

Hydropower Development in Northeast India: Conflicts, Issues and Way Forward

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Northeast India – geo-politically a group of eight states, often referred to as seven sisters and one brother, located in the Northeastern corner of the country – has been in turmoil over the last two decades or so because of unbridled hydropower development in the region. This article¹ is an effort to understand the extent of hydropower development in the region, the multi-faceted and multi layered conflicts unleashed by this development and also explore ways of engaging with them.

The article is organised around three broad sections: in section one, we provide a brief profile of the region; in section two we discuss a few of typical cases of hydropower projects to bring out the different dimensions of conflicts; and in the third section we suggest certain tentative ways of engaging with the conflicts.

Section One: The Northeast Region

The Northeastern region of India is part of the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot, which is ranked sixth in the 25 biodiversity hotspots in the world. Geo-ecologically, it is a part of the eastern Himalayas known for its richness in water resources, biodiversity and ethnic and cultural diversity as well. The region has about 164,000 km² of forest cover, which is about 60% of the total geographical area. Settled agriculture is mainly practiced in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. Shifting cultivation is still practiced in the hills of the region. In most of the region, especially where the hydropower projects are coming up the population density is very small and often inhabited by small, ethnic communities. Because

1 This article is based on an earlier article by the authors: “Understanding Water Conflicts in Northeast India” in Das Partha J., Chandan Mahanta, K. J. Joy, Suhas Paranjape, Shruti Vispute (Ed.), 2013, Water Conflicts in Northeast India: A Compendium of Case Studies, Pune: Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India. It also draws from some of the case studies included in this publication.

of this, the scale of displacement is much smaller as compared to the scale of displacement caused by dams in the rest of India.

The region is drained by two large river systems of the world – the Brahmaputra and the Barak (Meghna). Both are trans-national rivers cutting across bordering countries. It is also one of the wettest regions of India. As a result, the region is endowed with abundant water resources and hydropower potential.

As natural resources are mostly owned by communities in most states in the region, state control over these resources has remained a source of disgruntlement amongst people. Moreover, indigenous communities are discontented because natural resources are being utilised for development without involving them and traditional institutions in the decision making process.

Unlike many other regions in the country the rich ethnic and cultural diversity of the region adds another layer to the conflicts. Nearly one-fourth of the population in the Northeast is tribal. About 145 tribal groups live here, representing one of the world's richest ethnic diversity. This region represents a sort of 'ethnological transition zone' between India and the neighbouring countries of China, Tibet, Burma and Bangladesh (Ali et al., 2003).

The hydropower driven development paradigm coupled with disregard for traditional institutions and community opinion seems to have prepared the ground for conflicts. The nature of water related conflicts in the region is typical of its bio-physical and socio-cultural complexity and political sensitivity.

Section Two: Hydropower Projects and Conflicts

Though the Northeastern region harbours colossal water resources, the ongoing efforts to harness this vast hydropower potential through a series of dams has posed an unprecedented threat to the water, social and ecological security of the region. Hydropower dams involve the setting up of large infrastructure, which in turn leads to deforestation and disruption of forest ecosystems and reduction of biodiversity. The indigenous people at the dam sites who are largely dependent on forests and rivers for livelihoods are feeling threatened. Further, the widespread detrimental impacts on the downstream flood plains,

the river regime, aquatic biodiversity, ground water domain, wetlands and consequent effects on agriculture and environment can lead to loss of livelihoods and out migration, thus increasing the possibility of conflicts.

The hydropower potential of the region has attracted national and international attention, with the result that more than 168 hydropower projects with large river dams are being planned for the region. A large number of Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) have been signed with various companies, prompting the then Minister of State for Power at the Centre Mr Jairam Ramesh to make a cryptic comment in 2008 that the Northeast is hit by an MoU virus! Many of these projects are in different stages of execution by public and private sector companies. There is widespread concern over the observed and probable social and environmental impacts of these hydropower projects in the region. Protests against the detrimental downstream impacts of large dams in Assam have assumed the proportions of a mass movement.

