
[“Energy Trade or Our Life”: The Struggle Against the Dams in the Mekong River Mainstream](#)

The Mekong River is the longest river in Southeast Asia and one of the world's great rivers. Covering a distance of nearly 5,000 km. from its source on the Tibetan Plateau in China to the Mekong Delta, the river flows through six countries: China, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The people of the Lower Mekong countries (Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam) have been living with a significant challenge in the past three decades due to the rapid development of large hydropower dams, especially on the Mekong mainstream. Large hydro dams block major fish migrations and disrupt this vitally important river, affecting millions of people who depend upon the Mekong for their livelihoods and survival. Territorial issues of sovereignty and land tenure, plus the lack of governance cooperation among the relevant states, are the main barriers for affected communities and civil society movements to strengthen their networks across borders. Yet, despite these barriers, in tandem with the false argument of solving people's energy needs and benefits from the energy trade, social movements have maintained their unity with hope, still.

The upper part of the Mekong River, or “Lancang River” in the Chinese language, is now entirely controlled by the 11 Chinese-owned large hydropower dams. These large dams are, among other impacts, preventing the Mekong mainstream from filling itself along the Thai-Laos border as well as from filling the Tonle Sap (the Great Lake), the major source of fishes, which provides Cambodians with up to 70 per cent of their protein.

Currently, the government of Lao PDR is going full-speed to push seven dams on the Mekong mainstream, after finishing with the first two dams, which are implemented by Thai and Malaysian companies. The energy trade relationship between the Mekong and other Southeast Asian countries is not only a business matter, but it is also firmly pushed by the political interests of many actors. China is now the leading actor in the business with its engagement in many upcoming projects. It is also the most influential in political ideology and development direction and the biggest lender for landlocked Laos. At the same time, Thailand remains the biggest buyer of Laos' electricity.

Laos is referred to as the “Battery of Southeast Asia” due to the vast amount of planned dams aimed to feed the energy for neighboring countries.

‘Net Zero’ Emissions by Damming the Mekong river and its people

Since 1993, Thailand has signed five Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) to buy electricity from Laos. In 2016, Thailand agreed to purchase 9,000 MW from Laos over the following two decades. To date, Laos has sold 5,935 MW to Thailand. On March 2022, the Thai cabinet agreed to sign the latest MOU for buying an additional 1,500 MW, making a total of 10,500 MW. The government's argument for the new MOU was “To get clean energy to support Thailand's Net Zero Green Emissions.” Therefore, the agreements make way for the Thai business to continue building dams in Laos and allow the announcement of a distorted logic in claiming that the large-scale hydropower dam is a

clean energy source.

It is difficult to know the number of people suffering from these mega dams, because of the multifold changes along the river's 4,880 kilometers that cross six countries. The destruction of the biodiversity in the Mekong mainstream, its tributaries, the Tonle Sap (the Great Lake) in Cambodia and the Mekong delta, took away a promising future and the livelihoods of millions. Studies estimate that the decline in the Mekong's fisheries alone will cost nearly USD 23 billion by 2040. This number is not surprising when we look at Tonle Sap, one of the world's biggest inland lakes, with 70% of fish species migrating from the Mekong into the lake during the wet season. By 2019, the Mekong-Tonle Sap flowing system had changed dramatically, leaving the lake's water warm, shallow and oxygen-starved. In that year, fisheries in Tonle Sap were estimated to decline by 80 to 90%. As a result, many people had to move away from their original thriving communities next to the lake, to face an unknown future with almost no choices.

In the past three decades, the governments from the Mekong region have failed to protect the river and its people. The region, under military and socialist governments, was only able to agree on an open-market economy and cross-border trade. However, the lack of governance in this process has left people behind and far apart from one another. Apart from the weak, unreliable process among the Mekong governments as well as from mechanisms such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC), people in the Lower Mekong have also faced Chinese aggressive investments without much explanations and Chinese hydropower businesses, which have rapidly grow. While insisting on its brotherhood with the Lower Mekong countries, China has never accepted any of the impacts of its dams.

