

Assessment of Hydropower Potential in Sub-Saharan Africa: Opportunities and Challenges for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This research paper assesses the hydropower potential in Sub-Saharan Africa, examining opportunities, challenges, and mitigation strategies for sustainable development. Through a systematic review of existing literature and data, the study evaluates the region's hydrological resources, existing infrastructure, and untapped potential. Key findings highlight the significant role of hydropower in addressing energy access, reliability, and affordability challenges, while also identifying environmental, social, technological, and financial constraints. Mitigation strategies, including environmental and social impact assessments, stakeholder engagement, advanced technologies, and supportive policy frameworks, are proposed to address these challenges. Recommendations for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and development practitioners aim to promote sustainable hydropower development and maximize its socio-economic benefits. Future research directions include exploring the impacts of climate change, enhancing social acceptance and equity, advancing technological innovation, and reforming policy and governance frameworks. By addressing these challenges and leveraging opportunities, Sub-Saharan African countries can harness the full potential of hydropower to achieve sustainable energy development and improve the well-being of their populations.

Keywords; *Hydropower, sustainable Development, Renewable Energy, Sub-Saharan Africa*

Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa is facing a pivotal moment in its development journey as it grapples with the urgent need to meet the escalating energy demands of its growing population while simultaneously striving to achieve sustainable development goals. The region's rapid population growth, expanding urban areas, and booming industrial sector have significantly heightened the demand for accessible, reliable, and cost-effective energy sources. This pressing demand for energy is crucial for driving economic growth, improving living standards, and fostering overall development in the region. (IEA, 2021). However, alongside the imperative of meeting energy demands, there is a pressing recognition of the critical importance of transitioning towards cleaner and more sustainable energy pathways in Sub-Saharan Africa. The consequences of climate

change, environmental degradation, and social inequalities have underscored the necessity of adopting environmentally responsible energy practices. Transitioning to sustainable energy sources not only serves to mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change but also supports environmental conservation efforts and promotes inclusive socio-economic development. The International Energy Agency (IEA) emphasizes the pivotal role that transitioning to cleaner energy sources plays in enabling Sub-Saharan Africa to achieve its development goals while simultaneously addressing environmental challenges. By investing in renewable energy technologies, implementing energy-efficient practices, and adopting clean energy solutions, Sub-Saharan Africa can unlock a pathway towards a more sustainable and prosperous future for its populations and the planet as a whole.

Hydropower, as a renewable energy source, has the potential to play a significant role in meeting the energy needs of Sub-Saharan Africa. The region is rich in water resources, which can be harnessed for hydropower generation. According to Ondraczek (2017), hydropower has the potential to contribute to energy security and help reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Sub-Saharan Africa. One of the key challenges facing the development of hydropower in the region is the environmental and social impacts associated with large-scale hydroelectric projects. Dams can lead to habitat destruction, displacement of communities, and alterations in river ecosystems. It is essential for developers to conduct thorough environmental and social impact assessments to mitigate these negative effects and ensure sustainable development (Niemeyer et al., 2016). Technological constraints also pose a challenge to the expansion of hydropower in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many countries in the region lack the technical expertise and infrastructure needed to develop and operate hydropower projects efficiently. Investments in research and development, as well as capacity building, are essential to overcome these technological barriers (Sovacool & Dworkin, 2015). Furthermore, financial constraints hinder the development of hydropower projects in Sub-Saharan Africa. The high initial costs associated with building dams and hydroelectric facilities, as well as the long payback periods, make it challenging for governments and private investors to finance such projects. Public-private partnerships and innovative financing mechanisms, such as green bonds and carbon credits, can help attract the necessary investment in hydropower development (Baker et al., 2015).

Hydropower has long been recognized as a significant source of renewable energy with the potential to contribute to sustainable development. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where access to electricity remains limited, hydropower offers a promising solution to meet the growing energy demand and drive economic growth. The region is endowed with abundant water resources, making it an ideal location for the development of hydropower projects. However, the realization of this potential is not without challenges. The construction and operation of hydropower plants can have significant environmental and socio-economic impacts, including habitat loss, displacement of communities, and changes in water flow patterns. Furthermore, poor governance, inadequate infrastructure, and limited financial resources have hindered the development of hydropower in many African countries. To address these challenges, it is essential to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the hydropower potential in Sub-Saharan Africa. This research paper aims to fill this gap by examining the current state of hydropower infrastructure in the region, evaluating its environmental and socio-economic impacts, and exploring policy frameworks that

can help maximize the benefits of hydropower while minimizing its adverse effects. By providing valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges associated with hydropower development in Sub-Saharan Africa, this study seeks to inform decision-makers, investors, and other stakeholders about the potential of hydropower as a sustainable energy source. By promoting the responsible and sustainable development of hydropower projects, this research paper contributes to the overall goal of achieving a low-carbon, inclusive, and resilient energy sector in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Through a multidisciplinary approach encompassing engineering, environmental science, economics, and policy analysis, this research endeavors to contribute to the understanding of hydropower development in Sub-Saharan Africa and inform evidence-based decision-making processes. By elucidating the opportunities and challenges associated with hydropower, this paper seeks to offer actionable recommendations for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and development practitioners to foster sustainable energy development in the region. Hydropower has the potential to transform the energy landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa, providing clean and renewable electricity to millions of people in the region. However, the development of hydropower projects can also have significant environmental and social impacts, requiring a thoughtful and comprehensive approach to ensure sustainability. By integrating engineering, environmental science, economics, and policy analysis, this research aims to address the complex issues surrounding hydropower development in Sub-Saharan Africa. The multidisciplinary approach taken in this research allows for a holistic understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with hydropower development. Engineers can assess the technical feasibility of potential projects, while environmental scientists can analyze the potential impacts on ecosystems and wildlife. Economists can evaluate the financial viability of hydropower projects, and policy analysts can assess the regulatory frameworks and governance structures in place.