The upstream-downstream linkages within the region and the contiguous Himalayan areas are also engendering conflicts. The issue of large scale hydropower development in the eastern Himalaya has already caused a simmering tension between China, India and Bangladesh. Similarly, India's talk of interlinking of rivers to transfer water from the "surplus" basins to the "deficit" ones has also created anxiety and tensions amongst the neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. The perceived threat felt by Bangladesh due to India's Tipaimukh Dam in Manipur and China's alleged plan to divert the Brahmaputra elucidates the potential of transboundary conflicts over the use of water resource. The unwarranted release of water to rivers from dams both in Bhutan and within the region has caused devastating flash floods. A lack of coordination between countries sharing the river basins is a major obstacle in resolving these problems.

Below we discuss a few case studies to bring out the different dimensions and issues related to hydropower development in the region.

The conflicts around hydropower development in the region cover a wide range of issues including displacement, loss of livelihoods, various types of ecological impacts - especially seismicity and the fragile nature of the Himalayas, downstream impacts, flooding, ethnicity-culture-sacred landscapes, environmental impact assessments, and so on.

The Tipaimukh High Dam (THD) on the border of Manipur and Mizoram was originally designed to contain flood waters in the lower Barak valley, but later a hydropower component was added to it. The case of THD brings to the fore issues of displacement and deprivation of livelihoods especially of large number of indigenous communities, mostly belonging to the Zeliangrong and Hmar peoples. The situation is also a trans-boundary one, as the people of Bangladesh are worried about the possible changes in the flow pattern downstream of the dam, after the construction of the THD (Singh, 2013).

Six projects have been envisioned on the Teesta in Sikkim, of which Stages I-IV are in north Sikkim. The Teesta HEP Stage V (510 MW) was the first to be taken up in the six stage 'cascade' plan to harness 3,635 MW of hydropower, all within 175 km of the Teesta river in Sikkim. This is located in the North and East Districts, and has been commissioned. Stage VI (500 MW) will be located further downstream in East and South Districts. These hydropower projects have detrimental impact on the ecosystem, livelihoods, religion, cultural identity and political rights of the people. The heavy influx of outside workers seems to be changing the demography of the place, and these workers continue to reside in the state, affecting the social, economic and political situation, and also exerting great pressure on its sparse resources including land. Several areas that have been brought under hydropower projects are sacred, and are spiritually and culturally important for indigenous communities. Violation of the sacred landscape has been an important cause of discontentment among the people (Tseten, 2013; Sharma and Pandey, 2013). The region also saw a vibrant movement of the affected people under the banner of the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT), including the historic hunger strike of 915 days that forced the government of Sikkim to invite the ACT for negotiations.

Dibang Multipurpose Project in the Dibang basin in Arunachal Pradesh brings out the two main conflicting issues: one, the underlying justification of the project on grounds of economic viability as the displacement is considered to be negligible; and two, the fear of the Idu Mishmi community, the primary inhabitants of the Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang Valley Districts, of the influx of outsiders into the region because of dam building that will lead to a demographic imbalance in the Dibang basin. All the 17 planned projects of the Dibang basin together would bring in about 100,000 outsiders to the region, whereas the total population of the Idu Mishmi community is only about 11,000. The onslaught of several

hydropower projects on this river revered by the Idu Mishmis has stimulated a debate about the right to ancestral land, identity and culture. For the Idu Mishmi people living along the tributaries of the Talon river, these projects have spelled 'cultural genocide'. Interestingly, the youth, students and literary people are in the forefront of the anti-dam movement, as the resistance of the Idu Mishmi community was primarily organised by the All Idu Mishmi Students Union (AIMSU), the student wing of the community, and the Idu Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society (IMCLS). The fear of state violence seems to have forced the leadership of the movement to reconsider their anti-dam stand and start a process of negotiation with the government on a revenue sharing model between the state and the local community (Mimi, 2013).

The Demwe Lower Hydro-Electric Project is one of the 11 HEPs proposed in the Lohit river basin, an important tributary of the Brahmaputra. Though a series of dams is being constructed in the Lohit river basin, no cumulative impact study has been conducted yet. Since the location of the project is situated at the boundary of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, the major downstream impact of the project will be in the Assam valley, and no efforts have been made to study the likely downstream impact of the project. It is expected to have serious downstream impacts in Assam owing to high population density. Apart from negative impacts on ecology and livelihoods, it would jeopardise the livelihoods of different tribes on both the upper and lower ridges. Border conflict between the people of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam is another possibility. If the people of Assam and Arunachal come together under a common forum it can probably compel the government to carry out a cumulative impact assessment before going ahead with further construction on the project (Chetia, 2013).

