

Photo essay: The human cost of hydropower

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Rivers play a central role in the lives of millions of people in Southeast Asia. They are the lifeblood of the region, providing fish, fresh water, fertile sediment, employment, transportation, recreation and many other essential benefits. However, these critical lifelines are increasingly threatened by the construction of cascades of large dams which will irreversibly alter the ecology of the rivers, block crucial fish migration routes and re-settle hundreds of thousands of families. The widespread social and environmental impacts of large dam projects disproportionately affect riparian communities, many of them ethnic and indigenous peoples who have limited voice in the decision-making process. The photos presented below illustrate the importance of three of Southeast Asia's most iconic rivers, the Nam Ou, Mekong and Salween Rivers, the way of life that they support and the impacts associated with large-scale hydropower development on each river.

The Nam Ou River is one of the most important rivers in Laos. Originating along the Lao-China border, the river flows south into northern Laos and on to meet the mainstream of the Mekong River. Communities of diverse ethnic minorities have relied for generations on the Nam Ou River and surrounding forest resources for food, income and spiritual well being. These communities are now significantly affected by the ongoing construction of a cascade of seven dams along the river. Three dams are already completed, and phase two of the cascade development was announced in April 2016. Affected villagers have been largely kept in the dark about project plans and resettlement schemes.



1. The impacts from the first three dams on the Nam Ou River are already apparent: a lady who lives just downstream of the Nam Ou 6 dam looks out at the Nam Ou River. The water level has become uncertain since the dam started operation. Sometimes, water released from the dam upstream floods her small shop. Her life has been irreversibly altered by construction of the dam, yet she has received no acknowledgement of the impacts or compensation from the dam developers.



2. Downstream of the Nam Ou 6 dam stands an abandoned village. Villagers were relocated to a site up on the hill, where three villages were moved together, far from the river. Villagers still travel back to their old village to look for materials for their homes, and to visit their abandoned farms in search of food. The image of beautiful new homes and a better life put forward by project developers is in stark contrast to the reality which these villagers now face.

The destructive model of dam development, which externalises the true social and environmental cost of these projects, is being exported beyond the Nam Ou River. On the lower Mekong River, two dams are under construction, along the river's mainstream in Laos, with a third following quickly. Before the Xayaburi Dam moved forward in 2010, the lower Mekong River flowed freely from Laos through the Vietnam Delta. Now, Mekong communities face a similar uncertainty over their future as villagers along the Nam Ou River.

The Mekong River is recognised globally for its abundant biodiversity and is home to the world’s largest freshwater fishery. Communities along the length of the river rely on fish as a critical protein source, and for many people Mekong fish are also a primary means of livelihood. Mekong fisheries face a major threat from hydropower construction due to blocked migration routes, reservoirs and irreversible ecosystem changes. A significant decrease in fish stocks and shifts in the river’s seasonal flood pulse are likely to trigger a food security crisis in the region. One of the most vital fish migration pathways along the lower Mekong mainstream is found in Siphandone, southern Laos. In 2014, construction began on the Don Sahong Dam, blocking the Hou Sahong Channel, the main pathway in the area allowing for year-round fish migration. The dam is located just two kilometres upstream of the Laos-Cambodia border; however, project developers have failed to study the dam’s trans-boundary impacts, leading to widespread concern in Cambodia and throughout the lower Mekong region.

3. A fisherman casts his net on the Mekong River in Siphandone, Southern Laos, close to the site of the Don Sahong dam. Construction of the Xayaburi and Don Sahong dams moved forward without meaningful consultation with affected communities, ignoring objections from people across the region and ongoing concerns voiced by neighboring countries that share the river downstream.



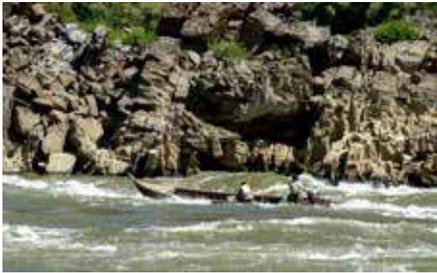
4. In November 2016, the Lao government announced plans to move forward with a third dam on the lower Mekong mainstream, the Pak Beng dam, in northern Laos. A fishing boat travels along the Mekong River in Pak Beng, which is a popular tourist route for slow boats coming from Thailand.

With each new dam that moves forward, the impacts on the Mekong River and its people are compounded, and the unique ecosystems and vital natural resources are pushed to the brink of collapse.

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1. Nam Ou River in Phongsali, Northern Laos, 2016
2. Nam Ou in Phongsali, Northern Laos, 2016
3. Fisherman at Don Sahong, Laos- 2016
4. Fisherman Pak Beng, Laos- 2016
5. Salween River, Karen State, Myanmar 2007
6. IDP family, Karen State, Myanmar 2006
7. IDP camp, Karen state, Myanmar 2006
8. IDP camp, Karen state, Myanmar 2006

The Mekong's sister river, the **Salween** is one of Asia's longest remaining free-flowing rivers. It holds a unique place in the identity of the diverse ethnic peoples who live along its length. The Salween River sustains rich fisheries and fertile farmland that are central to the lives of communities living along its banks. The history and significance of the river runs deeply through these communities. Due to decades of armed conflict, it is also a highly sensitive and contentious area. Salween communities have experienced decades of violence and displacement in Myanmar's longstanding civil war. A cascade of seven dams planned along the Salween River represent yet another installment in a long series of devastating events.



5. A boat navigates rapids along the Salween River near the location of the proposed Hat Gyi dam in Karen State, Myanmar, and the site of recent active armed conflict.



6. Most dam-affected people in Karen and Shan State, Myanmar, are either internally displaced people (IDPs), or refugees who were forced to flee to Thailand during Myanmar's military junta and decades of conflict. Planned dams along the Salween River, including the Hat Gyi and Mon Ton dams, threaten to drown the hopes of thousands of refugees of ever returning home. The proposed dams face widespread opposition from local communities.



8. A medic treats a woman at an IDP camp along the Salween River.

7. An IDP family at a camp along the Salween River close to the site of the proposed Hat Gyi dam.

Dams planned, under construction and in operation on these three rivers will have profound and irreversible social and environmental impacts. The people who stand to lose the most are riparian communities who have little voice in decision-making processes. There is an urgent need for governments in Southeast Asia to recognise the importance of these iconic rivers and the benefits that they provide beyond electricity generation. Healthy rivers are the lifelines of our planet and this is nowhere more evident than in the Nam Ou, the Mekong and the Salween Rivers.

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