
[Mekong dams heat up the region](#)

The problems associated with large-scale hydropower dams are not a new issue to the Mekong basin. Originating in the Tibetan Himalayas, the Mekong River weaves through Yunnan province in southern China before passing through a small part of Burma, then into Laos, where for a long stretch it forms the Lao-Thai border in north and northeastern Thailand, and then flows south through Cambodia and down to the Mekong delta in Vietnam. Over the past decades, many parts of this river-rich region have been seriously impacted by large-scale hydropower dams. Current proposals to build hundreds of dams on the Mekong River's most important tributaries together with 12 dams on the Mekong mainstream are raising serious concerns and heating up tension and conflicts among region's countries more than ever.

At the moment when this article began to be written, around 2,000 people from local communities, members of the People's Movement for a Just Society (PMove) - Assembly of the Poor, were returning home after a 25-day-long gathering under the blistering sun in Bangkok. They had gone there to pressure the Thai cabinet's decisions on cases of injustice, including large-scale projects that take away people's natural resources and livelihoods. The people's movement has been driven by a wide range of chronic problems including inadequate land reform, unwanted mining projects, and the emergence of power plant proposals in rural communities. Among all these issues is the case of the Pak Mun Dam.

Over the last two decades, the people affected by the Pak Mun Dam in Ubon Rachathani province in northeastern Thailand have become the forefront of the Assembly of the Poor, the strongest people's movement ever witnessed in Thailand. In 1991, with direct support from the World Bank, the military-appointed government decided to dam the Mun River, the biggest tributary of the Mekong River, for electricity generation at a capacity of 135 MW. Only one kilometre away from where the Mun and the Mekong Rivers meet, the Pak Mun Dam has plagued both rivers, as it has almost completely blocked the natural fish migration route. As a result, the dam has directly affected around 6,000 families from fishing communities along the once-fertile river, and many more in other northeastern parts of the country. Since entering into operation, the dam has failed to generate the intended amount of electricity. Recently, this first "run-of-river dam" in Southeast Asia was recorded as producing just a little over 20 MW of electricity. Even at its full capacity, the dam could barely meet the electricity needs of the largest mall in Thailand, located in Bangkok, and its remaining supply would not meet even half the needs of the second largest mall.

Despite the dam's failure in efficiency and its continuing impacts, the Thai cabinet continues to refuse to take action on the recommendations of the government-appointed committee to study the dam, which states that all the Pak Mun Dam's sluice gates should be opened permanently. The explanation for this refusal given by the Thai government and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) to the public is that if the gates are opened, the Mun's flow would rapidly drain as a result of the severe drought that has afflicted the Mekong River, and thus its advantages would be simply wasted.

The Thai cabinet's claim conflicts with another widely shared theory: that the real reason why the

Pak Mun Dam can never be opened permanently is not because of the need for the 20 MW of electricity it produces nor the concern for water use, but rather because permanently opening the dam gates is equivalent to an acknowledgement of the total failure of the dam. This would be advantageous for those who oppose dams, while leaving authorities who advocate dam building in both Thailand and the rest of the region in a disadvantageous position.

The Thai and other Mekong region governments never inform the public about the hydrological changes caused by the four dams built upstream in China. Meanwhile, the case of the Pak Mun Dam clearly demonstrates how governments hold on tight to their own existing dams and plans to build dams on the Mekong's tributaries, while also striving to build dams along the lower Mekong mainstream as well.

The series of large-scale dams on the upper Mekong mainstream in China started with the construction of the Manwan Dam, which was completed in 1992 without any proper consultation with the lower Mekong countries, especially with the people who directly rely on the river for their everyday life. The scale of the Chinese dams is in no way comparable with Pak Mun: they all have more than 1,000 MW of installed capacity and hold millions of cubic metres of Mekong water. Apart from the early outcry of the people in northern Thailand, the impacts of China's dams seemed to be very slowly felt by the downstream Mekong countries throughout the 1990s. For instance, until the mid-2000s, nobody seemed to have any idea about the impacts of the Chinese dams on Vietnam's Mekong delta.

However, shortly before the completion of the Xiaowan Dam – the fourth dam in China, out of plans to build a total of eight or even 15 dams on the upper Mekong mainstream – the impacts on the Mekong River were already being overwhelmingly felt. In April 2010, a representative of the Chinese embassy in Thailand appeared before the Thai public for the first time, at a civil society-hosted forum in Bangkok, to deny any relation between China's dams and the negative changes in hydrology, biodiversity and livelihoods in the lower Mekong mainstream countries. It was a bit too late, though, as the Chinese government had already been bombarded with criticisms by local communities, civil society groups and news agencies. In Vietnam, for instance, the people, academics and even government agencies, in particular those from the Mekong delta, have pointed a finger at China as one of the root causes of the hydrological change and voiced their concern over the impact of the Mekong dams on the delta.