Another very critical dimension of the Demwe Lower Hydroelectric Project is related to green governance/clearances. There have been violations of the provisions of various environment and wildlife related laws in the country. Apparently, there was a major conflict of interest during the scoping of the Demwe Lower project itself. Though the EAC prescribed a cumulative impact assessment of multiple projects in the Lohit river basin, it delinked the environmental clearance of the Demwe Lower and Demwe Upper projects from the results of the Lohit river basin study. No public hearings were held in downstream Assam, though several speakers at the public hearings in Lohit and Anjaw districts of Arunachal Pradesh on

11 August, 2009 and 12 August, 2009 respectively did highlight that the downstream impact assessment was not done. The downstream-affected communities such as the Khamptis and Singphos within Arunachal Pradesh were neither informed nor consulted. There have been also several violations with regard to forest and wildlife clearances, which have also been challenged on many grounds before the National Green Tribunal (NGT) by civil society activists of the region. According to Neeraj Vagholikar unless some of the issues – like a fresh ‘scoping’ of the project, as the earlier process was biased because of a certain conflict of interest, fresh public consultations in the upstream and downstream areas in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam based on both prior availability of all impact assessment studies (including downstream and cumulative impact assessment studies), fresh appraisal of the project for environmental clearance after the completion of the above processes, and re-assessment of the forest and wildlife clearances – are addressed, the Demwe Lower project would continue to be a hotbed of conflicts (Vagholikar, 2013).

The proposed 2700 megawatt (MW) Lower Siang Hydroelectric Project, one amongst a series of projects planned in the Siang basin, is situated in the East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. The project is being opposed on grounds of social and ecological destruction – submergence of large tracts of forest and agricultural landscapes, destruction of rivers, massive socio-cultural and demographic changes, very little opportunity for sustainable livelihoods, increased seismicity in the region, and other major downstream impacts. While the state government is pushing a large number of hydropower projects, the groups opposing the project have called for a moratorium on all projects in the Siang valley. The central government is also using the Chinese card – the hydropower projects on the Tsangpo by the Chinese – to accelerate hydropower development in the Siang valley. The movement against the project is being led by the Adi Students Union (AdiSU), Siang People’s Forum, and Forum for Siang Dialogue. According to Azing Pertin if the deadlock has to be broken, then the government has to explore possibilities of tapping the hydropower potential of the tributaries of the Siang river, leaving the main river undammed and unbound (Pertin, 2013).

The Kopili Hydel Power Project (KHEP), owned by the North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited (NEEPCO) and located at Umrangshu in the Dima Hasao district (earlier known as the North Cachar District) of Assam, is primarily about the conflict around the

devastating floods caused by the project. In 2004, the excess water released from the Kopili Hydel Project devastated a vast area of the three districts of Nagaon, Morigaon and Kamrup, forcing nearly 100,000 people to flee from their homes and escape to the temporary shelters set up by the community or the administration. Though the NEEPCO authorities have been denying the release of excess water from the dam as it has no provision to release excess water, the affected people are refusing to accept the NEEPCO version. In fact, the issue of the flood induced by the Kopili Hydel Project became a rallying point in the general agitation against dam induced floods in the state. Ajit Patowary is of the view that those who are opposed to the project had not persistently raised the demand for abandoning or fully redesigning the project; instead they only demanded a halt to the practice of the arbitrary release of excess water by the project authorities from their reservoir, as well as compensation for the affected people (Patowary, 2013).

One of the important points that need to be highlighted and engaged with is the fundamental difference “between the hydropower projects of postmillennial India and the multipurpose river valley projects of an earlier period in India’s postcolonial history. In the mid-20th century large multi-purpose river valley projects were taken up, to develop a river basin region. They were driven by the spirit of decolonization itself.... By contrast, what is being designed and built these days are almost all single-purpose hydropower dams with power to be produced and sold for a profit by private as well as public sector companies” (Baruah, 2012). This difference in the nature of projects unfolding in the Northeast needs to be kept in mind as these projects are basically to export power and may not contribute to the development of the region even in conventional terms.

