



## Conflict Factsheet

### Three Gorges Dam Conflict in China

Type of conflict  
**Main**

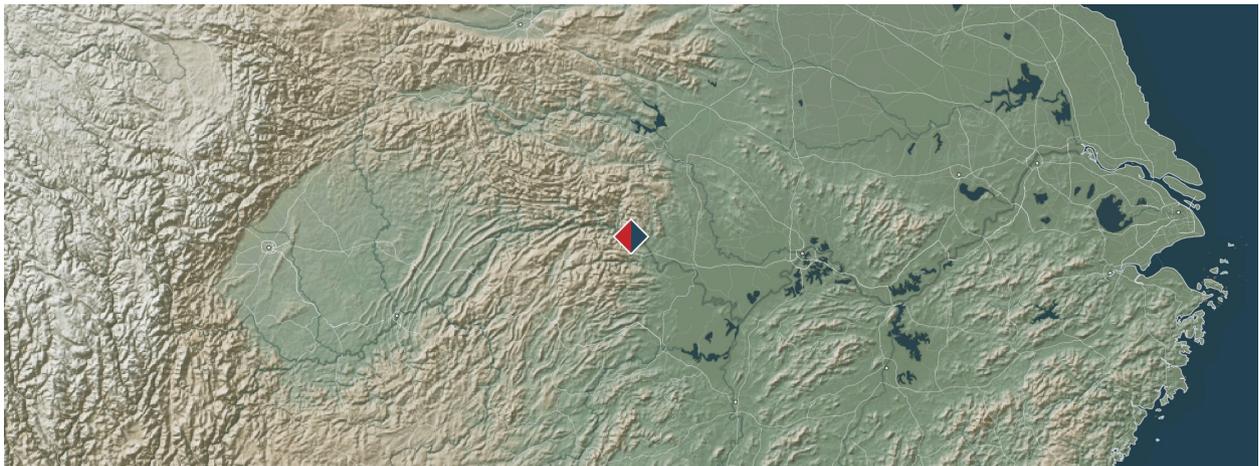
Intensity  
**4**

Conflict Locality  
**Eastern Asia**

Time  
**1994 –ongoing**

Countries  
**China**

Resources  
**Fish, Agricultural / Pastoral Land, Water, Ecosystem Stability**

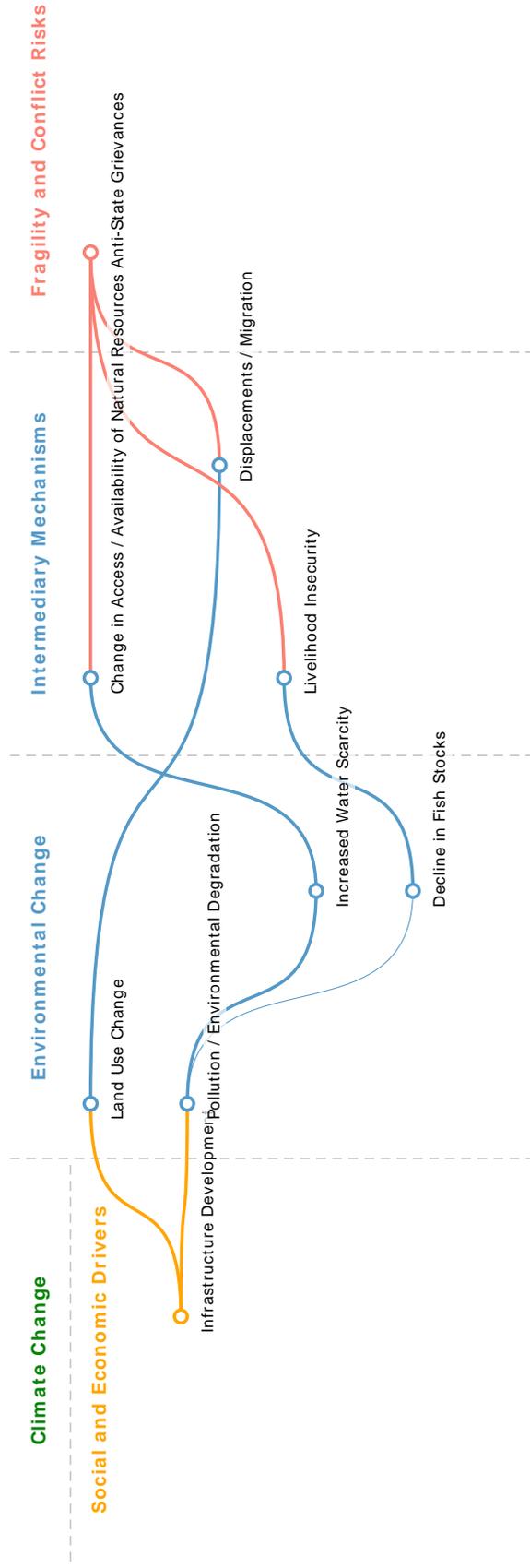


### Conflict Summary

The construction of the world's largest dam on the world's third largest river (the Yangtze River) has displaced some 1.2 million people. The Three Gorges Dam has been one of the most controversial dam projects in the world for its social, environmental and economic impacts.



### Conceptual Model



### Context Factors



Fish, Agricultural / Pastoral Land, Water,  
Ecosystem Stability



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## Conflict History

China has embarked on numerous massive dam projects, including the Three Gorges Dam, the largest dam in the world. The displacement of millions of people and their loss of livelihood, combined with harsh environmental consequences, which threaten the extinction of fish species and geological instability, have caused local discontent and international criticism from environmental and human rights organisations, such as Human Rights Watch and International Probe. Contestation of the dam project and protests for greater compensation have remained non-violent, appearing mostly in scientific reports and in the form of petitions from civil society. The Three Gorges Dam was completed by 2006 and displaced more than 1.2 million people ([International Rivers, 2006](#)). The dam was constructed not only to produce energy, but also to stop large-scale seasonal flooding. Moreover, hydropower also has environmental benefits compared to fossil fuels in particular and its extension can thus be construed as a response to increasing pressure from the international community for China to reduce its carbon footprint.

### Environmental impacts

The environmental impacts of the dam were immediately apparent one month after opening, when landslides caused by increased water levels in the reservoir killed fourteen people ([International Rivers, 2006](#)). Downstream erosion caused by irregular water flow also led to bursting river banks and flooding. In addition to landslides and floods, the dam sits atop two major fault lines causing hundreds of tremors. In 2011, Chinese authorities admitted the concerning