



## Conflict Factsheet

### Sardar Sarovar Dam Conflict in India

Type of conflict  
**Main**

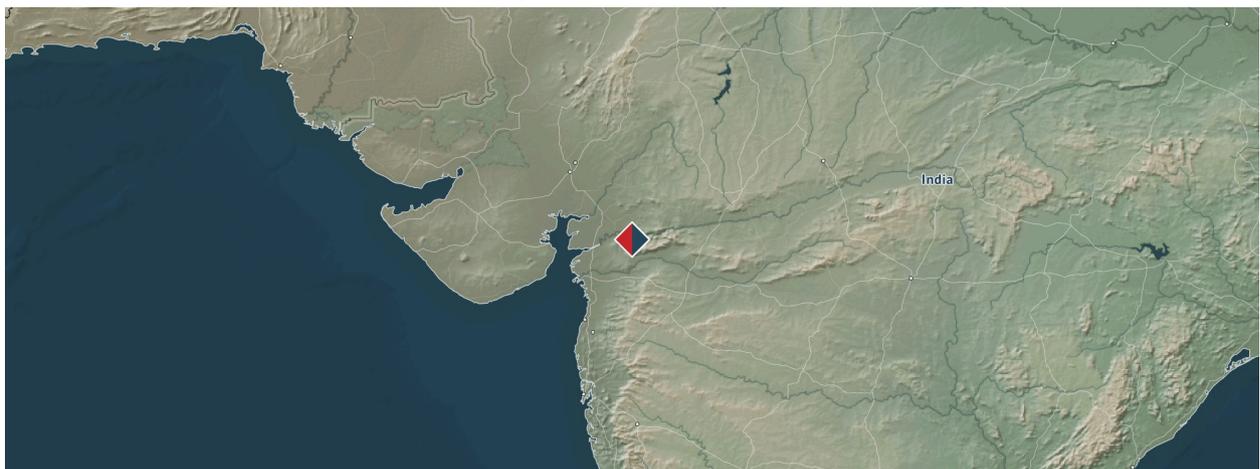
Intensity  
**4**

Conflict Locality  
**Southern Asia**

Time  
**1985 –ongoing**

Countries  
**India**

Resources  
**Agricultural / Pastoral Land, Water**

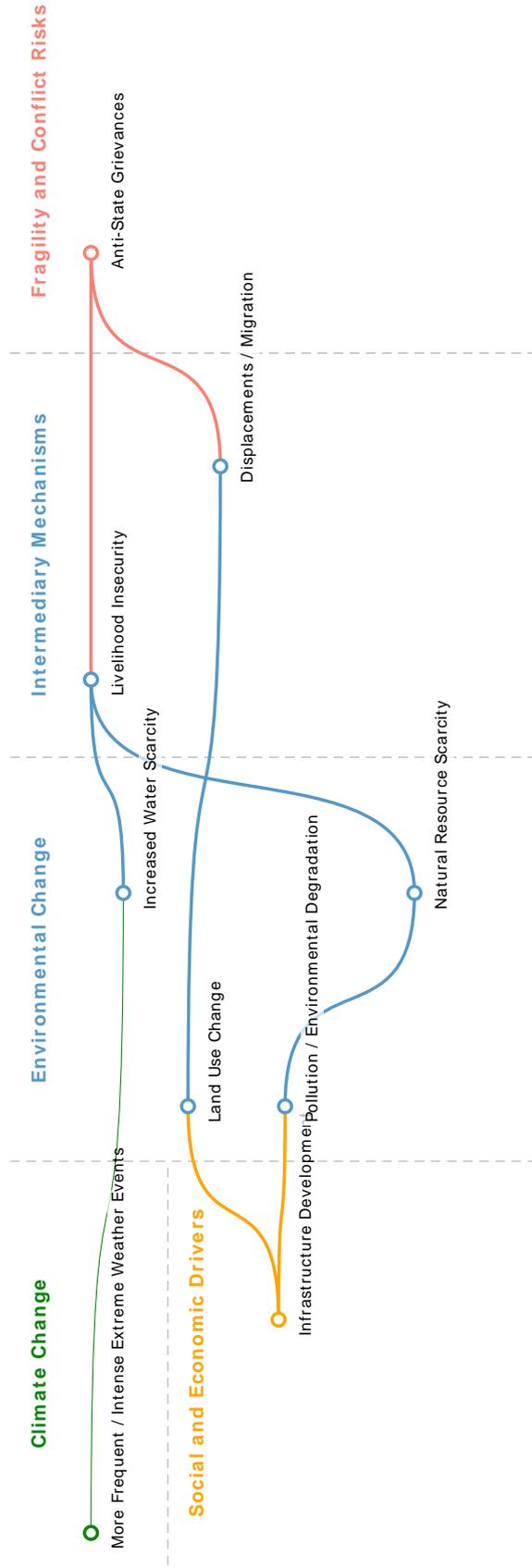


### Conflict Summary

The Sardar Sarovar Dam, constructed on the sacred Narmada River, aims to secure power, as well as irrigation and drinking water, for the drought-prone region. However, the project has also had significant environmental impacts and has displaced large proportions of the population, especially poor farmers and ethnic and Adivasis, the aboriginal population of India. Indeed, this situation catalysed one of the major environmental protest movements in India.



### Conceptual Model



### Context Factors



Agricultural / Pastoral Land, Water

Unresponsive Government



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## Conflict History

The Sardar Sarovar Dam is one of the biggest dams built within the framework of the Narmada River Development project which started in 1979 thanks to the award of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal (NWDT – see [Narmada Dam Water Dispute between Indian States](#)). However, from 1985 onward, civil discontent began to rise, coming from citizens, academics, international and national NGOs and medias who denounced several infringements of environmental and human rights standards ([Narula, 2008](#)). Different groups of non-violent activists merged in 1989, giving birth to the Narmada Bachao Andolan, which has been leading the protest since then and opposing the governments of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat, as well as the government of India, which were all supporters of the project.

### A development project causes public outcry

From the outset, governments and dam builders advocated the development aspect of the project which aimed at providing power as well as irrigation and drinking water in a drought prone region ([Ellison, 2005](#)). Whilst the World Bank had agreed to support the project in 1985, political protest mainly voiced by the Narmada Bachao Andolan grew by peaceful means. This non-violent protest was inspired, among other, by the Gandhian ideology ([Vinay Lal, 2000](#); [Kalland & Persoon, 1998](#)).