According to Amelie Huber and Deepa Joshi the new hydropower development discourse in the region is couched in ostensible win-win scenarios: securing energy for the rapidly developing national economy; accelerating development in hitherto ‘backward’ but hydro-potent areas; and generating ‘clean’ energy and thus taking the discourse away from the earlier dam-related critiques. The entire environmental/water governance gets “depoliticised” by transferring environmental governance from the public to the state or state-backed private technological-managerial control in the specific context of Sikkim. This is all the more serious as critical dissent from state policy is against the grain where state-

citizen relationships are skewed and characteristic of a process of eroding democracy and of an 'imposed...benevolent despotism' (Huber and Joshi, 2013).

Section Three: Possible Way Ahead

Water conflicts are symptoms of larger issues in water resources governance. Implicit in these conflicts is a demand for change, first in the ways we think about water and second, in the ways we manage it.

Main drivers of hydropower development in the region

With the publication of the Report of the World Commission on Dams (WCD) in 2000, along with heightened civil society action against large dams, especially in the 1990s, there was a belief that the days of mega dams were over. However, within a decade, mega dams seem to be back with a bang. The massive hydropower development plans in the Northeast, often described as the future powerhouse of India, became an integral part of this solitary power-centric engagement in water resources development. This was quite in line with the vision and strategy of the policy makers of India to fast track hydropower development in the country. A vision document circulated by the Central Electricity Authority of India (CEA) in 2001 provided preliminary ranking studies of about 400 hydropower dams with a total potential of about 107,000 MW. In 2003, the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced the 50,000 MW Initiative that included "prefeasibility reports" on 162 new projects with an aggregate capacity of 47,930 MW (ADB, 2007: 13; as cited in Baruah 2012). These projects were to be completed by 2017, and were to be followed by another drive to add at least 67,000 MW additional hydropower capacity in the subsequent 10-year period (International Rivers, 2008a: 7; as cited in Baruah 2012). According to one estimate, in a ten-year period, Arunachal Pradesh alone proposes to add hydropower capacity which "is only a little less than the total hydropower capacity added in the whole country in 60 years of Independence" (Human Rights Law Network, 2008: 3; as cited in Baruah 2012). "This projected pace of dam-building and the scale of India's hydropower development plans is unprecedented – nothing short of an attempt at a Great Leap Forward in hydropower generation" (Baruah, 2012). The hydropower initiative in the Northeast needs to be placed in the backdrop of this grand design of hydropower development in the country as "a

significant part of India's untapped hydropower potential is located in the rivers of the Eastern Himalayas" (Baruah, 2012). India's plan to expand its power generation potential – both hydropower and thermal power – is to keep up its high growth trajectory through industrialisation and urbanisation. Thus, the main driver of such large scale hydropower generation in the Northeast is arguably not the development of the region as such, but the export of hydropower to the rest of India to fuel its high growth economy. It amounts to what some civil society activists call "resource colonisation" of the Northeast by the rest of India. This also partially explains why single purpose hydropower projects are being put on a fast track, and not the multipurpose projects which were taken up in the post-independent era. These multipurpose projects could have met some of the critical developmental needs of the particular region, especially if these projects were planned as part of integrated river basin development, including overdue components like flood moderation, drinking water needs and navigation.

For the region, it is revenue generation for the state governments that is driving the hydropower development plan. The National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC) generally provides 12% of the power to the state government as royalty. In the case of certain private companies, the NHPC even pays 15% as royalty, as in the case of the Lower Demwe project on the Lohit river by Athena Energy Ventures.² To get a rough idea of how much revenue the government would earn, let us consider the example of Arunachal Pradesh, which would have the largest hydropower generation if all planned projects come true. "It has a projected hydropower potential of around 57,000 MW. As of July 2011, the state government has signed MoUs with power developers for 147 hydropower projects of over 40,000 MW installed capacity. The state government hopes to earn around Rs. 12,000 crores a year through the export of power to various parts of the country once the full capacity is developed. The government believes that hydropower development will catalyse the overall development in this Himalayan state" (Vaghlikar, 2013).

2 Minutes of the 24th Meeting of the Standing Committee of National Board for Wildlife, p. 18, 13 December, 2011, New Delhi

(<http://moef.nic.in/downloads/public-information/mom-24-13.12.11.pdf>); as cited in Baruah, 2012

Profit for the private sector is the other motive, as most projects are going to be implemented by private parties. In Arunachal Pradesh, of the 132 projects with a total capacity of about 40,140 MW, for which the government has signed MoUs with developers, 120 are with private companies (Vagholikar and Das, 2010). The main attraction for the private developers is the “free” fuel; unlike thermal and other sources of power, in the case of hydropower plants, though huge investments are required initially, once they are built, the operational costs are minimal (Baruah, 2012). It is this prospect of windfall profits that has pushed the private sector to come in a big way, including companies that have been unheard of in the power sector (Deka, 2010: 4; as cited in Baruah 2012).