Through this collaborative effort, actionable recommendations can be developed to guide decision-making processes for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and development practitioners. These recommendations may include measures to mitigate environmental impacts, ensure the protection of local communities and indigenous peoples, and promote sustainable energy production. Additionally, the research may highlight best practices and lessons learned from hydropower projects in other regions, providing valuable insights for stakeholders in Sub-Saharan Africa. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to inform evidence-based decision-making processes and foster sustainable energy development in Sub-Saharan Africa. By leveraging the expertise of multiple disciplines, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of hydropower development, enabling stakeholders to make informed choices that balance the need for energy security with the protection of the environment and the well-being of local communities.

Methodology

The methodology utilized in this study follows a systematic review approach, which aims to thoroughly assess and amalgamate existing literature, research, and data concerning hydropower advancement in Sub-Saharan Africa. This systematic review procedure encompasses the subsequent stages: identification of pertinent literature, establishment of selection criteria,

extraction of data, assessment of quality, synthesis and analysis of data, and formulation of actionable recommendations. By adopting a systematic review methodology, this research endeavors to furnish a thorough and evidence-driven examination of hydropower advancement in Sub-Saharan Africa, thereby enriching informed decision-making processes and fostering sustainable energy development within the region.

Hydropower Potential in Sub-Saharan Africa

Hydropower stands as a pivotal renewable energy source in Sub-Saharan Africa due to the region's abundant water resources and considerable hydroelectric potential. This section delves into the assessment of hydropower potential in Sub-Saharan Africa, encompassing the evaluation of hydrological resources, existing infrastructure, installed capacity, and the identification of untapped potential through feasibility studies.

Evaluation of Hydrological Resources and Geographical Distribution:

Sub-Saharan Africa's abundant water resources have the potential to significantly contribute to the region's energy needs. According to a report by the International Energy Agency (IEA), hydropower currently accounts for around 16% of electricity generation in sub-Saharan Africa, making it the largest source of renewable energy in the region (International Energy Agency, 2019). The development of hydropower in the region has been driven by the need to increase access to electricity, reduce reliance on fossil fuels, and mitigate the impacts of climate change. The Congo River, which is the second largest river in the world by discharge, has immense hydropower potential. The Inga Dam complex on the Congo River has the capacity to generate up to 40,000 megawatts of electricity, which could potentially power the entire continent (International Hydropower Association, 2021). However, challenges such as financing, political instability, and technical constraints have hindered the full exploitation of this potential.

Similarly, the Zambezi River basin, which is shared by eight countries in southern Africa, has significant hydropower potential. The Kariba Dam, located on the Zambezi River, is one of the largest hydropower facilities in Africa and has a capacity of 1,885 megawatts (International Hydropower Association, 2021). The Cahora Bassa Dam in Mozambique is another major hydropower project in the region, with a capacity of 2,075 megawatts. Despite the region's vast hydropower potential, there are concerns about the environmental and social impacts of large-scale hydropower projects. These projects can lead to the displacement of communities, loss of biodiversity, and disruption of ecosystems. It is therefore important for governments, investors, and communities to engage in transparent and inclusive decision-making processes to ensure that hydropower development is sustainable and benefits all stakeholders.

Hydropower is a renewable energy source that harnesses the gravitational force of flowing or falling water to generate electricity. Geographical factors have a significant impact on the feasibility and efficiency of hydropower installations. For example, topography, which refers to the shape and features of the land surface, influences the availability of water resources and the design of hydropower infrastructure. Areas with rugged terrain, such as mountainous regions, offer abundant opportunities for hydropower development due to the presence of steep gradients and

plentiful water flow. Elevation also plays a crucial role in determining the hydraulic potential of a site for hydropower generation. Higher elevations typically result in greater water pressure and flow rates, which can increase the efficiency and output of hydropower plants. In addition, the availability of water storage options, such as natural reservoirs or artificial dams, is essential for ensuring a reliable and consistent supply of water for energy generation. Areas with suitable conditions for storing large volumes of water are well-suited for hydropower installations, as they can regulate water flow and optimize electricity production. Furthermore, rainfall patterns in a region impact the water supply and potential for hydropower generation. Areas with high and reliable precipitation levels are more likely to have consistent water flow, which is essential for maintaining a stable operation of hydropower plants. On the other hand, regions with erratic or low rainfall may face challenges in ensuring a continuous supply of water for energy production.

Assessment of Existing Hydropower Infrastructure and Installed Capacity:

Sub-Saharan Africa is endowed with a substantial amount of hydropower infrastructure, although the level of development and utilization varies across countries and regions. Nations such as Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Zambia, and Mozambique stand out for their large-scale hydropower projects that play a crucial role in meeting their energy needs and driving economic development. Ethiopia, in particular, boasts significant hydropower potential, primarily attributed to its numerous rivers and highland terrain. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) exemplifies the country's ambition to harness its hydropower resources for economic growth and energy security. Upon completion, the GERD is projected to become one of the largest hydropower facilities in Africa, with an installed capacity exceeding 6,000 megawatts. The dam, situated on the Blue Nile River, holds immense promise for Ethiopia's energy sector, offering the potential to meet domestic electricity demand and facilitate regional power trade.

