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Large Scale Hydropower Projects and their Impacts on Local Communities

Ikuko Matsumoto

The Mekong River: A priceless natural resource



- The Mekong River threads mainland Southeast Asia together
- 12th longest River in the world
- 60 million people live within the lower Mekong River Basin
- Provides food security for millions and high economic value

Resources in the Mekong River:

Fisheries



River bank gardens and agriculture



Aquatic products



Endangered species



Mekong Giant
catfish

Irrawaddy
Dolphin



Mekong River's fisheries are central to regional economy and food security



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- Mekong supports world's largest inland fishery
- First catch value is US\$2-3 billion
- Economic value is up to US\$9.4 billion
- 64-93% of rural households are involved in fisheries
- Consumption of fish/aquatic animals contributes 47-80% of animal protein intake
- Fish are central to nutrition and food security for the 60 million people in the Lower Mekong basin

Social impacts (1): Decreasing level of access to natural resources

Hydropower projects:

- provoke a large part of rapid ecological decline, and
- **decrease the level of access to natural resources (rivers, forests, grazing lands and farm lands) for riparian communities, particularly communities who depend on natural resources for their livelihoods.**



Erosion along the
Hinboun River

Social impacts (1): Decreasing level of access to natural resources



A villager points out how high the water came last year in the middle of his abandoned rice field

- Loss of rights to access to natural resources = loss of control over their livelihoods,
- Decreasing the level of access to natural resources = undermining communities' food security.
 - Resettlement: *Moving to marginal and smaller lands (Nakai Plateau)*
 - Flooding: *Abandoned rice fields and losses of riverbank gardens (downstream along Hai and Hinboun rivers)*

Social impacts (2):

Most vulnerable to changes are poor households



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- Fishing and the collection of aquatic animals is of greater importance to poor households than to those which are better off (A study in southern Laos' Attapeu province).
- Poor and vulnerable families tend not to be involved in new livelihood restoration programs in order to avoid risk to be indebted (Downstream along the Xe Bang Fai River).

Social impacts (3): Difficult to replace subsistence livelihoods



- **Lack of suitable land**
 - Resettlement: *Lack of land for livestock, NTFP, rice cultivation.* The most fertile lands are submerged (Nakai Plateau)
- **Insufficient knowledge of the new techniques**
 - *Failure of dry season rice cultivation* (Downstream along Hai and Hinboun rivers)
 - *Failure of fishponds* (Downstream along the Xe Bang Fai River)

Social impacts (3): Difficult to replace subsistence livelihoods



- **Inexperience in commercial negotiation and lack of commercial networks**
 - Resettlement: *Difficult to shift growing cash crops and find a market* (Nakai Plateau)
- **Unfamiliarity with managing credit**
 - New livelihood programs: *Many people become indebted* (Downstream along Xe Bang Fai River, Nakai Plateau)

Social impacts (3): Difficult to replace subsistence livelihoods



- Volatile nature of a commodity market
 - New livelihood programs: *Risks on changes commodity price* regarding dry season rice cultivation (Downstream along Xe Bang Fai River)

Social impacts (4): Rapid change in culture increase risk of poverty



- For many subsistence agriculturalists, the loss of traditional agriculture is in effect a loss of culture.
- The loss of culture, or rapid change in culture increases risk of poverty.
- Rapid change in culture often results in: social dislocation, psychological trauma, feeling of deep hopelessness and despondency

RECOMMENDATION (1)

Cost-benefit analysis recognizing people's livelihoods and food security



This woman living near the confluence of Hai and Hinboun rivers is concerned about loss of agricultural lands and displacement

- Recognize the importance of the Mekong river basin to people's livelihoods and food security
- This recognition should be central to development plans in the Basin.
- Due to potentially devastating impacts to regional fisheries and food security, the Mekong River's mainstream should be placed off-limits to dam development.

RECOMMENDATION (2)

Comprehensive option assessment for the region's energy and water needs



- Conduct comprehensive option assessment for the region's energy and water needs
- Assess and prioritize potential for energy efficiency, demand side management, decentralized energy and new renewable technologies for the region
- Participatory process

RECOMMENDATION (3)

Agreement from affected communities



- If dam projects are the most appropriate option, affected people should give their agreement (indigenous people: free, prior and informed consent)
- Legally binding agreements for mitigation and compensation
- Guaranteed a share in the project's benefits for affected communities

Thank you for your attention



www.internationalrivers.org
ikuko@internationalrivers.org