scale of environmental side effects. Fish stocks diminished, threatening the endangered Chinese sturgeon and paddlefish and leading to the extinction of the baiji river dolphin ([International Rivers, 2008](#)). Fish harvest downstream has decreased by up to 70% below 2002 yields, threatening the livelihoods of thousands ([Gleick, 2009](#)). Water pollution has also been a major problem as the reservoir has submerged hundreds of factories, mines and waste dumps and urban run-off has led to algae blooms. This has exacerbated China's water shortage problem.

### Civil society protests

Since the dam was commissioned in 1994, protestors have petitioned against the dam and resettlement. The Three Gorges Dam was designed as a symbol of Chinese engineering prowess and has high international visibility. Because of the attendant government intervention and censoring, localised protests have been less visible and difficult to follow ([Qing, 2011](#); [Guo, 2010](#)). In 2001, Human Rights Watch reported on the arrest and trial of four farmers who protested against resettlement, although they were later acquitted. Again in 2009, protestors of displaced persons frustrated by corruption and insufficient compensation reportedly clashed with police forces ([Radio Australia, 2009](#)). There have been no official reports of fatalities caused by protests against the dam.

The government has invested billions in resettlement and clean-up programs to mitigate displacement and geological insecurity and to clean up polluted drinking water. However, many have not been sufficiently compensated and many farmers have been given sloped arid land on the banks of the Yangtze, thus contributing to erosion, geological instability and pollution of the water.



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## Resolution Efforts

### The "environmental assessment storm"

To address criticism from scientific and environmental circles, the Chinese central government State Administration of Environmental Protection board embarked on what is now referred to as the "environmental assessment storm" in 2005. This attempted to hold companies, including the state-owned Three Gorges Project Corporation, accountable for disregarding requirements set out by Environmental Impact Assessment Law (Guo, 2010). However, fines introduced for violating these requirements remained low and arguably do not encourage compliance today (International Rivers, 2006).

