
Hydropower on the Mekong: Where dams may block the future of millions

Hydropower is often portrayed as “clean” or “green” energy and as part of the solution for preventing fossil fuel-related climate change. However, government-sponsored and corporate-promoted hydropower implies building huge dams that result in environmental destruction and widespread violation of human rights, ranging from loss of livelihoods to forced evictions and related cases of repression.

The hydropower business is particularly active in the Mekong river basin. Since March 2006, hydropower companies from Thailand, China, Vietnam, Laos, Malaysia and Russia have proposed eleven big hydropower dams for the Mekong River’s lower mainstream. Seven of the dam sites are in Laos, two are in Cambodia, and two are on the Thai-Lao border.

There is already wide-spread concern amongst riverbank communities and the general public about the severe consequences these dams will have.

The Mekong River is host to the world’s largest inland fishery. The commercial fish catch is currently worth US\$3 billion annually. Not only are these fisheries an important source of income for local fishers, which include many of the region’s poorest people, but they are also vital in ensuring regional food security. Between half and four fifths of the animal protein consumed by the 60 million people in the lower Mekong basin come from the river’s fisheries.

This situation will dramatically change if these dams are implemented, because building dams on the river’s mainstream will block the major fish migrations that accounts for up to 70% of the commercial catch. Scientific opinion is agreed on the importance of the Mekong’s migratory fisheries, the impact of the dams on them, and that there is no way to mitigate these impacts.

In response to the growing public concern about the impacts of these dams, the Save the Mekong coalition was formed. As part of its activities, the coalition collected signatures and personal messages from concerned citizens, which express the people’s feelings very clearly:

- “Don’t let hydropower dams block our children's future!” Wang Dezhi, Yunnan, China
- “Don’t build the Mekong dams. The existing dams in Thailand already make brothers and sisters fight against each other!” Mak Vangdokmai, Roi et, Thailand
- “I love my country. I don’t want to see some people destroy my home country for greed. So I would like to do my best to protect our Mekong!” Sneampay, Vientiane, Laos
- “If the dams happen, where will all of us go to live?” Villager, Stung Treng province, Cambodia.
- “Saving us, saving our resources! Electricity is not everything!” Nguyen Thanh Hang, Hanoi, Vietnam

Given the strong government backing for dam building on the Mekong River, over 23,000 people from within the Mekong region and around the world signed a petition addressed to the Prime Ministers of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, urging them to keep the river flowing freely and to pursue less damaging electricity options. The petition was signed by fishers and farmers living

along the river's mainstream and tributaries, as well as by monks, students, city-folk and even some of the region's well-known celebrities.

Within the climate change process, it is important to note that in spite of their well-documented social and environmental impacts, hydropower projects are still eligible for receiving funding from the Climate Change Convention's so-called Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). Although none of the Mekong mainstream dams have yet applied for CDM funding, it is possible that they might do so in the near future, following the path of similar projects in the region and globally.

For instance, the Kamchay dam in Cambodia has applied for CDM funding, in spite of the fact that it is located wholly within the Bokor National Park and will flood 2,000 hectares of protected forest. A similar case is that of the Buon Kuop dam in Vietnam, that has impacted on the livelihoods of 11,000 downstream communities in Cambodia who rely on the Srepok River for their fishing and subsistence agriculture.

It is obvious that none of these dams –or those now planned for the Mekong's lower mainstream- can be considered neither "Clean" nor as a means for "Development". This means that they should not be eligible for receiving "Clean Development Mechanism" funding.

The millions of people that would be dramatically affected by the planned hydropower projects –who already have the Mekong River as their clean mechanism for development- are more important than electricity. Dams must not be allowed to block the future of millions!

Article based on information from Save the Mekong Coalition <http://www.savethemekong.org/> and from Carl Middleton (International Rivers), carl@internationalrivers.org