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| Impact of Souapiti Dam in Guinea |
| By: Human Rights Watch |
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Guinea’s 450 megawatt Souapiti dam, scheduled to begin operating in September 2020, is the most advanced of several new hydropower projects planned by the government of President Alpha Condé. Guinea’s government believes that hydropower can significantly increase access to electricity in a country where only a fraction of people have reliable access to power.

Souapiti’s output, however, has a human cost. The dam’s reservoir will ultimately displace an estimated 16,000 people from 101 villages and hamlets. The Guinean government had moved 51 villages by the end of 2019 and said it planned to conduct the remaining resettlements within a year. Forced off their ancestral homes and farmlands, and with much of their land already, or soon to be flooded, displaced communities are struggling to feed their families, restore their livelihoods, and live with dignity.

The Souapiti project is an example of China’s support for global hydropower and the role of Chinese foreign investment in large-scale infrastructure projects in Africa. China International Water & Electric Corporation (CWE) – a wholly owned subsidiary of the world’s second largest dam builder, state-owned China Three Gorges Corporation – is constructing the dam and will then jointly own and operate it with the Guinean government.

The Souapiti dam is also part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China’s trillion-dollar investment in infrastructure stretching across some 70 countries, which has supported large-scale hydropower projects in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The state-owned policy bank Export-Import Bank of China (China Eximbank), which has made loans exceeding over a trillion yuan (US$150 billion) to support BRI projects, is financing the project through a US$1.175 billion loan. In the face of criticism over the environmental and social impact of BRI projects, China’s president, Xi Jinping, pledged in April 2019 that the BRI would support “open, clean, and green development.”

This report documents the impacts of the Souapiti dam on displaced residents’ access to land, food and livelihoods. The report is based on more than 90 interviews with displaced residents, communities yet to be moved, and villages on whose land people are resettled, as well as interviews with business and government leaders involved in the resettlement process. The report makes recommendations on how resettlements can be improved going forward, and describes the remedies needed for communities that have already been displaced.

Souapiti’s resettlement process is the largest in Guinea’s post-independence history. Most of those displaced are already extremely poor, with a 2017 assessment estimating the average daily income per person in the area to be US$1.18. The original plan for the dam would have displaced 48,000 people, but the government agency overseeing the resettlement– the Project for Hydroelectric Construction of Souapiti (Projet d`Aménagement Hydroélectrique de Souapiti, Souapiti Agency) – decided to reduce the height of the dam, and by extension its reservoir, to lessen the number of people to be relocated.

Residents displaced by the dam are resettled in concrete houses on land ceded by other villages. Residents have so far not obtained legal titles to their new land, creating a risk of future land conflicts between displaced families and host communities. Displacement is rupturing longstanding social and cultural links between families in the area. “In our culture, our social and familial bonds are essential,” said one displaced resident. “Extended families are being split apart. Whenever there is something to celebrate or mourn in the family, we feel the distance.”

Souapiti’s reservoir is also flooding a vast area of agricultural land, threatening communities’ means of subsistence. The dam’s reservoir will eventually flood 253 square kilometers of land, including an estimated 42 square kilometers of crops and more than 550,000 crop-bearing trees. A 2017 project document warned starkly that, “displaced populations will generally have less favorable land than they have been farming for generations.”

Dozens of displaced residents told Human Rights Watch that they are already struggling to find adequate food for their families. “The people here are hungry, sometimes I don’t eat so my children can,” said a woman displaced from the village of Tahiré Center in 2019. Residents from several villages said that, whereas before being displaced they used to grow their own food, they must now find enough money to buy it from local markets. “With the fields gone, we’re slowly selling our cattle to make ends meet,” said a local herder and farmer. “We’re fragile like eggs because of the suffering here,” said a community leader relocated in 2019. “It’s only thanks to God that we survive.”

Officials at the Souapiti Agency acknowledged that displacement threatens communities’ livelihoods. “When you move a village, you’re breaking up the way they make a living, and you have to try to reestablish it,” said the Souapiti Agency’s head of environmental management and sustainable development. The Souapiti Agency said it intends to restore communities to the same or improved standard of living that they enjoyed prior to the resettlement. The Souapiti Agency does not provide displaced residents with replacement farmland but said it will assist them to farm more intensively on their remaining land and find new income sources, such as fishing or cattle-raising.