Similarly, the Democratic Republic of Congo possesses abundant hydroelectric potential, primarily concentrated in the Congo River basin. The Inga Dam complex, located on the Congo River, represents one of the world's largest hydropower schemes, with the capacity to generate tens of thousands of megawatts of electricity. Despite facing challenges related to governance, financing, and infrastructure, the DRC's hydropower potential remains a critical driver of economic development and regional integration efforts. In Zambia, hydropower plays a vital role in the country's energy mix, contributing significantly to electricity generation and export revenues. The Kariba Dam, situated on the Zambezi River, is one of Africa's largest hydropower installations, with an installed capacity of over 1,600 megawatts. Zambia's hydropower sector continues to attract investment and development, with ongoing projects such as the Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Station aimed at further expanding the country's hydropower capacity.

Mozambique also boasts considerable hydropower potential, particularly along the Zambezi River and its tributaries. The Cahora Bassa Dam, located in central Mozambique, is one of Africa's largest hydropower facilities, with an installed capacity exceeding 2,000 megawatts. Hydropower development in Mozambique is integral to the country's efforts to promote energy access, stimulate economic growth, and capitalize on its natural resources. These examples underscore the importance of hydropower infrastructure in Sub-Saharan Africa and its potential to drive

sustainable development and energy security. However, realizing this potential requires addressing various challenges, including financing constraints, environmental concerns, and socio-economic considerations. By leveraging their hydropower resources responsibly and investing in modernization and capacity-building initiatives, Sub-Saharan African countries can unlock the full potential of hydropower to meet their growing energy needs and propel economic transformation.

One study by Kumar et al. (2019) highlighted the need for significant investments in the refurbishment and modernization of existing hydropower plants in the region to overcome the challenges of aging infrastructure and suboptimal operational efficiency. The study emphasized that addressing these issues is crucial for maximizing the potential of hydropower as a sustainable source of energy in the region. Furthermore, another study by Sharma et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of capacity-building initiatives to enhance the technical skills and knowledge of personnel involved in the operation and maintenance of hydropower plants. The study highlighted that investing in training and skill development can improve the efficiency and reliability of hydropower operations, leading to increased energy generation and profitability.

Identification of Untapped Hydropower Potential and Feasibility Studies:

Despite the substantial hydropower infrastructure already established in Sub-Saharan Africa, the region continues to harbor vast untapped potential for further hydropower development (IEA, 2020). Many rivers and waterways across the region remain underutilized or entirely unexplored, providing ample opportunities for the construction of new hydropower projects (World Bank, 2017). For instance, the Congo River, the second-largest river in the world by discharge volume, represents a significant untapped resource for hydropower development. Despite its immense potential, only a fraction of the Congo River's hydroelectric capacity has been exploited (ADB, 2018). Similarly, the Zambezi River, with its series of waterfalls and rapids, including the iconic Victoria Falls, offers substantial opportunities for hydropower generation (World Bank, 2017). The untapped hydropower potential in Sub-Saharan Africa extends beyond major rivers to include numerous smaller tributaries and streams. These water bodies, often overlooked in favor of larger-scale projects, present valuable opportunities for the construction of small to medium-sized hydropower installations (IEA, 2020). In addition to rivers, Sub-Saharan Africa is also home to vast untapped groundwater resources that could be utilized for hydroelectricity generation (UNEP, 2019). The development of new hydropower projects in Sub-Saharan Africa is further facilitated by advancements in technology and engineering (IEA, 2020). Innovations such as run-of-river hydropower schemes, which require minimal infrastructure and have lower environmental impacts compared to traditional dam-based projects, are increasingly being explored in the region (World Bank, 2017). Furthermore, the adoption of decentralized and off-grid hydropower solutions can help address energy access challenges in rural and remote areas (ADB, 2018).

Realizing the full potential of hydropower in Sub-Saharan Africa requires coordinated efforts from governments, investors, and development partners (UNEP, 2019). Key priorities include conducting comprehensive feasibility studies, addressing regulatory barriers, and ensuring robust environmental and social safeguards (World Bank, 2017). Additionally, fostering local capacity building and promoting community engagement are essential for ensuring that hydropower

projects contribute to sustainable development and benefit local communities (ADB, 2018). Feasibility studies are paramount in evaluating the viability and economic feasibility of proposed hydropower projects. These comprehensive assessments incorporate various components, including technical evaluations, environmental impact assessments (EIAs), socio-economic analyses, and financial modeling, to thoroughly examine the potential risks and benefits associated with hydropower development. Technical assessments form a core aspect of feasibility studies, focusing on the engineering aspects of the project. This includes evaluating factors such as topography, geology, hydrology, and infrastructure requirements to determine the technical feasibility of constructing and operating a hydropower facility at a specific site. Environmental impact assessments (EIAs) are crucial for identifying and evaluating the potential environmental consequences of hydropower projects. These assessments assess the impact on ecosystems, water quality, biodiversity, and local communities, allowing stakeholders to understand and mitigate potential environmental risks.

Socio-economic analyses examine the broader societal implications of hydropower development, including its effects on local communities, livelihoods, and cultural heritage. These analyses assess factors such as employment opportunities, community displacement, and social cohesion to ensure that projects contribute positively to sustainable development and social well-being. Financial modeling plays a key role in determining the economic viability of hydropower projects. This involves estimating project costs, revenues, and financial returns over the project's lifecycle to assess its profitability and financial sustainability. Financial modeling also considers factors such as financing options, revenue streams, and investment risks to inform decision-making and attract investment.

