

## INTERNATIONAL DAY OF ACTION FOR RIVERS

Open Letter:

# Recommendations for Protection of the Mekong River Environment

14 March 2016

The Mekong, the river that supports the lives of millions of people in its basin, is losing its rich ecosystem due to dam development on the Mekong mainstream and tributaries. We—the local communities living in the Mekong Basin, international and local NGOs, and researchers concerned about the issue—would like to make recommendations for sustainable environmental conservation of the Mekong River to the Mekong Country governments, donor countries, and citizens living in the basin.

Of the approximately 60 million people living in the Mekong River Basin, about 80% live in rural areas and are dependent on agriculture, fisheries, and aquatic animals and plants for their livelihoods. Fish from the Mekong are essential for people in the region as it is the main source of protein at low cost. Fish is also an important source of income. Capture fisheries in the Mekong River Basin yield an estimated US\$4.2 to 7.6 billion in retail value. It is said that approximately 40 million people, including those working on a part-time or seasonal basis, are engaged in fishing in the Mekong River water system.

Today, the Mekong River is on the verge of a serious crisis. In China, 6 gigantic hydropower dams have begun operation on the upstream Mekong. Also, there are dams on all of the following rivers in the Basin: 6 Mekong River tributaries in Laos; Thailand's Mun River and its tributary, the Chi River; and the Sekong, Srepok, and Se San rivers that flow from Vietnam and Laos into Cambodia. In addition, Laos is proceeding with the construction of the Xayaburi and Don Sahong Dams on the mainstream Mekong. Scientists expect that in particular, the Don Sahong Dam and Cambodia's Lower Sesan 2 Dam, both currently under construction, will severely threaten the already diminishing fish resources in the Mekong Basin.

The impacts of dam development have been devastating. When dams block the river's natural flow, the fertile mud of the Mekong is not carried downstream but accumulates in the dam reservoir, negatively affecting water quality. The amount of sediment reaching the Mekong Delta has halved over the last 20 years. Furthermore, the dams have impeded the breeding cycle of fish species and have deprived them of habitat and food, thus drastically reducing fish resources. For many fish species in the Mekong, the natural rise of water levels during the rainy season acts as a trigger for spawning. With water discharges from dams, however, that trigger is lost and fish spawning is disrupted. Unnatural water fluctuation and changes in water quality have also

caused a decline in aquatic plants and insects, which are important food for fish. People have also been severely affected. Dams have destroyed farms along riverbanks and estuaries that local communities have cultivated for generations. As the fishery resources for domestic use and sales have declined, fishing communities are being impoverished and some have even collapsed. The damage and losses caused by dam development in the last 30 years are evident in the changing lives of local communities in the Mekong Basin.

From the perspective of local communities, the following can be said:

- The river provides not only water for people's use, but is also critical for food security.
- After dam construction, natural fish habitats have decreased, as have the number of fish. Aquatic plants are also being lost.
- River-based cultures and traditions are declining, and children are being deprived of opportunities to learn customs that pay reverence to the river.
- Traditional events that require the river as a place of prayer are being lost with dam development.
- Fish is not only food supporting individual lives but is also an asset that supports the greater community.
- The Mekong River belongs not only to farmers and people living near the river, but it belongs to everyone. The Mekong River is everyone's common property.
- Water, rice, fish, and other natural foods are absolutely essential, especially for rural communities.

The importance of biological diversity has long been recognized, but dams continue to be developed, negatively affecting biodiversity. In the Lower Mekong Basin, there are plans to construct 10 dams on the Mekong mainstream, and 100 dam plans for Mekong tributaries. Most of these plans are intended for electric power generation.

Once a species becomes extinct, there is nothing humans can do to revive it. Electricity, on the other hand, can be generated through various means including wind and solar power. Nevertheless, destruction of rivers has been accepted and justified in the name of economic development. Profit is enjoyed by the few who invest in the projects, while the burden resulting from excessive investment is placed upon ordinary people who must purchase electricity at high prices. Local communities in the dam areas experience very little, if any benefit.

