

2-3. Mainstream Dam Development and Regional Civil Society Cooperation

The current plans for hydropower dams on the Mekong's mainstream date back to the 1950's. They were never implemented, however, due to the Indochina wars and financing difficulties. Upon entering the 1990s, China constructed the Manwan Dam on the mainstream of the Mekong within its own borders, leading to increased awareness of the problems¹.

China aims to use dams not only for irrigation and electricity, but also to stabilize the water level of the Mekong River so that large commercial ships can navigate the river throughout the year. With this aim, China began blasting and removing rapids on the mainstream in 2003 because the rapids inhibited navigation. This sparked much criticism from communities in downstream Thailand. When the Mekong River's water levels dropped drastically in 2008, communities in northern Thailand were central in criticizing China's mainstream dams. At this time, the Chinese government was unusually responsive by accepting a letter from Thai affected people through its embassy in Bangkok, but still no solutions have been reached. China has not officially joined the Mekong River Commission (MRC), and though it is a member country of the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program, the program emphasizes economic cooperation, so there is no effective framework to include civil society in dialogue and problem-solving regarding transboundary environmental problems.



Civil society actions against the construction of the upper mainstream dams in front of the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok (April 2010).

The Mekong mainstream dam projects of the central and downstream regions began to concretely move forward after 2000. Wars that had previously prevented development ended and rapid economic growth in emerging economies increased fund-raising capacities of companies not only in China, but also Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and other countries. Interest in hydropower has also been stimulated by the rapid increase in demand for electricity in Thailand and Vietnam, and from the perspective of



Community representatives voice a clear "no" at a hearing on the Xayaburi Dam (February 2011) by Fukuoka NGO Forum on ADB).

preventing global warming some are looking to hydropower as an alternative to fossil fuels. On another front, involvement from western countries, Japan, and other traditional donor countries and aid agencies is far from absent. Through its GMS program, the ADB has made it easier for member countries and the private sector to enter the hydropower business and is actively providing funds for high voltage transmission lines. The Japanese private sector, such as Tokyo Electric (TEPCO), Mitsubishi Corporation, and J-Power, are also stimulating capital involvement in Thai electric companies. TEPCO bought stock in Electricity Generating Company (EGCO), and EGCO is in turn providing capital for the

Xayaburi Power Co. Ltd., which is the developer of the Xayaburi dam.

Around 1990, anti-dam movements by local people to protect the environment and their communities became very active in Thailand. Then from 2000, a network was built based on this experience to protect the Mekong basin's environment and society as a whole, and international NGOs also cooperated. This flow of events led to the formation of the Save the Mekong Coalition in 2009, and



Thai fisher-folks displaying banners against the Xayaburi Dam to foreign delegates to the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) held in Vientiane, Lao PDR (November 2012 by International Rivers).

it has become a central actor in protesting the dam plans for the Mekong's mainstream. The difference between this campaign and more traditional anti-dam movements is that it attempted to receive the understanding and support of Thailand's growing middle class, enabling photo exhibitions in downtown Bangkok and picture-postcard petitions. Petitions were sent to the MRC Secretariat and governments of member nations, and appeals were sent to domestic and international media. Save the Mekong is a very loosely connected movement, and many participating organizations are conducting their own separate activities.

In this context, there are groups providing information to communities in the basin, sending information to development partners, lobbying, and organizing nonviolent demonstrations.

One noteworthy activity was that of Vietnamese NGOs approaching dedicated researchers with information. Due to this, information about the severe impacts of dams reached Vietnamese parliamentarians, and the Vietnamese government took a clear position against the Xayaburi Dam.

Activities in Thailand are more mixed. Thailand's relationship with the Xayaburi Dam is multifaceted, because construction of the dam is being done by a large Thai construction company, Ch. Karnchang Public Co. Ltd., and Thailand's Electricity Generating Authority is to buy most of the electricity it produces. Many local communities living in the north and northeast regions of Thailand, however, are to be negatively affected. In regard to purchase of electricity, a detailed study has shown that the Thai government's projections for electricity demand are exaggerated, and an alternative proposal has already been submitted for ways to make up the demand with various demand-side management measures and use of renewable energy (Greacen and Greacen 2012). A network of affected communities in Thailand's north and northeast provinces was formed, and in addition to holding assemblies in various localities, they filed a law suit in August 2012 at Thai's administrative court to confirm that the Thai government's electricity purchase agreement was invalid.



Save-the-Mekong Coalition co-hosted the Delta Forum held in southern Vietnam (August 2013).

While civil society movements such as these are watched for their ability to influence the direction of mainstream dam construction plans, they deserve more attention. Given the current political and economic trends towards regional integration that prioritizes economic goals, awareness of these issues is transcending borders, and transboundary civil society movements can be expected to take shape.

References

Greacen, Chuenchom, and Chris Greacen. 2012. *Proposed Power Development Plan (PDP) 2012 and a Framework for Improving Accountability and Performance of Power Sector Planning*. Bangkok, Thailand: Palang Thai.

<http://www.palangthai.org/docs/PDP2012-Eng.pdf>

Save the Mekong. <http://www.savethemekong.org/> (Last accessed on August 20, 2013)

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1. See BP 2-1 *The Mekong River Mainstream: Looking back on Hydropower Dam Development*.