

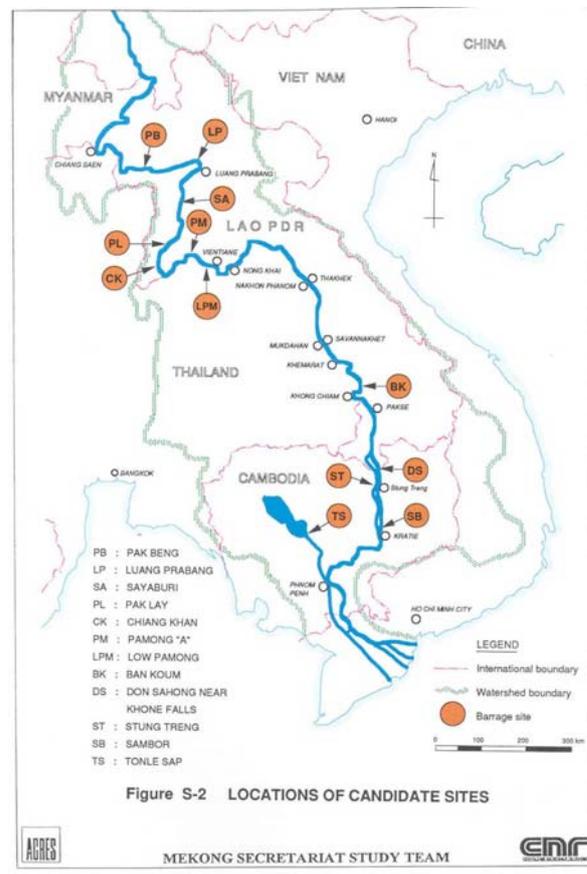
Press Briefing, 8 November 2007

MRC silent as mainstream dams move forward

Mekong mainstream dam plans revived

Six hydropower dams across the Lower Mekong River are back in the planning stages more than a decade after they were proposed and roundly dismissed as too costly and environmentally damaging. Since early 2006, Thai, Malaysian and Chinese companies have been granted permission to conduct feasibility studies for six large hydropower dams on the lower Mekong mainstream, including:

- Don Sahong dam, Champasak province, Lao PDR: Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between Mega First Corporation Bhd (Malaysia) and the Government of Laos (GoL) for feasibility study in March 2006.
- Xayabouri dam, Xayabouri province, Lao PDR: MoU signed between Ch. Karnchang Public Company Ltd (Thailand) and the GoL for feasibility study in May 2007.
- Pak Lay dam, Xayabouri province, Lao PDR: MoU signed between Sinohydro Corporation (China), China National Electronics Import, and the GoL for feasibility study in June 2007.
- Pak Beng dam, Oudomxay province, Lao PDR: MoU signed between Datang International Power Generation Co. Ltd (China) and GoL for feasibility study in August 2007.
- Sambor dam, Kratie province, Cambodia: MoU signed between China Southern Power Grid Company and the Government of Cambodia for feasibility study in October 2006.
- Ban Koum dam, Ubon Ratchathani province, Thailand: Feasibility study commissioned by Thailand's Ministry of Energy is currently being conducted by Panya Consultants Co. Ltd and Mako Consultants.



These same six sites were recommended by Canadian and French consultants in a report published by the Mekong Secretariat in 1994 (see map).¹ The 1994 study proposed a series of “run-of-river” dams 30 to 60 metres high, with reservoirs stretching a total of over 600 kilometres of the river, displacing an estimated 57,000 people.

Mainstream dams threaten riparian communities

While detailed social and environmental evaluations of individual projects have either yet to be undertaken or publicly released, numerous studies point to the severe and widespread impacts these dams would have on thousands of riparian communities who rely on the Mekong's abundant resources.

In May 2007, over 30 scientists sent a letter to senior government officials of the Mekong countries and the MRC, urging them to consider the weight of scientific evidence that points to the devastating impacts the Don Sahong dam would have on the Mekong's fishery and fishing-based livelihoods. The letter states: "the location of this proposed dam is probably the worst possible place to site a 240 MW project since it is the point of maximum concentration of fish migration in the river that supports the world's largest freshwater fishery."

