

All Eyes on Lao Dam Tragedy Probe



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The contentious Xayaburi Dam on the Mekong. Laos should give greater consideration of how hydropower affects communities living in and around dam sites and reservoirs.

File photo Bangkok Post

In the wake of the tragic collapse last month of an auxiliary dam of the Xe-Pian-Xe-Namnoy hydropower project in southern Laos, the Lao government on Aug 7 announced a major review of hydropower projects across the country.

All dams -- built or under development -- will be inspected for flaws in design and construction, according to the government statement. Further, the Lao government has temporarily suspended all new hydropower investments pending a review of the country's future hydropower development strategy.

In direct response to the dam collapse -- a human-made disaster which killed over 30 people and forced thousands of others from their homes -- the government announced it would establish a task force to investigate the cause of the collapse and the failure of project oversight and warning systems. The investigation is to be chaired by the deputy prime minister and chairman of the Government Inspection Authority, with representatives from the Korean and Thai governments invited to observe the process.

A spotlight is now shining on Laos's current energy strategy and the risks it poses to local populations.

The proposed initiatives to investigate the Xe-Pian-Xe Namnoy dam collapse and review both existing dams and the country's future hydropower plans are welcome and appear to be a significant step in the right direction for development in Laos.

In order for the Lao government's initiatives to be meaningful, the investigation and review process should be undertaken in a way that places affected communities -- the intended beneficiaries of the country's development and energy policies -- at the heart and centre of the process.

Further, the Lao government should adhere to important core principles when undertaking the investigation and review to ensure their effectiveness. In particular, they should: act sincerely and conduct the processes in good faith; conform to international standards for independence; and ensure that the processes are open, transparent and accountable.

To be open and accountable, the government needs to ensure adequate investment of time, resources and space. It needs to talk to affected peoples in Laos and neighbouring countries about their experiences of dams and their perceptions of the current policy. Doing this is essential in order to understand the impacts of existing projects and develop comprehensive findings for consideration in rebuilding the confidence of the people of Laos and the region following the disaster.

To ensure independence, panels should be established with experts from both inside and outside the government and the hydropower industry, including academics with social and environmental expertise and civil society representatives. The investigation and review committees should enable the involvement of experts nominated by villagers impacted by the Xe-Pian-Xe-Namnoy dam collapse and those affected by other dams across the country, as well as experts identified by stakeholders monitoring the impacts of hydropower on people and ecosystems.

With respect to the investigation of the Xe-Pian-Xe-Namnoy dam collapse, in particular, employing these principles will help provide a meaningful basis from which to ensure accountability and secure redress for the people devastated by the disaster.

The government must be sincere in its stated intentions in order to act in good faith. Unfortunately, with respect to the suspension of new dams, this is already open to question. A day after the announcement, the Joint Committee Working Group of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) agreed to begin the Prior Consultation process -- a procedure of the 1995 Mekong Agreement -- for the proposed Pak Lay dam on the lower Mekong mainstream in Laos. The Pak Lay dam is a controversial project, expected to have extensive and transboundary impacts on the river system. Reportedly, the process was pushed forward despite urging from the MRC CEO to delay in the light of recent events and the national hydropower review. The initiation of Prior Consultation signals the Lao government's intention to move forward with the proposed project.

In their announcement of the review of existing projects, the Lao government focused on the need to study dam design and construction and assess compliance with current quality standards. However, a review of dam safety should extend beyond construction and engineering. The review also needs to consider how hydropower affects communities living in and around dam sites and reservoirs as well as up and downstream and across national borders. To do this, the review should look at the design, siting, and operational regimes of planned and existing dams. It should assess dams' reliance on unproven mitigation technologies such as fish passage facilities and examine the management of reservoirs and surrounding lands and forests.

Including operational assessments of existing dams in the review process opens up the possibility of rehabilitating river habitats affected by hydropower construction. Habitat improvement can be achieved by providing environmental and cultural flows and amending dam management practices that cause harm to local communities. In reviewing the operational regimes of dams, the Lao government could reinstitute environmental flows to rivers and reconnect river ecosystems.

At the same time, the review of Laos' hydropower policy presents a critical opportunity to consider better alternatives to large dams for building the future of the country -- alternatives that safeguard rather than jeopardise the well-being of local people.

The review should, therefore, entail a thorough assessment of hydropower's financial and safety risks and its massive social and environmental costs. A major rethink of the current policy of rapid hydropower expansion would create opportunities for energy production through development of safer, cheaper and more reliable renewable energy options. Laos holds great and untapped potential for solar PV and wind power. The plunging cost of solar and wind energy and power storage options provide increasingly viable and sustainable alternatives to large-scale dams, without the serious threats to people and the environment.

If conducted in the right way, the government's initiatives provide an opportunity to respond to the recent tragedy with a comprehensive and transparent energy sector evaluation, putting new value on rivers and water resources and the local communities who depend on them. With support from all sectors, the government of Laos can turn this human-made disaster into a catalyst towards a more sustainable and equitable development path for the country and its people.
