
[From the loss of fish to climate change: A look into the recent dam movement in the Mekong Region](#)

“The dams built on the Mekong mainstream and other rivers in the region have resulted in severe changes in the Mekong’s ecosystems, endangering life, livelihoods and the economy of the entire region. Indigenous peoples, women and children are most affected by these changes. The dams have also worsened the impacts of climate change that we are already facing.”

“We have witnessed and experienced the destruction caused by the dams. For us, who live by the river and experience every change in the water systems, there is no question that such dams result in serious negative impacts for present and future generations, and should not be built”

“Mekong governments: Listen to the people!”

Statement by local people on dams in the Mekong Region

25 September 2015

The above statement, written by representatives of local communities from Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, was endorsed by more than 8,200 people, mainly from local communities along the Mekong River, Tonle Sap (Great lake) in Cambodia and the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. The statement was read publicly on 11 November 2015 during the Regional Public Forum called “Local Mekong peoples’ voices: the message to Mekong governments on Mekong dam”. The Forum was held in An Giang University of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, and was hosted by local community representatives from the three countries and their NGOs alliances. At the final part of the Forum, Mrs. Huynh Thi Kim Duyen, representative of Ga Mau Province of Vietnam’s Mekong delta got up for her final statement; *“The Vietnamese local people would like to ask - that Don Sahong Dam should be stopped”*. Such a public spoken statement requesting the dam to be stopped, was truly something new to hear from Vietnam. Equally active in the Forum was the representative from Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia. Mr. Sam At, a fisherman from Tonle Sap in Cambodia states clearly his opinion: *“Cambodia will have to bare the most severe impacts of the Mekong dams on fisheries, especially from the Don Sahong Dam. We want to know why the Don Sahong Dam and other dams keep being pushed forward and why none of the governments will listen to us.”*

In the past almost three decades of the dam campaign among the Mekong civil society and local people, one of the biggest obstacles that has blocked many NGOs, and especially local Mekong communities to participate in the campaign, has been the crippling political relationship between

people and their own government. The lack of democracy within the socialist scheme in Vietnam and Laos has always affected directly the space for civil society organizations (CSOs) and local people to influence energy planning and hydropower dams matters. Thailand and Cambodia, even with more democratic spaces in principle but being led by pro-business and centralized power governments, have continually caused similar results: no access to information and even endangering the lives of the CSOs and local people within the movement.

However, the present situation related to hydropower dams has strengthened the movement of local people and goes beyond the obstacles of the Mekong governments and other influential groups in the region. The political obstacles are now being challenged by local people. They are calling for a direct dialogue between Mekong governments and Mekong people on the unbearable impacts of hydropower projects that people are being forced to suffer since China begun to construct the first dam, Manwan, on the upper part of the Mekong mainstream in 1986. The chronology of impacts from hydropower dams in the Mekong River basin continues (from the China dams) to the Pak Mun dam, which was constructed on the largest Mekong tributary in Thailand and completed in 1994. In 1997, Vietnam built the Yali Falls dam on the upper Sesan River, the major river of the Mekong basin. And finally, since 2012, after China finished five dams on the upper Mekong, Lao PDR begun the construction of a series of dams on the lower Mekong mainstream, with the Xayaburi dam. Currently, Laos continues to push for construction of the Don Sahong Dam without listening to the voices of concern from all over the region.

The strongest voices in the Mekong region are local communities who face the problems directly. In Cambodia, more and more people and communities are facing the severe change on fish lost from the Mekong mainstream, Mekong tributaries and around the Great Lake. Studies that have come out since 2011 from the Mekong River Commission and the fish expert pointed out that *“if, by 2030, eleven dams are built on the Lower Mekong Basin mainstream, forecasted total fish losses would amount to 550,000 to 880,000 tonnes compared to the baseline year 2000 (a 26-42 percent decrease). This is a loss of approximately 340,000 tonnes compared to a situation in 2030 without mainstream dams. Estimates of the cost of lost fish production range from US\$200 million to US\$476 million a year.”* Not only the ‘nation of fish’, Cambodia, but also fishing communities in the region are increasingly experiencing a reality without fish, including many indigenous communities whose livelihood depends almost entirely on fishing.

Along with the fisheries lost, the conclusion that dams in the Mekong region have worsened the existing impacts of climate change, especially in Vietnam, has become one of the key reasons for more space to open up to local people in Vietnam to participate in the hydropower dams matters today. Lack of fresh water from the Mekong to come down to the delta, as well as the lack of good sediment for agriculture is affecting an area where 70 percent of agriculture products of Vietnam are grown. 78 percent of the land in the 40,000 square kilometers of the Mekong River Delta is used for rice production, and most of it lies barely more than two meters above sea level. That this land risks disappearing into the sea because of climate change, exacerbated by hydropower dams upstream, has obviously become a concern for a million people in the country. People are also concerned about water for everyday’s consumption.

Beyond the limits of political space and propaganda on hydropower dams that the dam proponents keep presenting to the Mekong governments, are the actual impacts and real suffering of the Mekong people. The existing and foreseeable impacts of the large scale hydropower dams in the Mekong region have been very clear. It is therefore impossible to convince local people that large scale hydropower is a ‘clean’ source of energy. Along the same lines, the propaganda that presents large scale hydropower dams in the Mekong basin as ‘sustainable’ cannot be taken seriously by local

people, when looking at the severe impacts of existing dams on their lives and economies at the local, national and regional scale. What is only worth looking forward and hoping for, is actually what local Mekong people state in their recent statement; *“It is time for our governments to hear our voices and respect our rights to make a decision about the future of our rivers and our lives.”*

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