2-4. Cross-Border Environmental Issues: The Sesan, Srepok, and Sekong (3S) Rivers Dam Developments

Overview of the Sesan, Srepok, and Sekong Rivers

The Sesan, Srepok, and Sekong Rivers (collectively known as the 3S Rivers) comprise the largest water system made of Mekong River tributaries. The 3S are all international rivers that flow into northeastern Cambodia from their sources in the plateaus of central Vietnam and the Phu Luang mountain range in Laos. The downstream region is made up of Cambodia's northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri, Steung Treng, and Mondulkiri, where many indigenous and ethnic peoples live with differing livelihoods, languages and cultures. There are approximately 70,000 people living along the three rivers in some 127 villages, and their livelihoods depend on natural river resources. This region is also known for its rich natural resources and biodiversity, and about 40% of Cambodia's natural forests are in Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri Provinces. The natural resources of the 3S river



Map: 3S River basin

basin are very important, not just from the perspective of environmental conservation, but for ensuring food security and livelihood for people living in the region who depend on natural resources.

Transboundary Hydropower Dam Impacts

Because the three rivers are international waterways, upstream development is having a large impact on nature and people in Cambodia. In 1993, construction of the Yali Falls Dam in Vietnam began as the first hydropower dam project in the Sesan River Basin, at a point just 80 km within the

Cambodia-Vietnam border. In October 1996, there was flooding of Cambodian villages, the cause of which is attributed to a broken water diversion dam when the Yali Falls Dam was under construction. Since then, discharge of water from the Yali Falls Dam itself impacts people with frequent and unpredictable floods, deterioration of river water quality, decrease in fish catch, erosion of riverbanks, and impacts on riverbank farming. People who use the river for daily life and drinking water are suffering severe health impacts as well. According to an NGO survey conducted in 2000, 32 villagers drowned in floods over a four year period (Fisheries office and NTFP 2000). Since 2003, there



Hospital inundated by flooding of the Srepok River (2009).

has been increasing dam construction on the upstream Srepok River, and just as with the Sesan River, similar impacts are being seen downstream in Cambodia.

People living in Cambodia have continued to voice their concerns related to the dams' impacts to their own government, to the Mekong River Commission (MRC), and to national and international aid agencies financing the dams, but development in Vietnam and Laos continues without consideration for what occurs downstream in Cambodia, and affected people in the river basins who are facing great difficulties are being neglected.

Insufficient Environmental Impact Assessment

In spite of unresolved issues of mitigation and compensation around the Yali Falls Dam, there are many dam projects planned for the 3S region. One way of predicting, preventing, mitigating and managing the negative impacts of large-scale infrastructure projects such as dams is to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), but the EIAs for these dams have been insufficient, and some construction is in progress even without an EIA.

The area examined in the EIA for the Yali Falls Dam covered only resettlement and electricity generation upstream of the dam, and a 6 km range downstream. While it would have been possible to predict the damages to water quantity, water quality, fishing and aquatic life, it was determined that the social and environmental impacts some 10s of kilometers downstream in Cambodia would be minimal, and no survey was conducted.

The Sesan 3 Dam was constructed about 15 km downstream of the Yali Falls Dam, and its EIA was conducted with technical support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The report was completed in 2000 but was not disclosed. In 2003, the EIA report was leaked, so its content became known. In the process of conducting the EIA, no surveys were done in Cambodia, but the EIA cited reports on the Yali Falls dam and other surveys, saying that the impacts of the Sesan 3 Dam construction on Cambodia would be "extensively destructive," and criticized the project for looking too lightly upon the impacts downstream. In spite of this, the construction of the Sesan 3 Dam went on without any mitigation or compensation measures for Cambodia.

Also, from 2005-2006, an environmental survey on how dam construction on the Sesan and Srepok Rivers impact the environment downstream in Cambodia was conducted. While there are problems with the surveys, such as impartiality, the post factum EIAs for the Srepok and Sesan Rivers in 2006 and 2007 respectively, recognized the claims being raised by villagers, and pointed out that future dam construction would lead to additional negative impacts. Also at the post factum EIA hearing in January 2007, a promise was made to build regulatory dams on both rivers to adjust the flow when water is released from dams upstream. As of 2012, however, those dams are being promoted as hydropower projects, so the promise of mitigation measures made to Cambodian villagers in the post factum EIA are not being implemented.

Grassroots Efforts

In 2000, NGOs active in Ratanakiri Province led efforts to begin surveying the abnormalities of the Sesan River and the damages suffered by people living nearby. Domestic and international NGOs also formed a loose network called the Sesan Working Group to monitor the situation in the basin. In February 2000, the Working Group surveyed all of the approximately (at the time) 90 villages located along the Sesan River in Cambodia. The Working Group wrote a report of the overall situation and problems facing the Sesan River.

