

How a China-Built Dam Destroyed an Ecosystem and Livelihoods

The Mekong River Basin is a gigantic freshwater ecosystem with thousands of migratory fish species. By cutting the two rivers that are the main tributaries of the Mekong River, and the creation of a large artificial reservoir, dams prevent fish from traveling up and down, interfere with their feeding and reproductive cycle. As a result, both species die and fishery yields are reduced. Fish is an important part of the Cambodian diet. Millions of people on the Mekong River system rely on catching and selling fish. Currently, fisheries are declining across the country.

Today, everything that people had ever used from the dam river; Food, water, income from fishing has disappeared. If people want to fish, they have to travel because the migrant area they moved to is far from the river. The land they now live in is rocky, dry, and difficult to farm. It takes fertilizer that they don't have the money to buy, and because groundwater is not suitable for drinking, people have to buy water.

Some refuse to migrate and live in forests to stay near water. But they also fight for a living. Before the dam was built, some families caught 40 kilos of fish in one night, but now he's catching less than 2 kilos. There are fewer and fewer fish that are big, meaty, only left with small fish which is hard to get a good price. People are receiving compensation; new house which worth \$6000, but still not worth what they lost. Cambodians not only lost their home but also lost their job, invaluable environment, which are last since their ancestors. They even have to learn new skill of work. For instance, woodwork, electronic repairs and welding.

We started our field interviews at the beginning of 2019 when the dam's impact became apparent. Since then, and due to the Covid-19 outbreak, we have been regularly following up over the phone. When you compare the losses with the fishing revenue and moving costs generated by this dam to the gigawatt-hours that the dam should be built. There is a serious question of whether it is worth the cost. Moreover, electricity is scarce and unreliable in Cambodia.

In addition, the country's geography is not suitable for hydropower. The dam must be very wide because the country does not have large mountains and gorges that can act as reservoirs and ensure that the falling water generates enough pressure for the hydroelectric turbines, that creates problems in itself. When you build a lot of this embankment, especially in areas with dense vegetation, all dead plants emit large amounts of carbon dioxide and methane—for many years. Some hydroelectric dams, especially the dam, has the same carbon footprint as a fossil fuel power plant.

The dam is part of the Chinese government's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), a trillion-dollar investment and infrastructure project aimed at spurring development and promoting China's foreign policy interests around the world. Chinese government money often comes without protection or obligations to protect the rights of vulnerable communities. However, the Belt and Road Initiative is not just a development and foreign policy initiative. It also aims to make Beijing look good on the world stage. As the majority owner of the company responsible for the construction and operation of the dam, the Huaneng Group should ensure that the violations are corrected, and in the next phase, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), which provided funding for the dam construction. Projects that provide funding should be more overseen.

The Cambodian government itself needs to re-evaluate how it handles impact assessments for infrastructure projects. Be it roads, power lines or power plants, authorities need to offer reasonable compensation. Create projects that give people new skills and consult with communities on alternative mitigation strategies such as aquaculture or fish-collecting opportunities for reservoirs. Finally, Cambodia's future energy policy cannot focus on energy. water can. Governments must explore renewable energy sources.