Likewise, the Sambor dam in Kratie would block a crucial passageway for fish migrating upstream from the Tonle Sap into the Mekong River, with serious impacts for Cambodia's fisheries, which contribute roughly 12 per cent of national GDP. According to a recent policy brief by the Cambodian National Mekong Committee, "the loss of even a small percentage of this fishery represents tens of thousands of tons and millions of dollars worth of fish."ⁱⁱ

Research published by the Mekong River Commission in 2004 identifies dams built for purposes of irrigation, hydroelectricity and flood control as "the overriding threat to the future of the Mekong's fish and fisheries."ⁱⁱⁱ Contrary to repeated claims by hydropower proponents that, if properly managed, negative impacts of dams can be mitigated, "there are so far no examples of effective measures in the region to mitigate the negative impacts of dams on fisheries."^{iv}

Mekong River Commission: protecting or damming the Mekong?

Despite the serious ecological and economic implications of damming the lower Mekong, there is only silence from the Mekong River Commission (MRC) – an abdication of its primary duty to protect the river under the 1995 Mekong Agreement.

The 1995 Agreement replaced two prior Mekong agreements: the 1957 statute which founded the original Mekong Committee; and the 1975 Declaration of Principles for the Utilization of the Water of the Lower Mekong Basin.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Mekong Committee drew up plans for a cascade of seven large-scale dams for the lower Mekong mainstream. While these plans did not materialise due to geopolitical conflicts and widespread concerns over the massive social and environmental impacts, the Mekong Committee and Secretariat continued to devote significant resources on "revised" plans to dam the mainstream – as well as identifying over 200 possible dam sites, most of them on tributaries flowing from the highlands of Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The signing of the 1995 Agreement was meant to signal a new commitment to sustainable development, environmental protection and management of the river for a wide range of users – a shift from its earlier focus on mobilising resources to build large-scale dams on the Mekong and its tributaries. Although the establishment of the MRC was hailed as a step towards overcoming past antagonisms in the Mekong Region, it continues to be dominated by the national interests of its member states, underpinned by a focus on economic benefits at the exclusion of all else.

To date, the MRC has failed to uphold and implement the 1995 Agreement, remaining silent over the renewed drive for large hydropower dams which threaten the future health of the Mekong and its people. Under Article 7 of the 1995 Mekong Agreement, the Commission is required “to make every effort to avoid, minimize and mitigate harmful effects that might occur to the environment, especially the water quantity and quality, the aquatic (eco-system) conditions, and ecological balance of the river system, from the development and use of the Mekong River Basin water resources.” However, there is little indication that the MRC has made any effort to advise member governments against damming the lower mainstream, even though the best available knowledge about the river’s ecosystem and its relationship to people’s livelihood security – much of it prepared by the MRC itself over the past decade – indicates significant harm will ensue.

To fulfil its obligations under the Agreement, the MRC has the authority to conduct “assessments for the protection of the environment and maintenance of the ecological balance of the Mekong River Basin” (Article 24), insist on procedures of consultation among and within the member states, and evaluate proposed uses of the Mekong in terms of their impact on flow in the mainstream and the Tonle Sap (Article 6).

However, rather than taking steps to ensure that decision-making processes over these projects proceed in an open and participatory manner and in accordance with the 1995 Agreement, the MRC has failed to inform the public of the immense risks of such developments, at times censoring and withholding information. A recent independent review of the MRC highlights the problem within the institution of editing and controlling scientific information,^v practices which are presumably to avoid publishing negative impacts of particular development projects.

Since May 2006, the MRC has secured over US\$23 million of financial support from Denmark, Finland, France, Belgium and other donors. Financial and technical support is provided on the basis that the MRC would promote and coordinate sustainable development. However, the MRC’s failure to protect the ecological integrity of the Mekong River, has led some donors and civil society to question its future role and relevance.

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i Mekong Secretariat, 1994. “Mekong Mainstream Run of River Hydropower”, published by Mekong Secretariat, December 1994, Bangkok, Thailand.

ii CNMC and WorldFish Center, 2007, Infrastructure and Tonle Sap fisheries: How to balance infrastructure development and fisheries livelihoods? The challenge facing decision-makers in Cambodia, Policy Brief, p.3

iii Poulsen, A.F. et al., 2004. Distribution and Ecology of Some Important Riverine Fish Species of the Mekong River Basin. MRC Technical Paper No. 10. p.19

iv WorldFish Center, The Don Sahong Dam and Mekong Fisheries, A science brief, June 2007, p.2

v Independent Organisational, Financial and Institutional Review of the Mekong River Commission Secretariat and the National Mekong Committees. Final report, January 2007, p.19 available at: www.mrcmekong.org