Climate change is the latest motivation to push the hydropower agenda, as production of hydropower is seen as low-carbon energy and thus part of the climate mitigation strategy. It is also seen as ‘green’ energy, which makes it eligible for funding under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), in return for carbon credits (ADB, 2007). More than one-fourth of the projects applying for funding under the CDM are hydropower projects, and most are located in the Himalayas of India and China (Dharmadhikary, 2008). The claim that hydropower is green power has always been contested³. This is all the more true in the context of the Eastern Himalayas, as it is one of the climate change hotspots in the world, and given its fragile nature, the large scale damming of the area may exacerbate impacts of climate change even further. The “run of the river” nature of most of these projects is also being used by the pro-hydropower lobby to give a clean chit to the projects in terms of their environmental as well as social impacts, as the destructive submergence can be much less compared to the conventional, behind-the-dam storage centric hydropower production. However, many argue that these projects in the Northeast may not adhere to the definition of run of the river projects, as they “involve large dams, which divert the river waters through long tunnels, before the water is dropped back into the river at a downstream location after passing through a powerhouse. These projects are promoted as being ‘environmentally benign’ as they involve smaller submergences and lesser regulation of water as compared to conventional storage dams” (Vagholikar and Das, 2010). Ghanashyam

³ For a example see Rudd et al 1993, Lima et al 2007, International Rivers 2008b, DelSontro et al 2010

Sharma and Trilochan Pandey aptly describe what extensive tunneling has done to the popular psyche in Sikkim. They say, “The NHPC has already earned the sobriquet of *‘durey musa’* (mountain beaver), and the young people say *‘Darjeeling le Gorkhaland paucha ki paudai na, tara Sikkim le chai todkaland paune nai bhayo’* (whether Darjeeling gets Gorkhaland or not, Sikkim is definitely going to be hole-land [land of tunnels])” (Sharma and Pandey, 2013).

Finally, we have the Chinese angle to hydropower development in the Northeast. China’s South to North Water Diversion project that aims to take waters from the Yangtze river and divert it to the Yellow river has created apprehensions amongst its neighbouring countries. India is particularly concerned about China’s plan to divert the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra). As Nimmi Kurien states in her article in this Compendium, “China’s dam building plans are also serving as the ‘strategic reason’ for India to not only justify building mega dams on its side but also to establish its first-user rights over the waters. The moves to expedite plans to develop mega hydroelectric projects on the sub-basins of the Siang, Lohit and Subansiri rivers can be read as India’s moves to institutionalise such a norm. But this raises a more critical question: what is the likelihood of India and China subscribing to the norm of prior use as a possible basis for equitable water sharing, given that both have chosen not to ratify the only existing international treaty governing shared freshwater resources? Since formal international law provides a feeble regulatory framework for mediating contested claims among riparian states, one needs to look beyond formal and legal instruments to ‘soft law’ and an entire range of innovative, informal processes that allow for flexibility and consequently a greater measure of success” (Kurien, 2013). This seems to be the best bet for India, given the asymmetries in the geo-politics of the region.

Where do we go from here?

The first and the most important thing to do is to put a stop to all project related activities, in whatever stage they are, till a comprehensive review of all projects is carried out, taking into account the various objections raised by academics, activists and affected people, and made available in the public domain. The manner in which the environmental impact assessments of various projects have been carried out has attracted serious criticism. Issues range from conflict of interest to credibility of the people (and the institutions) who carry

out EIAs, their lack of independence and at times capability, lack of transparency, a denial of the right of project affected people to be involved in decision making, project planning and implementation, and stage managed public hearings. Often the EIAs appear *fait accompli*, and apparently not a single project in India has been rejected based upon the EIA report. The issue with EIAs is not limited to the Northeast alone; this is the norm all over the country. It is high time that the entire process is streamlined and restructured in a more transparent, democratic, participatory, scientific and objective manner. The recent measures implemented by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) to accredit qualified EIA consultants following stringent selection procedures is welcome but not adequate. The need for cumulative impact assessments is gaining ground as well, because a number of projects are coming up in the same river basin. There has been enough civil society engagement⁴ on this issue, which could provide the basis for determining the methodology of objective EIAs. The MoEF should demonstrate the political will to streamline processes, establish the required protocol, and order fresh EIAs for all projects in the Northeast as part of this comprehensive review.

