

From Reactive to Proactive Attitudes toward Hydropower Dams in the Mekong Region



MAIN OUTCOMES

- ✓ Changed attitudes regarding hydropower project resettlement, compensation, and benefit sharing
- ✓ Proactive engagement in participatory planning of hydropower and management of associated impacts

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Outcome Stories

In the Mekong region, increasing power demand and growing interest to capitalize on the region's inherent hydropower potential have led to a surge in hydropower development. In 2010, more than 3,200 MW of hydropower capacity, about a tenth of the region's total potential, had been installed on the Mekong River's tributaries.¹ Many more dams are either planned or currently under construction.

While the development of hydropower is expected to have irreversible impacts on both communities and the environment, dam developers and governments often fail to consider and inform about the full costs and benefits of hydropower. As a result, communities, local government

agencies, and other stakeholders remain uncertain about what to expect from planned hydropower dams.

Planned Dam Breeds Concern in Cambodia

The CPWF project MK2–On Water Valuation (2010-2013) was designed to estimate the costs and benefits of different water uses at the reservoir and catchment levels at study sites in Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam. In Cambodia, the project team conducted fieldwork in Stung Treng province, the location of the proposed 400 MW Lower Se San 2 hydropower dam.

A series of consultation meetings revealed that the provincial and local authorities in

¹ MRC 2010



Study tour participants attend exchange visit with relocated community (above) and discuss livelihood development programs with Theun-Hinboun officials (right).



Realizing the potential for transboundary learning, the project organized an exchange visit for stakeholders from Stung Treng province to visit Lao PDR and learn from stakeholders who had already experienced the positive and negative impacts of a hydropower dam

Stung Treng were gravely concerned about their own lack of experience with managing hydropower companies, resettlements, compensation processes, and benefit-sharing mechanisms. The local communities, both upstream and downstream of the proposed dam site, expressed concerns about how to deal with the dam's impacts, especially with regard to how to cope with uncertain changes to their livelihoods and way of life. The critical factor was that almost no stakeholders had actually seen a hydropower dam, a reservoir, or a resettlement village, and they were therefore unsure of what to expect.

The CPWF project team had observed and documented local communities near the Theun-Hinboun Expansion Project in Lao PDR undergo a resettlement process and struggle to re-establish their livelihoods in a new village. Realizing the potential for transboundary learning, the project organized an exchange visit for stakeholders from Stung Treng province to visit Lao PDR and learn from stakeholders

who had already experienced the positive and negative impacts of hydropower development.

Exchange Visit Changes Attitudes

In February 2012, the delegation of thirteen, including community members, local government officials, and representatives of non-government organizations, visited the Theun-Hinboun Expansion Project.

Participants visited the dam site and both downstream and upstream resettlement villages. They also had opportunities to meet with the hydropower company staff and Lao authorities who had been involved in the development of the hydropower dam.

During the visit, participants gained insight into various stages of hydropower development, including the formulation of procedures and guidelines, the design of local compensation programs, the logistics of moving into new villages, and the livelihood development programs in the new villages in Lao PDR.



Trip participants visited the Theun–Hinboun Expansion Project dam (above) and the new, irrigated rice fields of one resettled community (left).

These first-hand experiences helped community members and other visitors change their attitude toward hydropower from ‘reactive’ to ‘proactive’.

The exchange visit was realized through the CPWF Innovation Fund and with help from the Culture and Environment Preservation Association (CEPA) in Cambodia and the Department of Livestock and Fisheries (DLF) in Lao PDR. Other project partners included the International Centre for Environmental Management, the International Food Policy Research Institute, and the Central Institute for Economic Research and Management, Vietnam.

A Long-Term Impact

One significant outcome of the exchange visit was a positive change in attitude among the villagers who are likely to be affected by the planned Lower Se San 2 dam. Since the visit, villagers, local authorities, and dam operators in Stung Treng province have been proactively engaging in participatory planning

and management of hydropower and its associated impacts.

One Cambodian village leader from a community located near the proposed Lower Se San 2 dam site reported that his community had been working with the provincial resettlement committee to identify a mutually satisfactory site for a new village. He expects that the company will provide a compensation package and support for rebuilding livelihoods in the new village, similar to what was observed in Lao PDR during the exchange visit.

Another community leader from the same area requested that there be a more in-depth study of the Lower Se San 2 dam’s impacts on people’s livelihoods, an important factor in designing a satisfactory intervention. Such a study could help prepare villagers for the changes that result from dam construction.

A third community leader from the upstream Srekor village on the Se San River reported that the village committee had agreed that

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they would attempt to change local attitudes towards the construction of the Lower Se San 2 dam by organizing a public meeting, to which both the hydropower company and government officials were invited.

Finally, a household survey conducted by the CPWF project team in 2011 highlighted how community members were concerned about losing access to the riverine and forest resources that they depend on. Considering both the findings from the survey and the experiences during the exchange visit to Lao PDR, community leaders in Stung Treng province have decided to stop their campaign against the construction of the Lower Se San 2 dam and instead look for ways to approach the company to discuss better compensation packages and benefit sharing.

Outcomes

The CPWF project has improved the knowledge of stakeholder representatives in Cambodia and Lao PDR, leading to a shift from reactive to proactive attitudes towards dam construction. A shift in attitude may be a small outcome, but a case like this is a positive sign that the dam development process can be adjusted to include all stakeholders and take into consideration the full range of costs and benefits of hydropower.

References

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About CPWF Outcome Stories

The CPWF Outcome Stories document changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices that have emerged through CPWF-funded research. Outcomes occur when research outputs foster engagement processes that result in changes in practice or changes in behavior. These stories capture outcomes at a specific point in time; outcomes may have evolved since the completion of these projects.

Photos front & back covers: CPWF Mekong

Andes • Ganges • Limpopo • **Mekong** • Nile • Volta

About CPWF

The Challenge Program on Water and Food was launched in 2002. CPWF aims to increase the resilience of social and ecological systems through better water management for food production (crops, fisheries and livestock). CPWF currently works in six river basins globally: Andes, Ganges, Limpopo, Mekong, Nile and Volta.

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