
[Laos: Vietnamese consortium plans to build six dams in Laos](#)

In July, the Vietnam Laos Investment and Development Company signed a \$232 million deal with the Lao Government to build and operate the 210 MW Sekaman 3 dam. This month the Lao Government announced its approval for the consortium to build five more dams: Se Kong 4 (310 MW), Se Kong 5 (200 MW), Se Pian-Se Nam Noi (340 MW), the Sekaman 1 (300 MW) and Sekaman 4 (55 MW).

The consortium consists of six state-run power and construction firms including Electricity of Vietnam, Vietnam's state-run electricity utility and the Song Da Construction Corporation. Last year Hanoi signed an agreement with the Lao government to import 1,000 MW each year between 2006 and 2010.

The planned dams are all in the Se Kong River basin. The Se Kong flows from southern Laos into Cambodia and is a major tributary of the Mekong River.

In 1998, British engineering consulting firm Halcrow completed a \$2.5 million study of potential dam sites in three river basins including the Se Kong. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of Halcrow's study is the lack of information available about these rivers, their fisheries and watersheds and the people that live there.

Halcrow noted that: "the hydrology database needs to be improved"; "there is a need for the estimation of substantial amounts of missing data"; "fisheries information is extremely sporadic"; and "the current character of the project watersheds is unknown". On environmental and sociological impacts, Halcrow concluded that "the quality of available documentation is variable and generally inadequate to support the present study."

Yet there is little doubt that the impacts of the dams would be devastating.

The 190 square kilometre reservoir behind the proposed Sekaman 1 dam includes part of the Dong Ampham National Biodiversity Conservation Area. When confronted with estimates that logging the reservoir area would yield less timber than originally estimated, an employee with the then-developer, Austral Lao Power, is reported to have said, "In that case we'll just keep logging until we reach the Vietnamese border." ALP has since pulled out of the project after its project manager Peter Martin was arrested in 2001, for not paying \$240,000 in wages allegedly owed to his Lao employees.

The Sekaman 1 dam could take up to seven years to fill causing "permanent damage" to the downstream ecology, according to Halcrow. Fisheries would be wiped out, along with the livelihoods of communities dependent on the fisheries. The change in water flow would threaten the Se Kong Plains Wetlands. The only other example of this type of wetland in the Mekong Region is threatened by another proposed hydropower project: the Nam Theun 2 dam.

For several years, local authorities in southern Laos have been evicting people from their homes in anticipation of dam construction. The dam projects have been used as an excuse to clear people from upland watersheds, supposedly in an attempt to stop swidden agriculture. One upland

community that was moved from the site of the Se Kong 5 saw one-third of its people die of malaria within a year of being evicted.

Construction of the Se Pian-Se Nam Noi dam has been stalled since the 1997 Asian economic crisis. At the end of 2000, the dam developer, South Korea's Dong Ah Construction Industries, collapsed. The project was nevertheless used as an excuse to evict Nya Heun indigenous people from the reservoir area and surrounding forests.

In 1995, Swiss consulting firm Electrowatt (now 100% owned by Finnish consulting firm Jaakko Poyry) produced an environmental impact assessment for the project. Electrowatt hired a US NGO, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), to conduct fishery and wildlife surveys of the project area. WCS recommended the Se Pian River should not be dammed because of the damage this would cause to forests and fisheries. The recommendation was excluded from Electrowatt's final report. None of the follow-up studies that WCS recommended were carried out.

In 2001, an Electrowatt consultant visited the resettlement site for the Nya Heun people evicted from the Se Pian-Se Nam Noi dam site. He reported that conditions were "far from being satisfactory" and in need of "urgent improvement". Villagers had been given poor quality land and not enough pasture. Many households suffered food shortages. Villagers were moved into houses without kitchens or toilets. Water quality was "rather bad" and "not sufficient" to meet villagers' needs. There were not enough classrooms or teachers. Malaria was "a very serious problem". None of the villagers had electricity.

The impact of each of these dams is bad enough for the people and forests of Laos and Cambodia. Considered together the proposed dams spell a social and environmental disaster.

By: Chris Lang, e-mail: <http://chrislang.org>