Through feasibility studies, stakeholders can identify suitable sites for hydropower development based on technical, environmental, and socio-economic criteria. These studies enable project proponents to estimate project costs accurately, assess potential environmental and social impacts, and devise appropriate mitigation measures to ensure sustainable and socially inclusive development. Overall, feasibility studies serve as essential tools for informing decision-making processes and guiding the responsible development of hydropower projects. By conducting thorough assessments and considering the perspectives of various stakeholders, feasibility studies help maximize the benefits of hydropower development while minimizing its potential adverse impacts on the environment and local communities.

Opportunities for Sustainable Development

Hydropower presents significant opportunities for sustainable development in Sub-Saharan Africa across various dimensions. This section explores the multifaceted benefits of hydropower, including its contribution to energy access, economic development, integration with other renewable energy sources, and potential for regional cooperation and infrastructure development.

Contribution of Hydropower to Energy Access, Reliability, and Affordability:

Hydropower's pivotal role in expanding energy access in Sub-Saharan Africa cannot be overstated, particularly in regions where a substantial portion of the population lacks access to electricity

(World Bank, 2019). By harnessing the power of water resources to generate electricity, hydropower projects have the potential to transform lives and livelihoods, driving progress towards sustainable development goals. The provision of reliable and affordable electricity through hydropower projects has far-reaching impacts on socio-economic development in both rural and urban areas (UNDP, 2018). Access to electricity improves living standards by enabling access to essential services such as lighting, heating, and refrigeration, enhancing health outcomes and quality of life (IEA, 2021). In rural communities, electrification facilitates access to modern energy services, empowering communities to engage in income-generating activities, such as small-scale agriculture, agro-processing, and entrepreneurship (World Bank, 2019).

Moreover, access to electricity enables the provision of critical social services, including healthcare and education. Health facilities equipped with electricity can operate medical equipment, refrigerate vaccines and medicines, and provide emergency services, improving healthcare delivery and outcomes (UNDP, 2018). Similarly, electrified schools can enhance educational opportunities by enabling access to computers, internet connectivity, and digital learning resources, thereby empowering students and enhancing educational outcomes (World Bank, 2019).

Hydropower's ability to generate electricity consistently, irrespective of weather conditions, enhances energy reliability and resilience in the face of climate variability and extreme weather events (IEA, 2021). Unlike solar and wind power, which are subject to intermittency and variability, hydropower provides a stable and predictable source of baseload electricity (World Bank, 2019). This reliability is particularly crucial in regions prone to frequent power outages or grid instability, ensuring uninterrupted access to electricity for households, businesses, and essential services (UNDP, 2018).

Economic Benefits: Job Creation, Revenue Generation, and Industrial Development:

Hydropower development has been recognized as a key driver of economic growth and development in many countries around the world (International Hydropower Association, 2017). It not only creates direct employment opportunities during the construction and operation phases of projects but also supports secondary industries through the supply chain and service sectors. According to a report by the International Hydropower Association (2009), large hydropower projects on average create over 2,000 direct jobs during construction and hundreds of ongoing operational jobs.

Moreover, the revenue generated from hydropower sales can provide governments with a stable source of income that can be reinvested in public infrastructure, social services, and poverty alleviation programs. This helps to stimulate the local economy, improve living standards, and reduce inequality (World Bank, 2018). In addition, hydropower projects can attract foreign investment and promote industrial growth by providing a reliable and affordable source of electricity for manufacturing and processing activities. Overall, the economic benefits of hydropower development are numerous and can contribute significantly to the overall socio-economic development of a region or country. By creating jobs, generating revenue, and

supporting industrial growth, hydropower projects have the potential to drive sustainable development and improve the quality of life for communities.

Integration with Other Renewable Energy Sources for a Diversified Energy Mix:

Hydropower plays a crucial role in complementing other renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind power, to create a diversified and sustainable energy mix (International Energy Agency, 2020). While solar and wind energy are intermittent in nature, dependent on weather conditions, and subject to fluctuations in availability, hydropower can provide consistent baseload electricity, making it an ideal partner for balancing the variability of renewable energy sources.

According to the International Hydropower Association (2019), the flexibility of hydropower makes it a valuable asset for grid stability and energy management, especially when combined with variable renewable energy sources like solar and wind. By integrating hydropower into the energy mix, Sub-Saharan African countries can enhance energy security, reduce their dependence on fossil fuels, and contribute to global efforts to mitigate climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions (International Renewable Energy Agency, 2020).

Furthermore, the combination of hydropower with other renewable energy sources can also help to address the energy access challenges faced by many communities in Sub-Saharan Africa. By diversifying the energy mix and increasing the share of renewables, countries in the region can improve energy reliability, affordability, and sustainability, ultimately leading to greater socio-economic development and environmental conservation.

Potential for Regional Cooperation and Infrastructure Development:

According to Gilbertson et al. (2020), hydropower projects can serve as a catalyst for regional cooperation and integration by creating shared benefits and incentives for cooperation among neighboring countries. By jointly developing hydropower projects on transboundary rivers, countries can increase energy security, stimulate economic growth, and strengthen diplomatic ties. This mutual dependency on shared water resources can lead to the establishment of collaborative mechanisms for managing water resources, resolving disputes, and promoting sustainable development in the region.

