

Damming the Sesan River: Impacts in Cambodia and Vietnam

More than 55,000 people in Cambodia and Vietnam have suffered severe impacts to their livelihoods because of the Yali Falls Dam in Vietnam. Dam operation has altered the hydrology and water quality of the Sesan River, causing deaths to villagers and livestock and the flooding of rice fields and vegetable gardens. Affected communities have not received compensation for their losses, and there are no plans to provide them with compensation for past or future impacts. Despite the unresolved issues, the government of Vietnam has embarked on an ambitious plan to build up to five more dams on the Sesan River.

Background

The Yali Falls Dam is located 70-80 kilometers from the Cambodia and Vietnam border. Construction on the 720-MW dam started in 1993 and was completed in 2000. The project was funded mostly by loans from the governments of Russia and Ukraine. The World Bank funded the transmission line from the Yali Falls Dam to Ho Chi Minh City. The Swiss consultancy firm Electrowatt conducted the project's Environment Impact Assessment (EIA). The EIA failed to consider potential downstream impacts in Cambodia and only considered impacts to villagers living in "an area of 8 km long and 1 km wide below the dam." The Mekong River Commission, at the time called the Interim Mekong Committee, coordinated the EIA but failed to consider potential downstream impacts in Cambodia.



Cambodian villager affected by Yali Falls.

Based on interviews with local fishermen and farmers, citizens groups and district-level government officials in Cambodia report that:

- at least 36 people have drowned due to erratic releases of water from the dam;
- at least 55,000 people have been adversely affected; they have suffered millions of dollars in damages due to lost rice production, drowned livestock, lost fishing income, and damages to rice reserves, boats, fishing gear and houses;
- changes in the Se San River's water levels and flow have caused a decline in fisheries and

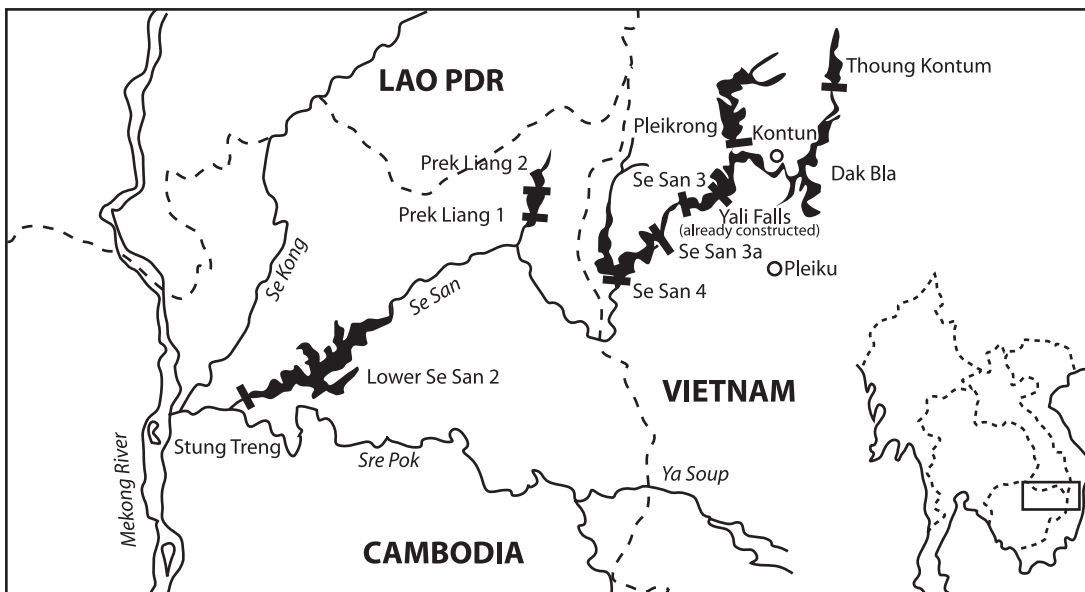
made fishing more difficult and hazardous. In addition, there has been an increase in river sedimentation and erosion, destroying river-bank vegetable gardens;

- hundreds of people have suffered stomach ailments, eye infections and skin rashes, which they believe are related to changes in the river's water quality since the dam was built.

"Since 1996 the situation of the water and river has changed. Before we never had a problem with floods. But now there are so many floods that damage our crops there is not enough to eat," said a villager in Stung Treng Province, Cambodia. Villagers in Vietnam downstream of the dam report similar impacts.

Downstream Villagers Suffer Livelihood, Health Impacts

While the dam was under construction from 1996-2000, erratic releases of water resulted in flash flooding downstream, causing deaths to people and livestock and destruction of rice fields and vegetable gardens. Since 2000, operation of the dam has resulted in rapid and daily fluctuations in the river's flow downstream in Cambodia's Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces.



Planned dams on the Sesan River

more destruction. More people will die,” said a villager in Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia.

The Yali Falls Dam is the first of several hydroelectric dams planned for the Sesan River in Vietnam. This map shows hydroelectric dams planned along the Sesan River. It includes dams that are planned, under construction or are already built. Construction on the 270-MW Sesan 3 Dam, located 20 kilometers downstream of Yali Falls, began in June 2002.

Broken Promises of Compensation

More than 6,700 people were resettled to make way for Yali Falls Dam in Vietnam. According to a 2001 study by Vietnam’s Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Studies (CRES), people displaced by the dam have suffered from severe shortages of food and other hardships since the dam flooded their homes and land in 1999.

CRES found that compensation was not distributed fairly and fully. Many families have not been given cultivatable land or rice paddies as promised. Supplies of rice, seedlings, fertilizers and money for animal husbandry have not been given. Particularly hard hit are ethnic minority communities of ethnic Jarai, Bahnar and Ro Nhao peoples, who did not receive land and were given less compensation than ethnic Kinh Vietnamese. For many, the only way to survive is by walking for days to clear new swidden fields deep in the forests, by entering into low wage employment, or by scavenging at the local dumpsite.

One villager said, “We are all hungry because there is no land left here for us to cultivate to feed our families. The government promised to give us land and we have been waiting and waiting, but nothing happened. We could not survive without land.”

More Dams Planned on the Sesan

“What more can they do to us? Nearly everything has already been destroyed. If they build another dam, there will be even

Planning of the following projects was approved by the Vietnamese government in November 2001:

- The Sesan 3a Dam
- The 440-MW Sesan 4 Dam: Construction expected to begin in 2004. Located 50 km downstream from the Sesan Dam. In July 2002, Vietnam’s Prime Minister asked Electricity of Vietnam to conduct a feasibility study for this project.
- The 120-MW Pleikrong Dam
- The 210-MW Thong Kontum Dam

Community Demands Resolution of Outstanding Problems, Halt on Dams

Villagers living along the Se San River would like to see the Yali Falls Dam decommissioned and the river returned to its natural state. If this is not immediately possible, they are demanding fair and timely compensation for their losses, and changes to the operation of Yali Falls Dam so that releases from the dam replicate natural flows. In addition, they are demanding that Vietnam halt construction of Se San 3 and any further dams on the Se San River until an open and independent assessment of the environmental damages and economic losses caused by the first dam is completed and made public.

For more information, visit the following web sites:

Contact the Sesan River Protection Community Network Project at nftp@camintel.com.

Reports documenting the impacts of Yali Falls Dam are available at www.oxfammekong.org and www.irn.org.



International Rivers Network

1847 BERKELEY WAY, BERKELEY, CA 94703, US
 TEL: 1-510-848-1155 FAX: 1-510-848-1008
 WEB: WWW.IRN.ORG EMAIL: IRN@IRN.ORG