
Malaysia: Indigenous groups from around the globe discuss anti-dam struggles

In December 2015, indigenous peoples in Sarawak, Malaysia, celebrated a major victory: the state government announced a moratorium and, in 2016, cancelled the controversial Baram Dam (4). The struggle against the dam has been an inspiration for many and featured prominently in the presentation about "[What is happening to our forests in Malaysia?](#)" at the November 2016 gathering in Bangkok referred to in the editorial of this Bulletin. We therefore re-publish this article on an international meeting of anti-dam activists who met on the banks of the Baram river in October 2015, just months before the state government announced the moratorium on Baram dam construction.

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Indigenous dam fighters from around the world came together on October 23rd 2015 on the banks of the Baram River in Sarawak, a Malaysian state on the island of Borneo, to stand in solidarity with the people fighting against the proposed Baram Dam. On that day, the two blockades against the Baram Dam celebrated their second year anniversary. The Baram Dam would have submerged over 400km² of forest and displaced up to 20,000 indigenous people, while its electricity is not even needed: Sarawak already faces a power glut. Thanks to the blockades, the works on the Baram Dam as well as its access road have been stopped completely for the last two years.

The indigenous delegations from Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Brazil, the United States, Honduras, and from around Malaysia gathered in Sarawak to share their experiences, strengthen ties between their communities and make a common statement on dams. The week-long event was called the World Indigenous Summit on Environment and Rivers (WISER) and was hosted by Sarawak's grassroots network SAVE Rivers (1).

Baram for all, all for Baram

The participants of WISER visited various places of importance to the resistance against the Baram Dam, such as the two blockade sites and the proposed dam site. Peter Kallang, chairman of SAVE Rivers and host of WISER, explained: "We of SAVE Rivers wanted the participants to experience our culture and to see the beauty of our Baram River themselves, so that they better understand what is at stake and why we struggle."

At the proposed dam site, which was reached by boat, Peter Kallang told an anecdote: "In 2012, Sarawak's power company and dam builder Sarawak Energy organized a traditional indigenous prayer ritual at the proposed Baram dam site to bless the dam construction. Immediately, the local communities reacted with protests on boats at the site to this abuse of their traditional prayer. That was a key moment in the mobilization against the dam."

The story of the defence of the Baram River symbolically stands for the destiny of many indigenous groups threatened by dams. Berta Cáceres, 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize (2) winner from Honduras, was struck by the similarities between the threats the communities are faced with and stressed the importance of WISER: “This summit on indigenous peoples and rivers has a special value in that its actions give strength to the historic resistance of our peoples and makes visible the grave aggressions and conflict generated by the privatization of rivers and the construction of dams within Indigenous communities and regions.”

The WISER Baram 2015 declaration

Workshops were held at the village of Tanjung Tepalit, one of the 26 villages to be flooded by the Baram Dam. The participants discussed their motivations to fight against dams, challenges to their campaigns as well as successful strategies to mobilize people and to advance in their respective struggles.

James Nyurang, former headman of Tanjung Tepalit and host of the international delegation, is confident that the Baram people gained strength through the summit to continue the struggle: “Being together with all the delegates sharing and discussing about various strategies to encounter the challenges of how to stop all the unnecessary dams in the world, I have gained a lot of experience from all of the delegates. And with such information, I am confident enough such experiences will be fundamental to us - the Baram People - and our strategies to continue to fight and stop the proposed Baram Dam.”

The discussions culminated in the adoption of the “[WISER Baram 2015 Declaration on Dams and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)”. (3) The declaration acknowledges the widespread suffering and destruction caused by dams. Governments, companies and investors are asked to not proceed with projects that have not obtained the Free, Prior and Informed Consent of the impacted communities, to ratify and enforce the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as well as the ILO Convention 169 and to implement small-scale renewable energy alternatives in rural contexts. The declaration also demands reparations for communities that have suffered from dams as well as to conduct studies on the removal of dams.

The participants stress that dams should no longer be presented as climate neutral. “We make a strong call to the next Climate Change Summit in Paris to listen to and respect Indigenous peoples and the alternatives to climate change our communities offer”, said Berta Cáceres, who is fighting the Agua Zarca Dam in Honduras, at the final press conference of WISER in the town of Miri.

Struggles and hopes

All participants share the suffering caused by loss of culture and heritage as well as the natural environments they and their communities are part of, the exclusion from decision-making and even the criminalization and militarization.

But there are also stories of success: Kundy Doeam and Dinith Yoen from Cambodia told how they reached a moratorium on the Areng Dam early this year after intensive campaigning with blockades, a bicycle campaign, amongst others. Sammy and John Luke Gensaw of the Yurok tribe in California,

United States, explained that while the four dams on the Klamath River are still standing and threatening the salmon, the base of livelihood for the Yurok tribe, the US government has started to decommission dams in other places. Subsequently, ecosystems are recovering surprisingly fast.

People in Baram are also more and more hopeful that the dam will be stopped. First of all, the resistance has considerably grown and the blockades have been effective in stopping the project. In June, Peter Kallang and Daniel Kammen, professor of the University of California, Berkeley, met with Sarawak's Chief Minister Adenan Satem to discuss alternative energy sources to dams. In September, Sarawak's Chief Minister Adenan Satem announced a moratorium on the Baram Dam.

However, Daniela Da Silva's story about the Belo Monte Dam in the Brazilian Amazon reminds us that successes are fragile. She spoke about how the predecessor of the Belo Monte Dam, the Kararao Dam, was defeated by widespread protests in the late 1980s, but renamed and revived by the government later on. Even several court rulings against the project couldn't stop its completion. Sadly, dam projects presumed dead are often revived by unimaginative governments.

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(1) SAVE Rivers was founded four years ago as community network to fight against a series of at least 12 dams proposed by the Sarawak government. The Baram Dam quickly became the most controversial project out of the series.

(2) The Goldman Environmental Prize honours grassroots environmentalists and recognizes them for their efforts to protect the natural environment, often at great personal risk. Only months after speaking at the gathering on the banks of the Baram river about the Lenca peoples' struggle against the Agua Zarca Dam in Honduras, [Berta Cáceres was killed inside her own home](#).

(3) Read the declaration:

http://www.stop-corruption-dams.org/resources/WISER_Baram_2015_Declaration_Signed.pdf

(4) The Baram miracle: Dam plans officially scrapped. Bruno Manser Fund News.

<http://bmf.ch/en/news/the-baram-miracle-dam-plans-officially-scrapped>