INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Climate Dangers of China's Hydropower Ambitions in Tibet are Growing

International Campaign for Tibet hosts 2025 World Water Week panel on hydropower's impacts on Asia's environment, climate and human rights

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For the second year, the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) hosted a session at Stockholm World Water Week, where the theme was "Water for Climate Action". The event brought togeter dignitaries, UN officials, Indigenous representatives, policy practitioners, and nonprofits for discussion, information sharing, and to emphasize that water security and climate can no longer be separated. Both issues are intertwined and therefore require coordinated policy responses and solutions at the highest levels of government, multilateral agencies, scientific institutions, and civil society.

Tibet is a prime case study of the urgent need for a multi-stakeholder response which includes the input and involvement of affected communities. Asia's major rivers, which originate in Tibet, sustain the livelihoods of 1.8 billion people downstream and are essential to climate stability, ecological integrity, and the fate of 7 million Tibetans.

Moderated by ICT's Government Affairs Director Franz Matzner, the session brought together ICT's Senior Researcher Palmo Tenzin, Stockholm Environment Institute's Senior Scientist Charlotte Wagner, and University of Potsdam's Dr. Wolfgang Schwanghart. The three participants explored the risks of China's hydropower dams in Tibet, to water quality and scarcity in the broader region, to climate change, and alternative development models.

"Any conversation around Asia's major rivers tends to primarily exclude Tibet," stated ICT's Palmo Tenzin. "It's never seen because it is a taboo topic for the Chinese…This is an occupied region and a territorial conflict. Without acknowledging that political dynamic and confronting it there will never be a sustainable solution for the way the rivers are managed."

Charlotte Wagner, scientist from Stockholm Environment Institute emphasized that achieving real-world results requires getting the science right.

"If we are just aiming for climate mitigation than maybe the answer is really simple… But recognizing that there are a lot of layers and decision making between generating the evidence and making the policy is an important first step in trying to empower all [those involved], including local communities," Wagner said. Wagner expanded on this theme, emphasizing the need to avoid overstating the cost-effectiveness of hydropower: "if we don't really take into account water availability and what climate risks will mean season to season, we will likely overemphasize the benefits of hydropower over some of the costs, which are local in Tibet, including local livelihoods… we need to think carefully about what options are really viable, and the obvious options [in terms of energy production] may not always be the most climate resilient and best for the communities meant to benefit."

Dr Schwanghart echoed these themes, stating that in global terms few free flowing rivers remain and that with hydropower construction "we are losing these pristine ecosystems and we do so particularly on the Tibetan Plateau. The Tibetan plateau is unique. It's ecosystems and its people." Wolfgang added that there are many risks to and from hydropower, particularly in the Himalayas, especially as climate change accelerates and glacial shrink continues: "hydropower exacerbates [destructive] landslides and flash floods. They are vulnerable to earthquakes, especially in the tectonic region of Tibet, and at certain scales can trigger earthquakes." He also warned that loss of life is often overlooked especially during construction: "In fact, the majority of fatal landslides, in particular in India and China, happened during the construction and impoundment phase."

Returning to the human rights of the Tibetan people, Tenzin underscored ICT's recent report *Chinese Hydropower: Damning Tibet's Culture, Community, And Environment* which found that if China's construction plans are completed, 1.2 million people will be displaced, as well as many sacred sites destroyed and important ecological systems degraded.

"All together, the panel painted a clear picture that from many perspectives, old assumptions about hydropower no longer make sense.", said Matzner. "Climate change and the growing global water crisis demand revisiting hydropower construction, especially on Tibet's rivers, which are so key to all of Asia. We are grateful to the Stockholm International Water Institute for providing the opportunity to raise awareness of this vital need".

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