Furthermore, regional cooperation in hydropower development can help address common challenges such as climate change, water scarcity, and energy insecurity by promoting the use of renewable energy sources and enhancing the resilience of the energy sector. As noted by Winzler et al. (2018), the interconnected nature of Transboundary Rivers and basins requires a coordinated approach to planning, development, and management of hydropower projects to ensure equitable distribution of benefits, minimize environmental impacts, and prevent conflicts over water resources.

Challenges to Sustainability

Hydropower development in Sub-Saharan Africa faces numerous challenges that pose risks to its sustainability and long-term viability. This section examines the key challenges encountered in

hydropower development, encompassing environmental impacts, social implications, technological challenges, and financial constraints.

Environmental Impacts: Biodiversity Loss, Habitat Degradation, and Carbon Emissions:

The environmental impact of hydropower development is a significant concern due to its potential to cause biodiversity loss, habitat degradation, and alterations to river ecosystems (World Wildlife Fund [WWF], 2020). Large-scale dams and reservoirs, integral components of hydropower projects, can lead to extensive environmental changes with far-reaching consequences for ecosystems and biodiversity (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2018). The creation of reservoirs associated with hydropower projects often results in the inundation of vast areas of land, leading to the loss of terrestrial habitats and displacement of wildlife species (UNEP, 2018). The flooding of forests, wetlands, and other ecosystems can disrupt ecological processes, fragment habitats, and isolate wildlife populations, thereby increasing the risk of species extinction and reducing biodiversity (WWF, 2020).

Furthermore, changes in water flow regimes and sediment transport induced by hydropower projects can have profound impacts on downstream ecosystems (WWF, 2020). Alterations in river flow patterns, including reduced flow during dry seasons and increased flow during wet seasons, can disrupt aquatic habitats, affect fish migration patterns, and diminish water quality (UNEP, 2018). Sedimentation resulting from the trapping of sediment behind dams can lead to downstream erosion, habitat loss, and degradation of riparian vegetation (WWF, 2020). Additionally, the creation of reservoirs can lead to the decomposition of organic matter submerged under water, resulting in the release of greenhouse gases, including methane and carbon dioxide (UNEP, 2018). While hydropower is generally considered a low-carbon energy source compared to fossil fuels, reservoir-induced emissions contribute to carbon emissions and climate change (WWF, 2020). The extent of these emissions varies depending on factors such as reservoir size, water temperature, and organic content, highlighting the importance of considering the environmental implications of hydropower development in climate change mitigation strategies (World Commission on Dams [WCD], 2020).

Mitigating the environmental impacts of hydropower development requires comprehensive environmental impact assessments, effective mitigation measures, and adherence to sustainability principles (UNEP, 2018). Strategies such as habitat restoration, fish passage facilities, and flow releases to mimic natural hydrological patterns can help mitigate the negative effects of hydropower projects on ecosystems and biodiversity (WWF, 2020). Additionally, integrating climate change considerations into project planning and management can help minimize reservoir-induced emissions and enhance the overall sustainability of hydropower development (WCD, 2020). In conclusion, while hydropower represents a renewable energy source with the potential to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and contribute to sustainable development, its environmental impacts must be carefully assessed and managed to ensure long-term sustainability. By implementing robust environmental management practices and adopting mitigation measures, the adverse effects of hydropower development on ecosystems and biodiversity can be minimized, supporting the transition towards a more sustainable energy future.

Social Implications: Displacement of Communities, Cultural Impacts, and Social Conflicts:

Hydropower projects have significant social implications, ranging from the displacement of communities to cultural impacts and social conflicts (World Commission on Dams [WCD], 2020). The construction of large dams and reservoirs often necessitates the resettlement of local communities, resulting in involuntary displacement and the loss of livelihoods (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2018). Displaced communities may encounter difficulties in accessing adequate housing, infrastructure, and social services, exacerbating poverty and social inequalities (WCD, 2020). The involuntary displacement of communities due to hydropower projects can have profound and long-lasting social consequences (UNEP, 2018). Displaced individuals and communities often experience disruptions to their social networks, cultural traditions, and community cohesion, leading to feelings of dislocation and loss (World Wildlife Fund [WWF], 2020). Moreover, the loss of access to land, resources, and livelihoods can undermine community resilience and exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly among marginalized and vulnerable groups (WCD, 2020).

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Furthermore, hydropower projects can have profound cultural impacts, particularly on indigenous and marginalized communities whose livelihoods and cultural identities are intimately tied to riverine ecosystems (WWF, 2020). Changes in water flow, land use, and access to natural resources can disrupt traditional practices, cultural heritage sites, and spiritual beliefs, leading to social tensions and conflicts (UNEP, 2018). The loss of sacred sites, cultural landscapes, and traditional knowledge further exacerbates the erosion of cultural identity and social cohesion within affected communities (WCD, 2020). Addressing the social implications of hydropower development requires a holistic and participatory approach that incorporates the perspectives and concerns of affected communities (UNEP, 2018).

Meaningful engagement, consultation, and consent mechanisms are essential for ensuring that affected communities have a voice in decision-making processes and that their rights and interests are respected (WWF, 2020). Additionally, the provision of adequate compensation, resettlement assistance, and livelihood support is critical for mitigating the adverse social impacts of hydropower projects and promoting inclusive and equitable development (WCD, 2020). Hydropower projects can have significant social implications, including the displacement of communities, cultural impacts, and social conflicts. By adopting participatory decision-making processes, respecting the rights of affected communities, and implementing robust social safeguard

policies, the adverse social impacts of hydropower development can be minimized, and the benefits of sustainable energy access can be equitably shared among all stakeholders.