In addition to the mounting concern over the transboundary impacts of the Chinese dams, it was announced in early 2008 that the first Mekong mainstream dam proposal outside China – the Don Sahong Dam in southern Laos – was ready to proceed. The dam is one of the 12 dams proposed among the lower Mekong countries: eight dams in Laos, two on the Thai-Lao border, and the other two in Cambodia. Aside from the Don Sahong project, none of the proposed dams has less than 800 MW capacity, and the biggest dam is up to 3,000 MW in size. Among questions raised about the Don Sahong Dam, the major concern was the potential impact on fisheries in what is probably the most intensively fished area and largest fish spawning area in the lower Mekong. As a result, the Don Sahong case raised the question of how much importance the Mekong region governments give to Mekong fisheries, which provide livelihoods for a great number of people and contribute significantly to these countries' economies, especially in Cambodia, where fisheries account for 17% of the country's GDP.

Nevertheless, after more than two years of opposition by many civil society groups, the Lao government has not yet submitted the Don Sahong Dam proposal to the regional Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA) to inform other Mekong countries of its

intention to build the dam. Instead, the Lao government submitted the proposal for the Xayaboury Dam in September 2010, initiating the PNPCHA process, which was agreed under the framework of the 1995 Mekong Agreement among Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. According to the PNPCHA, all four member countries agree to notify and listen to neighbouring countries when they propose to build a project on the Mekong mainstream, even within their own countries. However, the process can play no role in stopping the dam if the host country insists on building it. Therefore, the current process will represent a crucial milestone for the Mekong River's fate, as the PNPCHA process for the case of the Xayaboury Dam in northern Laos becomes a test case for all.

The proposed Xayaboury Dam has sparked wide criticisms and expressions of disapproval, splitting the Mekong countries like never before. The Mekong River Commission (MRC, formed in 1995 by an agreement between the governments of Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam with the primary duty of protecting the river under the 1995 Mekong Agreement) has been accused by many civil society groups of failing to play an effective role in facilitating the use of its own knowledge as an effective tool for decision making on the dam. The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) commissioned by the MRC states the severe impacts on fisheries, sediment load, wetlands and agricultural land, weighed against the limited benefits of electricity supply if the 12 projects are to proceed. According to the SEA, under the scenario for the year 2015, the series of 12 dams would only supply up to 11.6% of the electricity needed in Thailand, and only 4% for Vietnam. The SEA finally recommends the deferment of all lower Mekong mainstream dams for 10 years. Opposed to the recommendation, the government of Laos released a statement insisting that "Our view remains unchanged. We are confident that the Xayaburi Hydroelectric Power Project will not have any significant impact on the Mekong mainstream" – even before the completion of the consultations in the neighbouring countries under the PNPCHA process. This proves the failure of the MRC in integrating its knowledge in shaping development based on comprehensive impact assessments, as seen in the case of the SEA.

The debate on the Xayaboury Dam will reach the final round when the MRC Joint Committee members from the four countries convene by the end of this month to voice their opinion about the project. The situation could be volatile and is unpredictable.

In the midst of a situation where the large-scale hydropower dam era has been revitalized, the Mekong region needs more mechanisms than it currently has to cope with the impacts and potential disasters. The decision on the Xayaboury Dam, which might be the final threat to the life of the Mekong River, cannot be subject to the judgement of the MRC's Joint Committee members, who hold even lower positions than ministers.

The urgent and critical task is to ensure and emphasise transparency and public participation in the process to meet the region's power needs. The promoters of dams in the Mekong region argue that there is an increasing need for electricity and income generation; however, it is crucial to be aware of whom and what the energy is for, as well as who benefits and how they achieve their objectives. It is quite clear that the benefits of large dams would ultimately be concentrated among private sector investors in the projects and big companies that need ever increasing amounts of energy for their huge industries.

It's about time that hydropower dams in the Mekong region go through a serious and inclusive regional dialogue, which conveys "the voice of the region" that truly represents the majority of the Mekong people, before a natural resources crisis becomes the only future awaiting us.

By Premrudee Daoroung, Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA),

e-mail: premrudee@terrafer.org, www.terrafer.org