
[Myanmar: a dam megaproject for the benefit of the people?](#)

Massive protests against dam megaprojects have taken place in Thailand due to their negative social and environmental impacts. The cases of Pak Mun Dam (see WRM Bulletin 22 and new article in this issue) and Rasi Salai Dam (see WRM Bulletin 27) are perhaps the most notorious even if not the only ones. Now Thailand is trying to export this destructive model to neighbouring Myanmar (formerly Burma).

In fact a Thai dam-building company -GMS Power- is proposing the construction of a big hydroelectric dam on the Salween River in northeastern Myanmar. At the same time, the Thai government has made a commitment in the sense that the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) or other national agencies will buy up part of the electricity generated from projects in Myanmar by the year 2010.

With a proposed dam height of 188 metres, Ta Sarng would be the highest dam in mainland Southeast Asia, and the first dam to be built on the 2,400 kilometre-long mainstream of the Salween River. This is the only remaining free-flowing major river in the region. The 320,000 km² Salween River Basin is also the least dammed of the region's major river basins. Menace is pending on this river since the beginnings of the 70s, since Australian and Japanese consulting companies, together with Myanmar's and Thai state agencies, have produced seven major studies examining the possibility of constructing large dams there.

GMS Power is a subsidiary of Thailand's MDX Group of companies. Through GMS, MDX is involved in dam projects in Cambodia, Laos and China. Lahmeyer International, a German consulting firm, coordinated the pre-feasibility study for the Ta Sarng project, and the Electric Power Corporation of Japan was contracted to oversee the project's feasibility study. According to it, the project's reservoir would flood an area of at least 640 square kilometres.

The Thai-Myanmar Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1997 tries to justify the construction of large hydroelectric dams and other large-scale projects for electricity generation "for the mutual benefits of the peoples of the Kingdom of Thailand and the Union of Myanmar". Nothing could be more far away from reality. Large-scale energy sector-related infrastructure in both countries -for example the polemic Yadana gas pipeline project (see WRM Bulletin 22)- imply forest destruction, corruption, forced labour, and other violations to environmental and human rights. The vast majority of the population is never reached by the supposed benefits such megaprojects generate. In this specific case, a vast area of forests and fertile lands along the Salween River and in the tributary valleys would be permanently submerged by the reservoir. Many of these areas are used for seasonal cultivation of crops which serve the needs of local communities. Additionally, the reservoir will destroy the aquatic and terrestrial animal habitat of the river and its valley, and radically alter habitats downstream of the dam. Additionally, as usually happens in these cases, thousands of local people have already been forcibly relocated from the site of the proposed dam and its reservoir, by order of Myanmar's military dictatorship.

"I can't express what I feel. It would be worse than the death of my mother and father" answered a

villager who was asked about his opinion on the flooding of his village due to the dam works. Is this the kind of "mutual benefits of the peoples" that the governments of Thailand and Myanmar are providing?

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