
Mega-dams in Sarawak: how indigenous peoples rise to defend their rights

300 indigenous people protested against Sarawak's dams at the congress of the International Hydropower Association (IHA) this May in Kuching - Photo: Bruno Manser Fonds

A history of resource exploitation, corruption and human rights abuses

Sarawak is home to an incredibly rich flora and fauna. Its rainforests are one of the most bio-diverse places on earth. Sarawak's Chief Minister Taib Mahmud, however, has radically exploited the state's rich resources during his 30 plus reign of power. Today, Sarawak's rate of deforestation is over three times faster than in Asia overall. (1) Plantations are also rapidly expanding: One twelfth of the state was already covered with oil palm plantations in 2012 (2) and Sarawak's government plans to double the area under oil palm by 2020. (3)

Chief Minister Taib Mahmud has personally profited from the state's resource exploitation. Taib has used his political position to award his family members with concessions for timber, palm oil or with state contracts. In Sarawak, the Taib family controls a well-diversified business empire with interests in timber and logging, plantations, electricity supplies, property development and media. During Taib's term in office, he and his immediate family have amassed stakes in over 400 companies worldwide. Taib's personal wealth has been estimated at US\$15 billion.

Human rights abuses have accompanied the aggressive exploitation of natural resources in Sarawak. The indigenous peoples' right to their ancestral lands has been denied time and again. The indigenous communities want their forests, which they have used for hunting and gathering for centuries and which form an essential part of their identity and culture, to be legally acknowledged. The government, however, is only willing to grant land if it has been cleared for agriculture – the rest of the land is considered as state land and therefore up for logging and palm oil.

Large corporations profitting from large dams in Sarawak

In May 2013, international hydropower companies met under the umbrella of the International Hydropower Association (IHA) in Kuching. The International Hydropower Association (IHA) is an industry lobby composed of dam builders and financiers that promote the use of hydropower. The IHA is working closely with electric utility Sarawak Energy Berhad (SEB) to promote the Sarawak dams as "best practice," despite evidence to the contrary.

In fact, the companies developing and providing advisory services for the Sarawak dams—including SEB, Norconsult, Hydro Tasmania, China Three Gorges Corporation, and Sinohydro— sponsor the IHA. The International Finance Corporation, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank, have also backed IHA,

which in May 2013 hosted a workshop in Malaysia under the framework of its 2013 IHA Congress.

SEB has claimed that the IHA's voluntary auditing tool, the Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Protocol (HSAP), can help them manage environmental and social risks related to dams in Sarawak.

However, the HSAP was developed without the participation of dam-affected communities and civil society, and it has received criticism for being tightly controlled by industry, for its exclusion of affected people, and for its subjective scoring system, which could be used to greenwash dams.

"It is clear the building of the dams is mainly to supply power for energy intensive industries like aluminum smelting plants, magnesium plant and silicon industries," denounced the grassroots network of indigenous communities and civil society organizations Save Sarawak Rivers.

Sources: "The Sarawak Dams and Industry Greenwash", Save Sarawak Rivers, <http://www.savesarawakrivers.com/ihahsap/>

How the people's rights go down in the waters of the dams

The government's latest strike on the indigenous peoples' lands is a series of at least 12 hydroelectric dams: The Sarawak government and the state-owned Malaysian power supplier Sarawak Energy target a six-fold rise in electricity production capacity from today's 1,300 Megawatt to between 7,000MW and 8,500MW in 2020. (4) Whether enough purchasers for the new electricity will be attracted is highly questionable – the Taib family's companies profit anyway: They build the transmission lines as well as the resettlement sites. They also have a monopoly on cement and are involved in the smelters to be fuelled by the new dams.

Sarawak is known to have one of Asia's largest dams, the recently completed Bakun Dam. The 10,000 displaced indigenous peoples tell a story of broken promises and loss of livelihoods. They have never been properly informed or consulted on the construction of the dam. The circumstances in the resettlement sites have not allowed them to continue their traditional way of life, as the farmland is often unsuitable and there is no forest left for hunting and collection of forest products. Many of them are still waiting to receive the full compensation package they were promised – more than a decade after their resettlement.

The resettlement for the Murum Dam, the first dam of the new series, started in September 2013, only three weeks before the filling of the reservoir began. As at Bakun before, the rights of the affected communities have been violated: The indigenous communities have not been given the chance to grant or withhold their free, prior and informed consent for the project. The social and environmental impact assessment was only done after the start of the construction. The indigenous peoples' right to choose their own development path has been denied: the government uses the resettlement to force the people into mainstream society.

Save Sarawak Rivers: an indigenous movement is emerging

The Baram Dam, the next proposed dam, would affect 400km² of indigenous land and up to 20,000

people. The affected people have heard the stories from their brothers and sisters displaced by the Bakun and Murum dams. They have made their first experiences with Sarawak Energy: Consultation and consent is understood as giving them information about how the Baram Dam will improve their lives. First expropriations of land have taken place although no environmental assessment has been completed and the project has not been officially approved. Consequently, the indigenous peoples took the decision to fight the Baram Dam and to protect their ancestral lands.

Affected communities and civil society groups founded the “Save Sarawak Rivers Network” (SAVE Rivers) in late 2011 with the following purpose: “Together we are working to protect our human rights and stop destructive dams in Sarawak.” Since then, they have been tirelessly taking action. Their letters, petitions, conferences and protests have received a lot of public attention.

When Sarawak Energy tried to hold a traditional Baram prayer ritual at the proposed dam site in 2012, angry villagers interrupted the ceremony on boats: “How can Sarawak Energy and the government hold our traditional Baram ‘Mayau Dalleh’ prayer ritual for blessing a dam which will destroy our Baram culture?”, asked Philip Jau, a member of SAVE Rivers. Some days later, 150 indigenous people held their own prayer against the dam at the same site.

In May 2013, international hydropower companies met in Kuching. They were faced with 300 protesting people travelling from all over Sarawak to speak out against dam development and the neglect of their right to their ancestral lands. Since October, around 200 indigenous people have been manning two blockades in the Baram area, one against the on-going construction of the access road and one near the proposed dam site. The construction work for the road and the soil sampling came to a complete standstill.

The protesting people have been surprised by their own success. The actions and especially the blockades have seen wide solidarity. It further seems like the movement against the dams has expanded and mobilized many indigenous groups based on land issues. The time might soon be ripe for a change in Sarawak. Let’s support the communities in their struggle for their rights and lands.

Further information and taking action

Sign the petition on the SAVE Rivers website: www.savesarawakrivers.com

Watch the film: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wewbJbo7I1Q

Read more: www.stop-corruption-dams.org, www.sarawakreport.org/tag/dam-watch/

By Annina Aeberli, Bruno Manser Fund, www.bmf.ch The Swiss-based Bruno Manser Fund is committed to protect the threatened tropical rainforests and the rights of the indigenous peoples in Sarawak. The organisation has been working closely with the local SAVE Rivers network in supporting the struggle against the planned mega-dams in Sarawak.

(1) SarVision, Impact of oil palm plantations on peatland conversion in Sarawak 2005-2010“, 25 January 2011, <http://www.wetlands.org/Portals/0/publications/Report/Malaysia%20Sarvision.pdf>

(2) Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB) “Oil Palm Planted Area”, December 2012, http://bepi.mpob.gov.my/images/area/2012/Area_summary.pdf

(3) Jack Wong (2010) “Sarawak to double oil palm plantation area”, in: The Star [Malaysia], 30.11.10.

(4) Sarawak Energy Berhad (2012) “2010 Annual Report”, page 28.

