. As such, there is a need to understand the unique pathways by which renewable energy conflicts can occur and the mechanisms required to prevent and resolve them.

This policy brief is an excerpt from the study "Green Curses and Violent Conflicts: The Security Implications of Renewable Energy Sector Development in Africa" conducted by the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC), Uganda, in collaboration with the Peace Research Institute Oslo, Environmental Law Institute, Norwegian University of Life Sciences and University of Massachusetts Boston. The study was based on qualitative research methods. The study sought to examine how renewable energy development can trigger violent conflicts and how these can be mitigated. The research team interviewed host communities of two purposively selected hydropower project developments and stakeholders through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The hydropower projects used as cases for this study were Karuma Hydroelectric Power Station, at Karuma Falls on the Nile River in Kiryandongo district, and Isimba Hydroelectric Power Station, in Kayunga district in Eastern Uganda on the Nile River.

Pathways through which renewable energy could trigger violent conflict

Pathways at the Community level

Lack of a grievance redress mechanism causes discontent among communities. Both Karuma and Isimba hydropower projects caused discontent among surrounding communities due to the lack of a grievance redress mechanism. Communities expressed their dissatisfaction with the compensation process, particularly because they believed their property and land were undervalued. Worse still, pockets of people have not been compensated to date. In Isimba communities, those whose houses and health were affected by the rock blasting have been denied help over their grievances. The lack of a formally instituted redress mechanism has left people hopeless, which is a major aggravating factor. They have tried to seek help from local leaders, district leaders, and courts of law, with no success.

“When we report, we don’t receive any feedback. It seems the government officials in higher offices (the mafias) swindled our compensation money.” (FGD participant, Isimba, 2022).

Loss of livelihoods without alternative employment opportunities: Many locals in the surrounding communities depended on the Nile River for different economic activities, including fishing, quarrying, agricultural activities, sand mining, etc. These activities came to a halt with the development of hydropower dams. Whereas there were promises of alternative economic activities for those affected, these were never fulfilled hence most people were left with no source of income a situation that has pushed some, especially the youths into illegal activities hence causing tensions within the community.

“Before the dam project, youths were engaged in different activities that included farming and fishing. When the dam project came, their family land was taken and the fishermen were banned from the lake. This left them redundant because they were not given alternatives to the economic activities they engaged in before. Some were given casual work at the dam while others were left jobless. At the end of the

dam construction, youths were completely left jobless. Some shifted to new areas to look for work while others remained idle in the communities. The joblessness has turned youths, who were originally active, into idle people with no alternative ways of survival. They are now wreaking havoc in the community. They steal people’s crops and other property, they are using drugs, and they are impregnating people’s daughters among other bad activities”. (FGD participant, Isimba, 2022).

Pathways at the Inter-community level

Perceived injustice in the allocation of benefits for surrounding communities: The Isimba hydropower dam borders the districts of Kayunga and Kamuli. Whereas Kayunga district is predominantly occupied by people from Buganda, Kamuli district is predominantly occupied by Basoga. Communities are dissatisfied with how the benefits from the dam construction have been distributed among the different communities, according to the findings. Specifically, the communities on the Kamuli side of the dam feel that it is those on the Kayunga side that have benefited more from the dam construction while the Kamuli side has just suffered the negative effects.

“The Isimba dam project has benefited more the people of Busaana because it is them that got jobs at the dam construction. The good, tarmacked roads too were constructed in other villages as our roads remained the way they were before the dam project. Most of the good buildings were also constructed in other villages. Therefore, Bwase did not benefit from the dam project. Most of the infrastructure as a result of the dam project was constructed in Bugerere in Buganda. Busoga did not benefit much”. (FGD participant, Isimba, 2022).

Pathways between individuals/companies and communities

Elite capture: Some persons in positions of responsibility, like political heads and technocrats from the Ministry of

Energy and Mineral Development (MEMD), manipulated the compensation process. For example, by conniving with the leaders in charge of making the relocation and compensation lists to include “ghost names” on such lists. This led to the compensation of people who did not even own any land at the expense of the genuine owners.

“We also realized that people who did not own land in this area and were not also staying here were on the list of those to be compensated. They received the money before those that were genuine landowners”. (FGD participant, Isimba, 2022).

In other instances, at the Isimba hydropower dam, political leaders retained for personal use compensation material like cement that was meant for those whose houses were affected by rock blasting.

Perceived unfairness in the recruitment process:

Communities surrounding both the Karuma and Isimba hydropower projects expressed a lot of dissatisfaction with the recruitment process of MEMD and the dam construction companies. Whereas the communities expected many employment opportunities for their members with the development of the hydropower dams, this was not realized as most employment opportunities at different levels were offered to people from outside the host communities.

“Even employment! How can you employ somebody coming from Kampala or Kasese as casual laborers when we have good boys here?” (FGD participant, Karuma, 2022).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Uganda is increasingly making huge investments in renewable energy development projects. These come with massive benefits for the host communities and the country’s development. If not well managed and addressed, several implementation challenges can potentially trigger violent conflict in such projects, even outside the energy sector. To deal with the escalation of such challenges into violent conflict, the study proposes the following actions:

Institute clear and formal measures for ensuring procedural justice. The project inception documents

should clearly lay out the conflict resolution strategies that will be adopted, with room for mediated dialogue. These strategies should ensure fairness, where everyone is given a voice to ensure a fair outcome for all parties involved.

Involve grassroots community organizations in the entire process.

Grassroots community organizations often have a firm grounding in the local communities. They have ample information about different norms in a community, community residents, and rightful property and landowners. Additionally, they are more trusted by the local communities to protect their interests. Involving them will reduce the issues of “ghost” project-affected persons and fraud in the compensation process. Additionally, they can be used as the first step in addressing grievances before they are escalated to different levels.

Ensure a fair recruitment process in such renewable energy developments

by enacting and implementing a policy that allocates some jobs for locals and stipulates a significant percentage of jobs to be filled by people from the local area hosting such energy developments. This is so that the local community gains in different ways through knowledge and skills transfers.

Ensure transparency in the compensation process.

Properly sensitize the communities on the compensation process, including how to value different properties, which rates will be followed, and when compensation will be provided, to ensure transparency and prevent any doubts or potential misunderstandings.

References

IHA. (2022). Africa: Ranking by total installed hydropower capacity. London. The International Hydropower Association (IHA).

Recent Policy Briefs

“Uganda’s priority actions for creating a healthy food environment: An expert panel prioritisation”
Issue No. 167, August 2023
Madina M. Guloba and Blessing Atwine

“How to speed up the adoption of e-commerce by MSMEs in Uganda.”
Issue No. 166, August 2023
Smartson Ainomugisha

“Diabetes costs the Ugandan Government and households UGX 2.2 trillion annually.”
Issue No. 165, August 2023
Madina M. Guloba, Blessing Atwine and Pauline Nakitende

About the Authors

Linda Nakato is a Research Fellow at the Economic Policy Research Centre, Kampala, Uganda.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) or its management.

Copyright © 2023

Economic Policy Research Centre

The Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) is an autonomous not-for-profit organization established in 1993 with a mission to foster sustainable growth and development in Uganda through advancement of research –based knowledge and policy analysis.

Learn more at:



www.eprcug.org



TWITTER: @EPRC_official



www.facebook.com/EPRCUGanda



eprcug.org/blog

Address:

Economic Policy Research Centre
51, Pool Road, Makerere University Campus,
P. O. Box 7841 Kampala, Uganda
Tel: +256414541023/4 Fax: +256414541022
Email: eprc@eprcug.org, Website: www.eprc.or.ug