Social Impact Assessments (SIAs) are as important as EIAs especially in a sensitive region like the Northeast known for its ethnic diversity and socio-culturally vulnerable communities. Several case studies in the Compendium have brought out the intrinsic vulnerabilities of different ethnic communities in the region in terms of their livelihoods, culture, customs and traditions as well as their sacred spaces. A comprehensive socio-anthropological assessment⁵ of the likely impacts of the hydropower projects on the lives and livelihoods of ethnic people should be included in the comprehensive review.

Hydropower projects are being promoted in the Northeast region often for exogenous reasons. It is time to reverse this trend. The starting point of this comprehensive review

4 For example, the South Asia office of International Rivers has sent a set of recommendations to amend the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) notification, signed by 32 prominent persons from the country, to the MoEF on 8 January 2013. The recommendations are based on over six years of experience of the EIA notification, and the adverse comments and observations the EIA process has received from judicial and quasi-judicial bodies, as well as Committees and Panels, including those set up by Courts and the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). For details of the recommendations write to Samir Mehta, the South Asia Coordinator of International Rivers, at samir@internationalrivers.org

5 Prof. Bagabhati's "Damming of Rivers and Anthropological Research: An Introductory Note", presented at a seminar of Guwahati University, 25–26 October 1983, still very much relevant even after almost 30 years, can provide important pointers for such assessments. This article is reproduced in Das et al (ed), 2013.

process should be the developmental needs of the region, taking into account its bio-physical, socio-economic and cultural diversity. The region should be able to define its developmental agenda and use its natural resources with people's participation. India as a nation also needs to rethink its high growth developmental pathway, which is putting enormous stress on natural resources. In the age of climate change, the need and wisdom of switching over to a developmental pathway with a low energy and water footprint cannot be emphasised enough. This would help to redraw the future energy policy and strategy of the country. Demonstrated measures could be taken to bridge the gap, for instance, energy efficiency measures, and tapping renewables like wind, solar, biomass and small hydro, thus opening up a wide range of options. This would help to move away from a large hydro-centric energy strategy, and as a result, the need for large-scale hydropower production in the Northeast could be substantially reduced.

It is the responsibility of the concerned governmental agencies and departments, with the participation of academic institutions and the civil society, to articulate different alternatives and present these before the people so that they can make informed choices from a basket of options. This is quite in sync with some of the key recommendations of the World Commission on Dams: one, the least cost option should be chosen; and two, the people who would be affected should have a decisive say in this choice (WCD, 2000). If a certain number of hydropower projects get chosen from the region with the consent of its people to provide power to the rest of India, then it should be on the condition that the revenue accruing from these projects should be shared fairly with the affected communities, and that too with minimal ecological and social costs.⁶

There is clearly an institutional vacuum in the region with regard to hydropower development. Though multiple projects are being planned in each of the river basins and sub-basins, there is not a single river basin institution in place. In fact what is urgently needed is a system of nested institutions that start from the micro level, may be a village or micro-watershed, and proceed upwards to the basin level board or authority (Joy and Paranjape, 2009). The institutional framework should be guided by the principle of subsidiary in the sense that the decisions that can be taken by a lower level/scale institution

⁶ In Nepal in the case of hydropower projects, 15% of the revenue generated is shared with the affected people through the elected bodies for development purposes.

should not be controlled or usurped by a higher level/scale one. The institutions at appropriate levels/scales should be able to make choices among different options and also negotiate the settlement of disputes.

One would earnestly urge all those who are concerned with hydropower development and other potentially conflict generating water infrastructure projects in the Northeast to stop all such contentious projects, in whatever stage they are, till the above steps are completed. If this is not done, the writing on the wall clearly points to the inevitability of further escalation of water conflicts in the region. Though water conflicts need not always be detrimental, we must realise that they pose a significant threat to economic growth, social stability, security and ecosystem health. In the Northeast, the poorest of the poor are under threat, especially the small ethnic groups, as well as the sources of their water – the rivers, springs, wetlands – and their very survival.

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