### The World Bank's withdrawal

This led the President of the Bank to form an independent commission in 1991, in order to reassess its position. The Independent Review, also called Morse Report, which followed firmly condemned the lack of a proper resettlement and rehabilitation plan (R&R) as well as the inadequate evaluation of the environmental damages involved ([Morse Report 1992](#)), while highlighting the lack of data and consultation with the people concerned. The World Bank consequently withdrew its support for the project.

### Environmental impact

The building of the dam has entailed massive flooding of villages and productive land. This has brought about extensive environmental consequences, such as a negative effect on downstream fishing, threat on wildlife natural habitat, waterlogging and salinization of water, silting of the river bed, deforestation ([Morse Report 1992](#); [Kothari & Ram, 1994](#)). For populations whose livelihood entirely relies on agriculture, an ecological disaster, such as this, also has economic impacts by damaging their mean of subsistence. The net benefits of the dam itself are thus questioned. Further it has been argued that climate change could worsen the situation.

### Social repercussions

The displacement of small farmers and tribal groups without a proper financial compensation, if any, has been at the heart of the conflict. The governments of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat are still responsible for massive violation of the right to life, livelihood and rehabilitation of thousands of families ([Indian Independent People's Tribunal, 2010](#)). Although the public protest managed to publicize the conflict at an international stage in the 1990s, the Sardar Sarovar Dam has been built and several raises in its final height have been agreed to, expanding the scope of the submerged zone and thus worsening the environmental and social impact of the project.