Displaced residents, however, have so far received no such assistance. “We’re not asking for something extraordinary. Prepare land for us to continue our activities, a pasture area for livestock farming. Respect the promises made,” said the president of Tahiré District, which encompasses several villages relocated in June 2019.  
International human rights standards require that resettled populations have immediate access to livelihood sources, and that resettlement sites should include access to employment options. The 2015 and 2017 action plans prepared to guide the resettlement recommended that the Souapiti Agency begin work on livelihood restoration programs as soon as construction on the dam started in 2015. At the end of 2019, however, the Souapiti Agency had not started implementing livelihood restoration measures and displaced populations were receiving no support to help them reestablish the farming-dependent lifestyle they had left behind. The Souapiti Agency told Human Rights Watch that it is, “in the process of redoubling its efforts to invest in the restoration of livelihoods in the coming month and for years to come.”

The Souapiti Agency pointed out that, in the short term, the government has provided food assistance – two deliveries of rice over six months and cash for basic essentials – to displaced families. “It helps people get on their feet,” said a Souapiti Agency official. But residents said that, given how long it would take to find new livelihoods, this was not enough. “We consumed what we were given in just over a month,” said a father of five resettled in June 2019 from Warakhalandi. International standards recommend that displaced communities receive support until they return to the living standards they enjoyed prior to resettlement.

The Souapiti Agency also said that it compensates residents for the trees and crops growing on flooded land, although it has provided no payments to reflect the value of the land itself. Farmers have therefore received no compensation for land lying fallow as part of a crop rotation system, nor for land used for grazing animals.

A lack of transparency in the compensation process – with the Souapiti Agency failing to adequately inform people about how compensation is calculated – has also fueled dissatisfaction with the payments made. Some residents said they have not been paid any compensation at all; others contend that, while they had been compensated for perennial crops, like fruit trees, they have received nothing for annual crops like rice or cassava. “The government gave us what they wanted. We accepted money without negotiation because we didn’t know the value of our resources,” said one village leader. Several women said that the bulk of compensation has been paid to men in family or community leadership roles, giving women little say over how money is used.

Residents from all the villages Human Rights Watch visited said that they had complained to representatives of the Souapiti Agency or to local government officials about the resettlement process, but that they had received either no response or one that did not address their concerns. “Someone says give [your complaint] to this person. They ask you to wait. He also has his director. Who are we supposed complain to?” said a community leader from Konkouré district. The Souapiti Agency told Human Rights Watch that it had “delayed” in implementing a formal grievance policy, and only did so in September 2019, after more than fifty villages had been moved. The Souapiti Agency did not explain the reason for the delay. As of December 2019, 110 complaints had been submitted to the new grievance mechanism.

The Souapiti Agency said that for future relocations is it negotiating agreements with communities that set out the Agency’s responsibilities during the process. While this could help clarify displaced residents’ rights, a sample agreement shared by the Souapiti Agency contains only a single paragraph summary of the Agency’s obligations and offers no detail on how the Souapiti Agency will address key issues like lack of agricultural land and support for livelihood assistance. The Souapiti Agency should also ensure that residents have access to independent legal advice, of their choice, prior to signing agreements.

Furthermore, to address the profound problems in the villages that have already been resettled, the Souapiti Agency should negotiate agreements with displaced households detailing how the Agency will remedy problems with access to land and livelihoods and any residual issues with the quality of housing and infrastructure at resettlement sites. The Souapiti Agency should also review the compensation payments made so far and explain clearly how compensation was calculated. Any underpayments should be remedied immediately.

The flawed resettlement process for the Souapiti dam is also evidence of the need for Chinese companies, banks, and regulators to ensure that BRI projects and other Chinese overseas investments respect human rights. CWE, in an email to Human Rights Watch, said that the resettlement is the responsibility of the Guinean government but that, as a shareholder in Souapiti, the company “participates in the reinstallation and plays a role of supervisor.” CWE, as well as China Eximbank, should use their influence to ensure that the Souapiti Agency addresses the problems identified in this report.

Finally, with more hydropower projects on the horizon, Souapiti’s resettlement process should alert the Guinean government of the need for better regulation and oversight. The government should, after consultation with civil society and impacted communities, draft and adopt regulations that clearly define the rights of anyone who loses access to land or is resettled due to large-scale development projects. “We’re leaving our home for the development of Guinea,” one community leader from Konkouré Center told Human Rights Watch. “We want the government to help us – otherwise we will suffer.”

Download the full report, including recommendations: [We’re Leaving Everything Behind: The Impact of Guinea’s Souapiti Dam on Displaced Communities](https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/04/16/were-leaving-everything-behind/impact-guineas-souapiti-dam-displaced-communities)

See [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUgWjeylRIM)