

Thinking Beyond Relocated Villages: Have We Overlooked the Impacts of the Dams on Downstream Communities?

Key words

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Policy Pointers

Engagement of local communities by government and civil society prior to start of hydropower projects

EIA and SIA's must be conducted by hydropower companies on both upstream and downstream communities

Capacity building activities for media and NGO's to better communicate impacts of dam development projects to effected communities

Data gathering in effected communities to record and respond to concerns and grievances

Government of Myanmar collaborate with all stakeholders to ensure clear and relevant communication and community engagement



The Salween River downstream from Hatgyi Dam near the Mi Kayin Village, Hlaing Bwe Township, Kayin State

Myanmar is a developing country trying to follow in the footsteps of its neighboring countries, which are rather more developed than itself. The Myanmar Government wants to harness its natural resources and sees the rivers of the country as a national asset in acquiring regular revenue for the government. The decision to build many mega dams on the major rivers of the country such as the Irrawaddy, Salween and Sittaung rivers is considered a natural resource development. With their high energy needs, Myanmar's two neighboring countries, China and Thailand, want cheap energy by importing hydropower from Myanmar.

"Rivers must be valorized not as a commodity, but as a nexus that connects livelihoods, ecosystems and economies."

- Dr. Pichamon Yeophantong

The impacts of dam developments have seriously affected the livelihoods and income of the local communities in Myanmar. With the local peoples' reliance on agriculture production in the region, the consequential drop in income is a major, negative effect of dam projects. Due to current policy approaches, the local people, especially women, do not have any opportunity to raise their concerns regarding the effects of the dam to their lives. While the best practice is to give enough compensation to the local people who are removed from their villages, it fails to recognize the plight of downstream areas and potential impacts on those communities.

This socioeconomic impact analysis of a large infrastructure development project provides insight into the unequal relationship between the project developers (the government and the construction companies) and the local people; it wrongly determines the portion of the population that enjoys the benefits and the portion of the population that suffers. By using this insight, policy makers can help reduce the cost of suffering without damaging the benefits. To do this, the policy makers must determine how to effectively communicate with the local people and should enable the local people to formally discuss the issues among themselves.

Downstream communities of Hat Gyi Dam

The Salween River is one of the four major rivers in Myanmar and the Hat Gyi Dam is one of the proposed projects to be built on the Salween River Basin. The Hat Gyi Dam is expected to be the first of the planned Salween River dams to be completed, however, its construction has not yet begun. The development site is located in Karen state's Hlaing Bwe Township in Hpa-an District.

The life of the project began in 1998 with the start of a pre-feasibility study entitled the "Preliminary Feasibility Study of Hut Gyi Hydropower Project in the Union of Myanmar." The study was carried out with the involvement of Myanmar Electric Power Enterprise (MEPE), the Japanese Marubeni Corporation, the Italian-Thai Development Plc. Co., Ltd., and NEWJEC Inc., the consulting group and subsidiary of Japan's Kansai Electric Power Company. However, due to limited funding and ongoing armed conflicts in the area, the dam builders cut corners, leaving socioeconomic impacts unaccounted for.



Map of the Salween River (Credit: International Rivers)

In this research, 90 per cent of the respondents in downstream communities said that they have not seen any signs of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) or Social Impact Assessment (SIA) being conducted for the project. Considering the highly valued ecosystems and people who closely rely on the land for their livelihoods, it is important to take all possible impacts into account. Hydropower is an example of development that benefits some at the expense of others.

The case of four villages

There are four downstream villages included in this study: Tandaroo, Kauku, Mine Ku and Mi Kayin, which are located inside Hlaing Bwe and Hpa-an Townships. The number of households in Tandaroo village is 256, in Kauku village is 207, Mine Ku village is 135 and Mi Kayin is 476.

Most of the respondents in the research stated that there would be many economic and social impacts felt by them. 62 per cent claimed that the dam will affect their ability to earn money due to a decrease in agricultural production. They believe that the sediments in the Salween River are very fertile and valuable to their farming and agricultural activities. If the dam is at an operational stage, then the sediments flowing to their areas will be fewer than before, as the flow of the water in the river will be changed. Another impact they mentioned is the availability of safe and sufficient drinking water.

Most of the respondents said that when the dam construction is completed, the project will affect

their agricultural production, fishing activities, and if the local people can no longer rely on the river, they will have to resort to looking for income elsewhere. The result is that most of the able people, both men and women, will go to other towns or foreign countries, like Thailand, to find employment.



The confluence of the Moei and Salween Rivers, viewed from the Thailand side of the border with Myanmar (Credit: Michael Cook)

Despite the obvious impacts of the project to the local people and their livelihoods, there has not been any kind of engagement from government on this matter. No information was given to the general public about the dam's direct effects on the communities (Zerrouk, 2013). The government only called a private meeting with local village administrators and informed them about the project plans, but neither local authorities nor higher-level officers have engaged the issues of possible impacts of the dam. Most of the respondents (72%) said they are only aware about the planning of dam through the local NGO, Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), that is actively campaigning against the dam construction. But again, no other NGO has come out to inform or consult with the local communities about the possible impacts of a completed Hat Gyi Dam.

To summarize the results of the research in downstream communities, the local people firmly believe that the consequences of the Hat Gyi Dam will be hugely felt yet they also believe that the policy makers, civil societies and other stakeholders are ignoring the situation or are not focusing enough on their issues.

Critique of Existing Policy

A big problem that is often overlooked regarding the socioeconomic impacts of hydropower dams is the attitude of the government authorities.

The current policy of the government is based on the assumption that the government owns all land, water and resources in the country, which is stated bluntly in Section 37 of the 2008 Constitution. With this, the government sees nothing wrong in displacing local people from their lands in favor of building the development projects such as dams for the greater benefits of the country.

The current approach of the government for the loss of livelihoods and land, and the potential loss of livelihood in the downstream areas is to merely give lump sums of money to the local families as compensation.

Another problem with the current policy is the sole focus on the local people who live directly in the project site area. While best practices generally recommends that compensation to the displaced families should be given, it fails to recognize the plight of the downstream areas and the potential impacts of the dam project on these communities.

Communities are centered around rivers and other bodies of water because they rely on the water as a resource. A dam interrupting a river leads to unpredictable social impacts. The communities downstream of the Hat Gyi Dam rely on the Salween River as their major source of livelihood (International Rivers, n.d.). The current situation for them is very satisfactory and they worry so much about the possible socio-economic impacts of the dam on their lives. Their livelihoods such as farming and fishing will be affected by the proposed dam construction, not to mention they do not have any place or platforms to voice their concerns. They do not have the proper channels to communicate their issues to the policy makers or the respective government authorities.¹



Protesters against Hatgyi Hydropower Dam

(Credit: Naw Hser Kler)

Policy Recommendations and Actions

The media and communication professionals have a real opportunity to support the local people in providing information about the impact of dams on the lives of downstream communities. Working with the media and other stakeholders can help individuals and related organizations build awareness, motivation, self-belief, knowledge and the skills to enable them to take action on their issues. This can support communities to discuss common issues, work together, influence public policies and hold leaders accountable. This, in turn, can contribute to stronger long-term systems to support the local people. To be able to achieve this, the following recommendations are necessary:

- ❑ Conduct capacity-building activities with the media and other NGOs on how to communicate effectively to downstream communities, especially women, about the potential impacts of the dam. To do so, there is a need to conduct further research on effective communication strategies to reach out to the local people.
 - ❑ A mechanism should be put in place in order to collect data on the concerns of the downstream communities to be affected by the dam project. According to the results of this research, downstream communities were not included in the data collection for the EIA report of the Hat Gyi Dam despite the clear social impact of the hydropower dams to these communities.
 - ❑ Civil society organizations and NGOs should work together in order to jointly highlight the weaknesses in the EIA/SIA process in large-scale infrastructure projects like the Hat Gyi Dam.
 - ❑ Domestic and international civil societies should promote knowledge sharing among each other and give support to downstream communities as well as flooded areas along the river basins.
 - ❑ Media partners should expand their coverage of potential impacts of the dams on the downstream communities in Myanmar so that general public can understand the problem more clearly and participate in the campaigns.
- The project developers and partners have a strong responsibility to respond to the issues raised by the communities not only to those around the dam area but also to include the plight of the downstream communities. The recommendations for them are as follows:
- ❑ Development actors including foreign governments and companies should seek out and engage with local, broad-based, independent associations of villagers and community-based organizations to address the potential impact issues of the hydropower projects to all communities concerned.
 - ❑ Hydropower companies must conduct the EIA and SIA on both the upstream and downstream communities so that a more holistic assessment of the impacts of the dam project is made.
 - ❑ The Government of Myanmar should lead along with the civil society in providing a platform where downstream communities can access information about the project and use the same in raising their concerns on the issue through community discussions.
 - ❑ The Government of Myanmar should work closely with NGOs in providing downstream communities with training and educational resources on how they can meaningfully participate in the decision-making processes of the development project.
 - ❑ All development stakeholders should ensure that equal participation of both upstream and downstream communities, men and women, are included in the process. This way, all concerns can be documented so that future policies are aided with correct and reliable information.

Without paying attention to the downstream communities, this case study forecasts a huge disaster in the making and the see the current situation as a threat to the current peaceful situation of the communities and the ecosystem.

Knowledge Products

The Center for Social Development Studies (CSDS) is within the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University. We produce interdisciplinary critical research on social development in Southeast Asia, engages in policy-making through building partnerships, and provides a public forum for debating critical issues.

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¹For more information on the subjects discussed in this brief, please visit the *Mekong, Salween and Red Rivers: Sharing Knowledge and Perspectives Across Borders* international conference proceedings at <http://bit.ly/2ykDz1f>.

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