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## Resolution Efforts

Although the nonviolent protest of the Narmada Bachao Andolan led to the withdrawal of the World Bank in 1993, neither the government of India nor the state governments stopped the project. The Narmada Bachao Andolan thus brought the case to the Supreme Court of India in 1995. The latter decided to suspend the construction of the dam because of the lack of prior assessment of the project's environmental and social impacts.

### Unaddressed grievances

The government of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat consequently established a Grievance Redressal Authority which aimed at dealing with the resettlement and rehabilitation complaints of those displaced. The Supreme Court's next rulings (1999, 2000) permitted the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, thus leaving the grievances unaddressed. The lack of involvement of civil society and especially of those displaced in the decision-making process has been much criticized and may be responsible for the failure of the conflict resolution efforts. As the decision-making process still excludes the different social movements and citizens, the dam's construction has not been held and thousands of families remain left without any compensation.

### Governments disregard their obligations

There is yet rehabilitation and resettlement requirement laid down in the award given by the NWDT in 1979 as well as in the Supreme Court rulings. Those requirements foresaw that the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat would have to compensate those displaced, but the concerned government still do not comply with their obligations towards the displaced populations ([Indian Independent People's Tribunal, 2010](#)).

### No accountability to the international community

Besides, the World Bank's withdrawal from the project somehow removed the international attention from the conflict, and certainly released India from its accountability duties towards the international community ([Narula, 2008](#)). Indeed, after the scandal following the Morse Report which constituted a "historical watershed for the World Bank" and an important landmark in the struggle for accountability ([Sureda, 2003](#)), the World Bank did not leave the project but set up conditions to its participation ([Kirk, 2011](#)). It withdrew at the request of the Government of India, which allowed the latter to avoid increasing its social and environmental standards.

### Prestige dimension

An important factor of the conflict resolution's failure is the political context in which the project was drafted and decided. Its rhetoric and legal framework date back to the direct aftermath of India's independence, when an ambitious modernization agenda was established ([Aquapedia, 2015](#)). The Sardar Sarovar Dam is thus also about prestige and development, a theme explored in more detail in the [Narmada Dam Water Dispute between Indian States](#).



### Intensities & Influences



#### INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity



Human Suffering



#### INFLUENCES

Environmental Influences



Societal Influences



Violent Conflict

No



Salience with nation

National



Mass displacement

More than 100.000 or more than 10% of the country's population are displaced within the country.



Cross Border Mass Displacement

Best estimate that more than 100.000 or more than 10% of country population are displaced across borders.



### Resolution Success

Resolve of displacement problems

Displacement continues to cause discontent and/or other problems.

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Reduction in geographical scope

The geographical scope of the conflict has decreased.



Increased capacity to address grievance in the future

There is no increased capacity to address grievances in the future.

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Grievance Resolution

Grievances have been mostly ignored.



Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity

There has been no reduction in intensity

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## Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

### Mediation & arbitration

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The Supreme Court of India decided to suspend the construction of the dam in 1995 because of the lack of a prior assessment of the project's environmental and social impacts. After the involved regional governments established a Grievances Redressal Authority to deal with the resettlement and rehabilitation of those displaced, the Supreme Court permitted the construction of the dam. However, the grievances of the displaced population were ultimately left unaddressed.

### Social inclusion & empowerment

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The involvement of different social movements and citizens in the decision making process of the project is key for a satisfactory resolution of the conflict.

## Resources and Materials

### Conflict References

[Narmada Dam Water Disputes between Indian States](#)

### References with URL

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[Narula, S. \(2008\). The Story of Narmada Bachao Andolan: Human Rights in the Global Economy and the struggle against the World Bank. New York University Public Law and Legal Theory Working Papers. Paper 106](#)

[Kalland, A., Persoon, G. \(1998\) Environmental Movements in Asia. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Man and Nature in Asia Series, No.4](#)

[Lal, V. \(2000\). Gandhi and the Ecological Vision of Life: Thinking beyond Deep Ecology](#)

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[Indian Independent People's Tribunal, Report on Sardar Sarovar Project, Canals of Indira Sagar & Omkareshwar and Jobat Dam Project, 2010](#)

Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/sardar-sarovar-dam-conflict-india>