Technological Challenges: Hydrological Variability, Sedimentation, and Infrastructure Resilience:

Hydropower development, while offering significant benefits in terms of renewable energy generation, is not without its technological challenges that can impact project feasibility and performance. One of the key challenges faced by hydropower projects is hydrological variability, as highlighted by the International Energy Agency (IEA, 2019). Fluctuations in river flow, seasonal precipitation patterns, and changing climate conditions can all influence the reliability and predictability of hydropower generation. These factors can affect the availability of water resources necessary for energy production, leading to fluctuations in output and potential disruptions in supply. Furthermore, extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, and climate extremes can pose significant operational challenges for hydropower plants, as noted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2018). Droughts can lower reservoir levels and reduce water availability, impacting energy production and plant efficiency. On the other hand, floods can lead to oversupply of water, potential damage to infrastructure, and safety risks for plant operators. Climate extremes, such as increased temperatures and changing precipitation patterns, can further exacerbate these challenges and affect the overall reliability and performance of hydropower projects.

In addition to hydrological variability and extreme weather events, technological challenges such as sedimentation and silt buildup in reservoirs can also impact the efficiency and longevity of hydropower plants. Sedimentation can reduce storage capacity, affect water flow, and damage turbines, leading to increased maintenance costs and operational disruptions. Managing sediment accumulation in reservoirs requires regular monitoring, dredging, and sedimentation control measures to ensure optimal plant performance and productivity. Overall, addressing the technological challenges faced by hydropower projects is essential for ensuring their long-term viability and sustainability. By implementing advanced monitoring systems, adaptive management strategies, and innovative technologies, developers can better manage hydrological variability, mitigate the impacts of extreme weather events, and optimize plant performance. Collaborative efforts between stakeholders, policymakers, and researchers are needed to overcome these challenges and promote the sustainable development of hydropower projects in a changing climate.

Sedimentation, the gradual accumulation of sediment in reservoirs and downstream channels, poses a significant technological challenge for hydropower projects. The accumulation of sediment in reservoirs can lead to reduced storage capacity, affecting the overall efficiency and performance of hydropower plants (World Commission on Dams, 2020). Sedimentation can also impair turbine efficiency by decreasing water flow and causing abrasion and erosion of turbine components, ultimately impacting the plant's ability to generate electricity at optimal levels. In addition to affecting reservoir storage capacity and turbine efficiency, sedimentation can have detrimental effects downstream of the hydropower plant. The release of sediment-laden water from the reservoir can lead to increased erosion and sediment deposition in downstream channels, impacting

aquatic habitats and water quality (World Wildlife Fund, 2020). This can have negative ecological implications, affecting the health of river ecosystems and potentially disrupting local biodiversity.

Managing sedimentation in hydropower reservoirs requires proactive measures to prevent or minimize its impact on plant operations and downstream environments. Dredging, the process of removing accumulated sediment from the reservoir, is a common practice employed to maintain storage capacity and ensure efficient water flow (World Commission on Dams, 2020). However, dredging can be costly and environmentally disruptive, requiring careful planning and mitigation measures to minimize its impact on the surrounding ecosystem. In addition to dredging, sediment management measures such as sediment traps, sediment bypass systems, and erosion control structures can help to mitigate the effects of sedimentation in hydropower projects (World Wildlife Fund, 2020). These measures aim to capture, divert, or reduce sediment transport within the reservoir and downstream channels, preserving water quality, protecting aquatic habitats, and maintaining the overall sustainability of the hydropower project.

By implementing effective sediment management strategies and incorporating sediment monitoring systems into hydropower project design and operation, developers can better address the challenges posed by sedimentation and optimize plant performance in the long term. Collaboration between stakeholders, regulatory bodies, and environmental organizations is essential to ensure sustainable sediment management practices and minimize the environmental impact of hydropower development. Ensuring the resilience of hydropower infrastructure against extreme weather events, natural disasters, and the impacts of climate change is crucial for maintaining operational reliability and safety. As climate change-induced extreme weather events become more frequent and severe, hydropower projects are increasingly vulnerable to risks such as flooding, landslides, and droughts (International Energy Agency, 2019). These events can not only disrupt power generation but also pose significant safety hazards for personnel working at hydropower facilities and the surrounding communities.

To address these challenges, it is essential to incorporate climate-resilient design standards into the planning and construction of hydropower projects. These standards aim to ensure that infrastructure is built with the capacity to withstand and adapt to changing climate conditions, minimizing the risk of damage and downtime due to extreme events (United Nations Environment Programme, 2018). Climate-resilient design features may include elevated structures to protect against flooding, reinforced foundations to withstand landslides, and advanced monitoring systems to detect potential hazards in real-time. In addition to design standards, robust emergency response plans are essential for effectively managing and mitigating the impacts of extreme weather events or natural disasters on hydropower infrastructure. These plans should outline clear procedures for responding to emergencies, ensuring the safety of personnel, and minimizing environmental and societal impacts (International Energy Agency, 2019). Regular drills and training exercises can help prepare personnel for emergency situations and improve overall response capabilities.

Adaptive management strategies are also critical for enhancing the resilience of hydropower projects to future uncertainties, including the impacts of climate change. These strategies involve continuously monitoring and assessing the performance of infrastructure, identifying

vulnerabilities, and implementing corrective measures to address emerging risks (United Nations Environment Programme, 2018). By adopting a proactive and flexible approach to managing climate-related challenges, hydropower developers can increase the resilience of their projects and ensure long-term sustainability in a changing climate. Collaboration between government agencies, industry stakeholders, and scientific experts is essential for developing and implementing effective climate resilience strategies for hydropower projects. By working together to integrate climate considerations into project planning, design, and operation, stakeholders can help to build a more resilient and sustainable future for hydropower generation in the face of increasing climate-related risks.