Other steps have been taken at the state level, such as the investment in water purification infrastructure to increase access to water otherwise limited by the dam. However, industries are still permitted to discharge their waste into the Yangtze, thus defeating the purpose of these measures. Other steps taken to reduce the environmental impact of the dam include a three-month fishing ban every spring to protect fish stocks. However, this targets commercial fish only and does not consider the overall ecological balance of the Yangtze (Yang & Lu, 2014). Furthermore, the livelihoods of fishermen have not been regarded in this policy. Little has also been done regarding the lack of compensation for those displaced by the dam project, with corruption preventing many from receiving their designated amount and poor living conditions in resettlement communities forcing others to relocate (Qing, 2011).

### Outlook

The main challenges in overcoming the conflict surrounding the Three Gorges Dam lie in the government and its bureaucratic structure. Management of the Three Gorges Dam is distributed in a multilayer and hierarchal model, with the State Council overseeing the project at the highest level. Nineteen state-level agencies with equal power manage the dam and its reservoir, thus making decision-making slow and conflict inevitable (Yang & Lu, 2014). To address the problems of the Three Gorges Dam in both environmental and social spheres, it has been suggested that management of the dam should be centralised in the Changjiang (Yangtze) Water Resources Commission (CWRC), a department within the Ministry of Water Resources. This would improve coordination, minimise conflicts and increase compliance with national level environmental laws (Yang & Lu, 2014). It could also offer a platform for conflict resolution. Furthermore, greater public participation in the local government concerning the dam has been recommended and interregional cooperation along the Yangtze has also been encouraged to enhance the scope of addressing environmental sustainability (Guo, 2010).



### Intensities & Influences



#### INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity

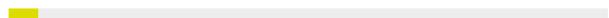


Human Suffering



#### 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

No



### Resolution Success

Resolve of displacement problems

Displacement continues to cause discontent and/or other problems.



Reduction in geographical scope

There has been no reduction in geographical scope.



Increased capacity to address grievance in the future

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



Grievance Resolution

Grievances have been mostly ignored.



Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity

There has been no reduction in intensity





## Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

<p><b>Cooperation</b></p> <p>Furthermore, interregional cooperation along the Yangtze has also been encouraged to enhance the scope of addressing environmental sustainability.</p> <hr/>	0
<p><b>Mediation &amp; arbitration</b></p> <p>The State Administration of Environmental Protection board attempted to hold the Three Gorges Project Corporation accountable for disregarding environmental laws. However, the fines that were introduced remained low and do not encourage compliance.</p> <hr style="border: 1px solid blue;"/>	2
<p><b>Compensation</b></p> <p>Proper compensation for those displaced by the project must still be adequately regarded in governmental policies as many are still struggling to receive their designated amount and are living in poor conditions</p> <hr style="border: 1px solid yellow;"/>	1
<p><b>Social inclusion &amp; empowerment</b></p> <p>Greater public participation in local decision making concerning the dam has been recommended.</p> <hr/>	0
<p><b>Changes in constitutional balance of power</b></p> <p>In order to improve coordination, minimise conflicts and increase compliance with national level environmental laws, it has been suggested that the management of the dam should be conferred to a state commission: the Changjiang Water Resources Commission (CWRC).</p> <hr/>	0
<p><b>Environmental restoration &amp; protection</b></p> <p>The government has taken steps to reduce the environmental impact of the dam, such as investing in water purification infrastructure and implementing a three-month fishing ban. However, these measures do only address isolated issues and are therefore not completely effective.</p> <hr style="border: 1px solid yellow;"/>	1

## Resources and Materials

References with URL

[International Rivers \(2006\). Three Gorges Dam. A Model of the Past](#)  
[International Rivers \(2008\). Three Gorges Dam. The Cost of the River](#)  
[Radio Australia \(2012\). Thousands clash with police over China's Three Gorges Dam](#)  
[Gleick, H. \(2009\). The The Gorges Dam Project. Yangtze River, China](#)  
[Adams, P. \(2008\). Human rights abuses and the Three Gorges dam](#)



[Yang, X. & Lu, X. \(2014\). Ten years of the Three Gorges Dam: a call for policy overhaul](#)  
[Guo, G. \(2010\). Environmental Security Concerns and the Three Gorges Reservoir Basin in China](#)  
[Qing, D. \(2011\). Dai Qing: On The Completion of the Three Gorges Project](#)

Further information  
<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/three-gorges-dam>