While the evidence of the Mekong River's environmental and social destruction is becoming more prominent, the sharp contrast between the businesses getting benefits and the people and the countries getting pain is also evident. In Thailand, the price of electricity is about to reach its highest rate in the coming May 2022. Yet, Thailand has more than 50 per cent of energy reserve margin, as the Thai Power Development Plans (PDP) was based on an overestimated economic growth. The Thai authority insists on raising hydro's power output from seven per cent in 2015 to 15-20 per cent by 2036, in line with its constant support to the hydro businesses, amidst the oversupply of electricity and the destruction of local environments and livelihoods.

For Lao PDR, the most recent news indicates the country's 'debt trap' problem. In 2015, Laos' Gross Domestic Product (GDP) tripled from 2005. It grew as high as 6.3 per cent in 2017. However, it dropped continually to 5.5 in 2019 and 3.3 per cent in 2020. The main driving force for the increased GDP was the foreign investment in large infrastructure projects. However, the Laos government has to invest at least 30 per cent of its GDP to generate six to seven per cent economic growth. Therefore, it turned out that Laos could not generate sufficient high income to pay off its foreign debt. Its debt, especially to China, came from multibillion-dollar projects, such as high-speed rail projects, large hydropower dams, and the energy grid infrastructure. Therefore, the government of Laos does not have many choices than to push further the "Battery of Asia", allowing the private sector and China to design their future development direction.

A Strong Resistance to Save the Mekong River

Since these large dam projects started in the late 1980s, civil society groups and local communities spent the first two decades working to understand the situation and mobilizing to create networks among them, despite all the difficulties due to repression and criminalization. In 2012, a Network of local communities from eight provinces along the Mekong river in Thailand sued the Energy

Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) for planning to buy 95 per cent of its electricity from the Xayabouri Dam, the first Lower Mekong dam built by a Thai company. (1) After years of investigation, the administrative court turned down the peoples' attempt to slow down the EGAT. The appeal is still ongoing against this major dam, which operates on a full scale. However, putting the energy authority to court has helped people to understand the energy business more than before. Since then, different communities in the Mekong countries have been trying to deepen the argument of energy needs and benefits from the energy trade with the situation on the ground. NGOs receive more requests to give training workshops on energy and impacts of hydro energy. Many community representatives start to overcome the apparent complexity of numbers and calculations and come out with their own arguments to support the critical question of "Energy trade or our lives."

In Thailand, the movements' momentum has also gained because of the campaign on the upcoming Thai-Laos dams. Among the seven proposed dams, two dams are planned across the two countries' borders, namely Ban Khoum and Pak Chom Dams. Communities can therefore react directly as affected stakeholders.

Recently, the company Energy Absolute Plc asked permission to the Thai Northeastern province to survey the areas affected by the Ban Khoum dam. The 69.6 billion Thai baht (around US 2 billion dollars) project will generate 1,079MW of power, but it would affect about 250,000 people in Thailand and Laos. On Feb 7, 2022, a Mekong conservation group, based in the Ubon Rachathani Province in Northeastern Thailand, submitted a petition to the governor of the Province asking him to reconsider the company's permission to carry out a survey in the area due to the serious concerns on the project's potential impacts.

On February 13, the governor sent a letter to the conservation group and the company instructing Energy Absolute Plc to suspend its survey because there is no information about a cooperation framework between Thailand and Laos on this project yet.

The Thai communities were able to delay the process in Thailand, at least for a while. However, a similar survey on the Laos side of the border was ongoing, regarding an announcement of a MOU between companies in Laos and Thailand and the Laos government for a feasibility study on these dams from July 29, 2020. According to the MOU, the group planned to finish the feasibility study of the dams within two years.

The movements against the large dams on the Mekong mainstream river could perceive this as the final struggle before the Mekong River becomes too devastated. It is even uncertain if all the seven dams could be built, with the severely drying situation of the river, when all the large dams need the Mekong waters to generate the power. However, in this final turning point, hopefully, the current problems and the knowledge people have gained in the past three decades will enable them to make a more robust mobilization and more comprehensive networking.

It might be the chance for the communities, for once, to lead the mobilization back on track and be able to save some of the remaining parts of the river, of their lives.

Premrudee Daoroung
Project SEVANA South-East Asia

(1) Video with English subtitles about a fisher community in Thailand in Ubon Rachathani Province, which is the group that submitted the petition against the survey of the company on Ban Khoum Dam.

[See the video.](#)