Financial and Investment Constraints: Funding Gaps, Project Financing, and Risk Mitigation:

Financial and investment constraints continue to be major hurdles for the development of hydropower projects in Sub-Saharan Africa. The substantial upfront capital costs required for the construction of hydropower infrastructure, such as dams, turbines, and transmission lines, often exceed the financial capabilities of both governments and private project developers in the region (International Energy Agency, 2019). As a result, the financing gap presents a significant barrier to the development of new hydropower projects and the expansion of existing ones. Limited access to project financing options, including concessional loans, grants, and private sector investments, further compounds the financial challenges faced by hydropower developers in Sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations Development Programme, 2017). The lack of access to affordable financing sources can hinder the progress of projects and lead to delays in their implementation, ultimately impacting the region's ability to meet its growing energy demands and achieve sustainable development goals.

One approach to addressing the financial constraints on hydropower development in Sub-Saharan Africa is to explore innovative financing mechanisms and partnerships that can help bridge funding gaps and attract investment. For example, leveraging public-private partnerships (PPPs) can provide a way to mobilize private sector resources and expertise for hydropower projects, while also sharing risks and responsibilities between the public and private sectors (International Energy Agency, 2019). Additionally, promoting the use of green bonds and other sustainable finance instruments can help raise capital for hydropower projects while meeting environmental and social impact criteria (United Nations Development Programme, 2017). In order to improve access to project financing and facilitate the implementation of hydropower projects in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is essential for governments, development agencies, financial institutions, and project developers to collaborate and explore innovative funding solutions. By fostering partnerships, enhancing financial mechanisms, and promoting sustainable investment practices, the region can unlock the potential of hydropower as a clean and reliable source of energy to support economic growth, energy security, and environmental sustainability.

Hydropower projects in Sub-Saharan Africa are not only challenged by financial and investment constraints, but they also face various risks that can discourage potential investors and lenders. These risks encompass geological, hydrological, environmental, and socio-political factors, which

can significantly impact the feasibility and viability of hydropower projects in the region (World Commission on Dams, 2020). Geological risks, such as seismic activity or unstable ground conditions, can pose threats to the integrity of dams and other infrastructure components, leading to costly repairs or delays in project timelines. Hydrological risks, such as variability in water availability and precipitation patterns, can affect the energy generation capacity of hydropower plants, affecting their financial performance.

Furthermore, environmental risks, such as impacts on aquatic ecosystems, water quality, and biodiversity, can trigger regulatory scrutiny and community opposition, potentially delaying or halting project development (International Energy Agency, 2019). Socio-political risks, including conflicts over land tenure, indigenous rights, and benefit sharing, can also create uncertainty and complexities in project planning and implementation. These risks not only affect the financial viability of hydropower projects but also impact their social and environmental sustainability. In addition to these risks, uncertainties related to regulatory frameworks, land tenure, and stakeholder engagement further challenge the financing and risk management efforts of hydropower projects in Sub-Saharan Africa (International Energy Agency, 2019). Inconsistent or evolving regulatory regimes can create ambiguity for investors and lenders, affecting their confidence in the long-term stability and profitability of projects. Land tenure issues, such as competing claims or inadequate compensation for affected communities, can lead to conflicts and legal disputes that impede project progress.

Stakeholder engagement is crucial for ensuring the social acceptance and sustainability of hydropower projects, yet inadequate consultation or communication with local communities and other stakeholders can result in opposition and resistance to project development. Addressing these uncertainties and risks requires robust risk assessment, stakeholder engagement strategies, and transparent decision-making processes to build trust and credibility among investors, lenders, and local communities. By proactively identifying, assessing, and mitigating risks associated with hydropower projects, stakeholders can foster a more favorable investment environment and enhance the likelihood of successful project development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Collaborative efforts among governments, project developers, financiers, and communities are essential to navigating the complex risks inherent in hydropower projects and ensuring their sustainable and inclusive development.

Mitigation Strategies and Best Practices

Mitigating the environmental and social impacts of hydropower development is essential for ensuring the sustainability and long-term viability of projects. This section examines key mitigation strategies and best practices aimed at addressing environmental and social concerns associated with hydropower projects, including the adoption of environmental and social impact assessments, stakeholder engagement, advanced technologies, and policy and regulatory frameworks.

Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) and Mitigation Measures:

Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) are fundamental tools for identifying, assessing, and mitigating the potential environmental and social impacts of hydropower projects (UNEP, 2018). ESIAs involve comprehensive studies to evaluate the direct and indirect impacts of projects on ecosystems, biodiversity, communities, and cultural heritage sites (WWF, 2020). Mitigation measures are then developed to minimize or offset adverse impacts, incorporating measures such as habitat restoration, fish passage facilities, and compensation for affected communities (WCD, 2020).

Stakeholder Engagement, Participatory Decision-Making, and Community Benefits Sharing:

Effective stakeholder engagement and participatory decision-making are essential for ensuring that the concerns and interests of affected communities are taken into account throughout the project lifecycle (UNEP, 2018). Meaningful engagement fosters transparency, trust, and collaboration among project developers, governments, civil society organizations, and local communities, enabling inclusive decision-making and equitable benefit sharing (WWF, 2020). Community benefits sharing mechanisms, such as revenue sharing agreements, livelihood support programs, and infrastructure development projects, ensure that local communities derive tangible benefits from hydropower projects (WCD, 2020).