We, the communities living in the Mekong River Basin and concerned citizens who wish to protect the lives of communities in the Basin, have not given up hope. For future generations as well as our own, we make the following recommendations:

To the Mekong Country Governments:

- Review and disclose the cumulative impacts of dam development in the Mekong River Basin as a whole. Conduct open discussions on the future of the Mekong Region and reflect the

results in policy.

- Re-evaluate all new dam development plans on the mainstream Mekong and its major tributaries. Decommission existing dams if deemed necessary for the welfare of communities and for the natural environment in the Mekong Basin.
- Consider cancelling the Don Sahong and the LS2 dam projects.
- Provide just compensation to the local communities for the social and environmental harms caused by existing dam projects. Implement appropriate measures to recover social and environmental damages.

To the Donor Countries and International Organizations:

- Work with the Mekong country governments to ensure participation of local communities in decision-making at the Mekong River Commission and any other framework that determines Mekong Basin management.
- Stop justifying and supporting large hydropower dam development based solely on dams' low CO2 emission levels. Promote and finance new types of dispersed energy systems and networks, rather than centralized power networks that cover a wide region.
- Provide financial support to efforts to recover natural and social environments that were damaged by the development projects funded by the donors in the past.
- Rather than pursuing the corporate interests of donor countries, support and finance efforts that contribute to the conservation of the global environment and stability of the region.
- Especially for emerging donor governments that are financing dam developments outside of their own countries, use high standards to review projects for environmental and social considerations, and learn from the past failures of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and other donor agencies/governments.

To Local Communities Living in the Basin:

- If the environment is damaged due to projects by the government or development agencies, communities can cooperate to demand that the project proponents take responsibility for the damage they create.
- Rather than pursuing short-term convenience and economic interests in one location, it is important to consider the natural and social environments of the entire watershed area when utilizing land and river resources. For example, refrain from destructive fishing using explosives; avoid excessive use of resources like over-logging; and consider environmental impacts when developing village roads and waterways. Aim for sustainable use of resources.
- Gather and share local wisdom and knowledge of natural resources, as well as learn from science. Communities can take initiative to plan and implement development while balancing both local wisdom and scientific perspectives.

To Researchers and Media:

- Researchers should study and deepen scientific understanding of the natural environment in the Mekong Basin, and use their findings for the benefit of society. Media should report on research findings in ways that are easy for the general public to understand.

The Mekong River, the treasure house of biodiversity, is worth conserving for the benefit of all people around the world. We will continue to work towards actualizing the above recommendations in our own communities, countries, and regions. We hope that our voices will be heard.

Yours respectfully,

*Cambodia*

3S Rivers Protection Network (3SPN)  
Cambodia Indigenous Youth Association (CIYA)  
Cambodian Community Development (CCD-Kratie)  
Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)  
Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT)  
Jesuit Service-Cambodia  
Khmer Youth Empire (KYE)  
NAK AKPHIVATH SAHAKUM (NAS)  
Save Vulnerable Cambodians (SVC)  
Social and Environmental Protection Youth (SEPY)  
The NGO Forum on Cambodia  
Tonle Sap Lake Waterkeeper

*Japan*

Biodiversity Information Box  
Friends of the Earth Japan  
Fukuoka NGO forum on ADB  
Japan Center for a Sustainable Environment and Society (JACSES)  
Mekong Watch  
Ramsar Network Japan

*Korea*

Busan Green Trust  
Busan River Network  
Daecheoncheon Network  
Energy and Climate Policy Institute for Just Transition (ECPI)  
Geumjeong Mountain Association  
Institute for Environment and Community Development Studies  
Korea Federation for Environmental Movement (KFEM)  
Korea River Network  
Life Web  
Women's Environmental Coalition

*Thailand*

Assembly of the Poor, Pak Mun Dam affected people  
EarthRights International  
Srisaket Province's Association of Community Based Freshwater Fisheries, Northeast Thailand