
Dams generate environmental and social destruction in Laos

Hydropower megaprojects in several Southeast Asian countries are frequently preceded by devastating logging operations in prospective inundation zones. This kind of practices cause an extensive negative environmental impact and damage indigenous communities, that are forced to abandon their lands and are resettled somewhere else. In Laos current and pending dam projects are being used as cover to evict village people from intended reservoir areas and from upland watersheds (see WRM Bulletin 8).

A report recently issued by International Rivers Network demands an urgent rethink of the "one-sided" policies of the Laotian Government and its United Nations, World Bank and Asian Development Bank supporters. According to the report, there are "fundamental problems" at all six projects visited, including doubtful financial viability, uncontrolled logging and growing mortality among ethnic minorities forced to resettle, often with little or no compensation. Possible starvation of fish ponds is feared. Social problems, as prostitution of displaced indigenous women, have also been reported. "It is irresponsible of the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank to be pushing ahead with the funding of individual hydroelectric power projects as 'aid'" states the report.

The Laotian government intends to sell much of the power generated by the Nam Leuk project to Thailand and possibly Vietnam. However, the collapse of the Thai economy has forced the Electricity Generating Authority of that country to reassess future demand estimates and such sale is nowadays doubtful. The report warns that the region's largest planned dam, the controversial Nam Theun Two project on the Nakai Plateau in central Khammouane province, may not even go ahead --despite the already widespread destruction of its catchment area. The viability of the four other projects studied remains also in doubt due to the economic crash, a fact that can be considered positive since it can allow crucial room to manoeuvre in carving out new more sustainable policies for the energy sector, the people and the environment.

Source: Aviva Imhof, South-East Asia Campaigner International Rivers Network.