After this report was released, MRC started an investigation in Ratanakiri Province in March the same year. It also heard reports from the Cambodian and Vietnamese governments about transboundary flood problems. As a result, the investigative team was able to confirm that there were indeed unnatural changes in water levels, and it was recognized at the government level that the discharge of water from the Yali Falls Dam was creating floods across the border.

Since then, the Cambodia-Vietnam Joint Committee for the Management of the Sesan River (which now also discusses management of the Srepok River) was established as a place for the two governments to negotiate. The Cambodian and Vietnamese governments also established a 5-point "solution" to prevent downstream damage from water discharged by the Yali Falls Dam. The joint committee, however, is largely controlled by the Vietnamese government, and participation by Cambodian affected people and NGOs is not allowed. The promised advance notification of water discharge is also actually being sent first to the MRC office in Vietnam, which then notifies the MRC in Cambodia, and the notification is thereafter relayed from the central government, to the province, the district, then the commune, and finally the village, so it is very rare for notification of the flood to reach villagers before the flood itself does. In reality, it is not working as a solution.

Even by 2001 the situation had not been resolved, so villagers along the Sesan River organized together to form the "Sesan Protection Network" (SPN) in order to more effectively notify the outside world of their concerns and their plight (The Sesan Working Group dissolved upon establishment of SPN). After that, people living not only along the Sesan, but also along the Srepok and Sekong Rivers began participating in SPN, and in 2005, it formed as an NGO of organized villagers in the region and they called themselves "Sesan-Srepok-Sekong Rivers Protection Network" (3SPN).



Protests by villagers against the dam construction.

Even after becoming 3SPN, the villagers' demands are still consistent. Their core demands are that the rivers' natural flow be restored, that no more dams be built without consent of villagers, and that compensation be made to villagers who suffered damage to their livelihood, crops, and livestock. Villagers have expanded their network, and have continued making their demands and concerns known to various other stakeholders. At the Northeast Cambodia Fishers Forum in 2005, approximately 180 fishers from Cambodia, Thailand and Laos gathered, in addition to officials from the Cambodian central and local governments, domestic and international NGOs. At this forum, it was reconfirmed that dam construction was a threat to the culture, agriculture and fishing of people who depend on the river and its ecosystem, and discussions were held about the challenges and efforts needed to protect them. The 3SPN villagers send a letter to Prime Minister Hun Sen demanding solutions to the problems, and a demand for the disclosure of the post factum EIA on the Sesan and Srepok was sent to Vietnam Electricity (EVN) and the Vietnam National Mekong Committee. They also made it into the public hearing on the Srepok post factum EIA, and made an appeal before the approximately 150 participants, who were representatives of the ministries of the Vietnamese and Cambodian governments, governors, villagers, and NGOs. They raised their concerns about the impacts of dam construction on the Srepok River, called for the temporary halt in construction, and demanded compensation. They also demanded an end to funding of EIAs that presume dam

construction and/or reject local participation.

Also, to collect evidence to back up their concerns and opinions, they did an impact survey, and are thus strengthening their own knowledge base. They are also getting on to radio programs to explain their situations, holding demonstrations against dam construction, and thus making their concerns about development projects known to a broader audience.

To Address Cross-Border Environmental Issues

It appears that the villagers' activities are leading to a widening recognition of the transboundary impacts of development. Still, in spite of continuously raising their concerns, the villagers have yet to be compensated for damages from the Yali Falls Dam and mitigation measures have not been implemented. And dam construction on the 3S Rivers continues.

In order to mitigate transboundary environmental impacts, the following improvements need to be made:

- Governance of the two committees working for the joint management of the Mekong Rivernamely the MRC and the Cambodia-Vietnam Joint Committee for the Management of the Sesan River-must be strengthened;
- 2) Affected people in downstream Cambodia must be allowed to participate in decision making for development projects;
- 3) Especially in terms of local participation, all people who are involved in dam development of the 3S Rivers must recognize downstream affected people in Cambodia as project stakeholders, provide information and hold consultations prior to final decisions to implement projects, and listen to opinions of affected people when taking the environment into consideration;
- 4) Aid agencies and other funders should not finance projects for which local participation, accountability, and appropriate social and environmental consideration cannot be confirmed;
- 5) The need to include transboundary issues into EIAs is clear from surveys and reports done to date, and EIAs should be disclosed to all stakeholders in languages they understand; and
- 6) Affected people downstream in Cambodia must be compensated for the cumulative environmental impacts of existing dams and those currently under construction. They have been raising their concerns for years.

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