
[Laos: Damming the Sekong Norconsult wipes Cambodia off the map](#)

A series of large dams are currently proposed for the Sekong River Basin in southern Laos. In addition to the tens of thousands of people in Laos who would be affected by these projects, the livelihoods of 30,000 people living along the Sekong River downstream in Cambodia are also under threat. Yet the dams are being planned with no consideration of the impact on people and the environment in Cambodia.

In June 2007, the Norwegian consulting firm Norconsult completed two initial environmental examinations for two of the proposed dams: Sekong 4 and Nam Kong 1. A recent report, written under the pseudonym of Anurak Wangpattana, welcomes the fact that the studies recognize many of the impacts that these dams will have on people, forests and fisheries in southern Laos, but criticises Norconsult for completely ignoring the impacts of these projects on people living downstream in Cambodia.

The two dam projects, which are both being developed by the Russian Region Oil Company, are about 100 kilometres apart. The 600 MW Sekong 4 dam would flood 150 square kilometres of land, including forests and other land used to collect non-timber forest products, grazing land and land used for rotational swidden agriculture. About 5,000 people would be evicted from their homes to make way for the reservoir, of whom about 98 per cent are Indigenous Peoples. The Katu and Nge ethnic minorities make up 80 per cent of the population in Kaleum District, the capital of which would be flooded by the reservoir.

The importance of the forest to villagers living in Kaleum District is clear from a 2004 report written by Charles Alton, a UN consultant, and Houmphang Rattanavong, of the Lao National Science Council. The report notes that in four Katu villages in Kaleum District, about 76 per cent of villagers' income comes from collecting non-timber forest products and a further 16 per cent from raising livestock. The 150-200 MW Nam Kong 1 dam, planned for a tributary of the Sekong River, would flood 21.8 square kilometres. Anurak Wangpattana notes that more than 1,600 people living downstream of the proposed dam would suffer the impacts of the dam. Many of these people used to live in the reservoir area, but were moved out by the Lao government during the 1990s.

Fish provides an important part of diet of villagers living in the reservoir area of the proposed Se Kong 4 reservoir. "All villages in the reservoir flooding area have robust fisheries primarily for subsistence, contributing a large part of the protein in their diet," reports Norconsult. Constructing the dam will wipe out these fisheries. Communities living downstream of the dam will also see severe impacts to their fisheries. The reservoir behind the Sekong 4 would take 14 months to fill. Once the dam is operating, the flow of the river would be completely changed.

"There is potential for a loss of aquatic biodiversity and productivity in the Se Kong River downstream due to these changes in flow," in the dry language of Norconsult's experts. Anurak Wangpattana explains that Norconsult's Initial Environmental Examination is the first step in the environmental impact assessments of the Se Kong 4 and Nam Kong 1 dams and suggests that a cumulative EIA would be possible. But what's missing so far from Norconsult's studies, Anurak points out, "is an

explicit recognition that these impacts will extend along the Sekong River in Cambodia." For ten years, villagers living along the Sesan River in northeastern Cambodia have seen the devastating impacts of dam construction upstream in Vietnam.

Dozens of villagers have drowned following sudden releases of water from the Yali Falls dam. Villagers have lost livestock, crops and fishing equipment. Poor water quality has caused skin rashes and stomach problems. More than 3,500 people have now abandoned their homes near the Sesan River and moved upland to get away from the river's floods and unpredictable flows, according to recent research by the Cambodian NGO 3S Rivers Protection Network ("3S" refers to the Sekong, Sesan and Srepok Rivers).

"Villagers have lost their hopes and dependencies on this river, because nearly all of the river resources are gone," Roman Mal, an Indigenous Jarai village chief, told the researchers. Many of the 30,000 people living along the Sekong River in Stung Treng province, Cambodia, belong to Lao, Khmer Khe, Kavet, Lun, and Kuy ethnic groups. The Sekong River's fisheries and riverbank vegetable gardens are a vital part of their food security and livelihoods. Anurak Wangpattana warns that "The experience with the trans-boundary impacts of large hydroelectric dams elsewhere in the Mekong Region clearly indicates that the impacts of the Sekong 4 and Nam Kong 1 dams on Cambodia and in Laos must not be ignored, and should not be allowed to happen, no matter how easy it is for the proponents of dams per se to dismiss these impacts."

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