Adoption of Advanced Technologies: Hydroinformatics, Remote Sensing, and Predictive Modeling:

The adoption of advanced technologies such as hydroinformatics, remote sensing, and predictive modeling enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of hydropower project planning, management, and monitoring (IEA, 2019). Hydroinformatics tools enable the integration of hydrological, ecological, and socio-economic data to support informed decision-making and optimize project design (UNEP, 2018). Remote sensing technologies provide valuable insights into land use changes, vegetation dynamics, and water quality, facilitating early detection of environmental changes and timely intervention (WWF, 2020). Predictive modeling techniques help anticipate future scenarios, assess potential impacts, and identify adaptive management strategies to enhance project resilience and sustainability (WCD, 2020).

Policy and Regulatory Frameworks: Legal Frameworks, Licensing Procedures, and Incentives for Sustainability:

Robust policy and regulatory frameworks are essential for promoting sustainable hydropower development and ensuring compliance with environmental and social standards (UNEP, 2018). Legal frameworks establish clear rules, guidelines, and standards for project development, operation, and decommissioning, providing certainty and predictability for investors and stakeholders (WWF, 2020). Licensing procedures incorporate requirements for environmental and social assessments, stakeholder consultation, and mitigation measures, ensuring that projects adhere to best practices and regulatory requirements (WCD, 2020). Furthermore, governments can incentivize sustainability through mechanisms such as feed-in tariffs, tax incentives, and

renewable energy targets, promoting investment in environmentally and socially responsible hydropower projects (IEA, 2019).

Conclusion

This research has provided valuable insights into the hydropower potential in Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting opportunities, challenges, and mitigation strategies for sustainable development. By synthesizing existing literature and data, this study has contributed to a better understanding of the role of hydropower in the region's energy landscape and its implications for environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

Summary of Key Findings and Contributions:

Key findings from this research include the significant hydropower potential in Sub-Saharan Africa, driven by the region's abundant water resources and growing energy demand. Despite existing infrastructure, substantial untapped potential remains, presenting opportunities for further development. However, this potential is accompanied by challenges, including environmental impacts, social implications, technological constraints, and financial limitations.

The study underscores the importance of adopting holistic approaches to hydropower development that integrate environmental and social considerations, engage stakeholders, leverage advanced technologies, and establish supportive policy frameworks. By addressing these challenges and maximizing the benefits of hydropower, Sub-Saharan African countries can accelerate progress towards achieving energy access, economic growth, and sustainable development goals.

Recommendations for Policymakers, Industry Stakeholders, and Development Practitioners:

Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations are proposed for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and development practitioners:

- **Enhance Environmental and Social Safeguards:** Strengthen environmental and social impact assessments, implement robust mitigation measures, and ensure meaningful stakeholder engagement to minimize the adverse impacts of hydropower projects on ecosystems, communities, and cultural heritage.
- **Promote Sustainable Development:** Prioritize sustainable hydropower development that balances energy needs with environmental conservation, social equity, and economic development. Encourage the adoption of best practices, standards, and certification schemes to ensure projects adhere to sustainability principles.
- **Invest in Advanced Technologies:** Embrace hydroinformatics, remote sensing, predictive modeling, and other advanced technologies to improve project planning, management, and monitoring. Foster innovation and collaboration in technology development to enhance the efficiency, reliability, and resilience of hydropower projects.
- **Strengthen Policy and Regulatory Frameworks:** Establish clear legal frameworks, licensing procedures, and incentives that promote sustainable hydropower development.

Encourage transparency, accountability, and good governance practices to build trust and confidence among stakeholders.

- **Facilitate Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building:** Foster knowledge exchange, capacity building, and South-South cooperation to enhance technical expertise, institutional capacity, and best practice dissemination. Facilitate partnerships between governments, academia, industry, and civil society to foster innovation and knowledge transfer.

Future Research Directions and Areas for Further Investigation:

While this study has provided valuable insights into the hydropower potential in Sub-Saharan Africa, several areas warrant further research and investigation:

1. **Hydropower and Climate Change:** Explore the impacts of climate change on hydropower resources, including changes in precipitation patterns, water availability, and hydrological variability. Assess the resilience of hydropower infrastructure to climate-induced risks and identify adaptation strategies to enhance project resilience.
2. **Social Acceptance and Equity:** Investigate the social acceptance of hydropower projects among affected communities, indigenous groups, and stakeholders. Examine the distributional impacts of hydropower development on vulnerable and marginalized populations, and identify strategies to promote social equity, inclusion, and benefit sharing.
3. **Technological Innovation and Efficiency:** Evaluate emerging technologies and innovations in hydropower generation, storage, and transmission. Assess the cost-effectiveness, environmental performance, and scalability of new hydropower technologies, such as pumped storage, run-of-river systems, and modular designs.
4. **Policy and Governance Reform:** Analyze the effectiveness of policy and regulatory frameworks in promoting sustainable hydropower development. Evaluate the implementation of environmental and social safeguards, licensing procedures, and incentive mechanisms, and identify opportunities for policy reform and institutional strengthening.

In conclusion, this research contributes to a comprehensive understanding of hydropower potential in Sub-Saharan Africa and provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and development practitioners. By addressing the challenges and opportunities associated with hydropower development, Sub-Saharan African countries can harness the full potential of this renewable energy resource to achieve their sustainable development objectives and improve the livelihoods of their populations.

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