

Joint Statement

Suggestions of People from the Mekong River Basin to the 3rd MRC Summit

Phnom Penh, 30 March 2018

This statement calls on the Lower Mekong governments and the Mekong River Commission (MRC) to respect and protect the rights of the people whose livelihood have been and will be impacted by the construction of hydropower dams along the Mekong River and to protect the river ecosystem, and to state the position of civil society organizations (CSO) in Cambodia regarding the dams' construction. The statement will highlight the effect of the change on the livelihoods of the people along the Mekong River and Tonle Sap Lake, the problems associated with the decision and the construction process of the upper Mekong dams, the Cambodian decision on its own mainstream dams and then starting the position of the CSOs on the recently constructed and the newly proposed dams.

The impact of the hydropower dams in the upper Mekong on Cambodians (people experiences)

The Xayaburi, Don Sahong and Pak Beng Dams are among 11 proposed hydropower projects to be constructed on the Mekong mainstream, including 9 in Laos and 2 in Cambodia. The Xayaburi and Don Sahong dams are under construction, while the Pak Beng dam has completed the Prior Consultation process under the MRC's Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation, and Agreement (PNPCA). Even though the projects are not yet operational, significant changes have already been observed on the hydrology and ecology of the Mekong River. It is extremely hard to imagine the effects cause on the Mekong's ecology and the livelihoods of millions of people if all of the planned projects proceed.

The changes of hydrology of the Mekong River have not just affected the ecosystem but also the communities' livelihood. The reduced amount of fish catches, as a main source of food and livelihood beside farming and collecting non-timber products in the forest, have further impoverished communities. The reduction of the fish catch is witnessed in some types of fish especially Mekongina erythrospila that is present only in Kratie and Stung Treng province in Cambodia which have significantly decreased according to communities in Kratie¹.

Irregular fluctuation of water has resulted in poor water quality and has decreased the level of water in which severely affect people's health and irrigation. This causes a decline in the water level, decreasing the amount of alluvium in which negatively affect the people's agriculture development. In addition, irregular fluctuation of the water has caused land erosion, mainly to the areas where are closer to the dam reservoir. Land erosion along the river bank is a further consequence of the sudden release of the water from the dam's reservoir, reducing agricultural land. As a result, farming activities at the river bank have been completely halted. These has severely impacted the agricultural activities of the people whose livelihood are largely depend on the River. Riparian people's farming activities and yields are falling coupled with significant decline of fish catches posing substantial loss of income sources, prompting some community members to migrate to look for alternative jobs.

Communities from Tonle Sap Lake have particular concerns about the impacts that caused by hydropower dams in Mekong upstream due to the fact that Mekong River and Tonle Sap Lake are closely connected and support each other. Similarly, to that of the Mekong, the water regime of the

¹ Community member from Kratie province shared her observation on the change of Mekong river during a Mekong Public Forum organized on 20th March 2018 in CAN THO, Vietnam.

Tonle Sap lake has dramatically changed, due to without any doubt to dam construction with the Mekong basin. This has also impacted the fish stock in the lake and rice production in the surrounding areas. Specific example is seen in the fact that the type of fishes that are used to make Prahok (fermented fishes, an important traditional Cambodian food) have decreased significantly to the degree that there are not enough fishes to make this kind of food². The hydrology of Tonle Sap has also provided source of water for rice production for those communities nearby the lake. The low water volume of Tonle Sap has led to the postponement or abandonment of the rice production of some of the communities with consequences far beyond the loss of the rice production.

Major concern over proposed Mekong mainstream dams in Cambodia

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has officially announced that it will conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) study on the proposed Sambor and Stung Treng hydropower projects on the Mekong mainstream (RGC, 2016). If built, the Sambor dam will be the largest hydropower dam in Cambodia and the Lower Mekong Basin. If the dam is constructed, it would negatively impact on food security, livelihoods, and agricultural production. The dam will disrupt fish migration and sever the vital ecological linkage between the Mekong upstream, the Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia and the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.

In addition, information from the feasibility study report of the Sambor Hydropower Station indicated that the proposed Sambor dam will directly impact 19,034 people. They will need to be resettled to other places because their current habitats and natural resources will be permanently flooded in the dam reservoir (Liu, 2008). A scientific study by the Inland Fisheries Research and Development Institute (IFReDI) in 2012 predicted that fish yields will be reduced by 16% - 30% or 98,000 – 182,000 tons and other aquatic animals if the proposed Sambor dam is developed. The proposed hydropower development and associated river damming sites will negatively impact the access of migratory species to important spawning sites. No successful solution exists to get larval and juvenile fish downstream of dams (IFReDI, 2017). Water flow from the Mekong River will change which will have a devastating impact on the water level in Tonle Sap Lake. It is also predicted that the water level will increase by 1.2 m in the dry season and decrease by 1.0 m in the rainy season (Sushu et al, 2010).

The state of development of hydropower dams along the Mekong mainstream

The hydropower dams developed on the Mekong mainstream to date have proceeded despite an extremely flawed decision-making process and lack of information transparency and consultation with affected communities in the Mekong Basin.

The Xayaburi dam was criticized by affected communities and relevant stakeholders across the region throughout the PNPCA process, which clearly identifies a requirement of prior consultation with riparian countries before commencing project. Even though, there were clear expressions of concern and strong responses of member countries of MRC against the construction of the dam on the mainstream and a request for a ten-year moratorium on dam-building and further studies including basin-wide assessment, the Laos government moved forward with the project. This was an evidence that the concerns raised during Prior Consultation procedure had no any meaningful impact on the decision-making.

² An observation shared by community fishery representative from Pursat provinve during a Mekong Public Forum organized on 20th March 2018 in CAN THO, Vietnam.

The space for CSOs in a process of public consultation particularly on hydropower dam project on mainstream and its tributaries are still very limited and not widely open for those who are working directly with affected communities on the ground. Experience with Xayaburi, Don Sahong and Pak Beng Dams shows that the decision-making process was not widely open for public consultation. Few CSOs were invited to the consultations, and only on short notice, posing challenges in engaging affected communities and relevant CSOs who are working on the ground to participate in the consultations.

The Xayaburi and Don Sahong are now under construction, however, comprehensive projects' information including details of project design and assessments demonstrating measures such as fish passage that will prevent the destruction of Mekong basin fisheries and other impacts on the river ecosystem has not been made in public despite repeated requests from communities, civil society and other stakeholders.

The position of the CSOs

We are Civil Society Organization together with dam affected communities working on water governance across the country, request the Mekong country's governments and the Mekong River Commission (MRC) to address the following concerns and demands:

- The development of national power development plan should necessarily engage public, both females and males of all ages especially affected communities, in a meaningful consultation process to ensure the plan will not make any negative impacts on the environment, natural resources and the well-being of local people. We have acknowledged the need for electricity to economic development in our country and the region, however, the plans should prioritize meeting local people's energy needs, not generating electricity surplus for export. The plans should be designed to phase in renewable energy (solar and wind) and manage energy efficiency measures.
- The Mekong country's governments should disclose relevant information and supporting documents related to the proposed Mekong Mainstream Hydropower Dam and should ensure that affected community members and other relevant stakeholders can effectively and fully participate in consultations and the decision-making process.
- Hydropower dam project information, including in national languages, should be available in the public domain or in MRC website to ensure the public can access to the information.
- The space for affected communities and CSOs in the consultation should be expanded particularly for those who are working directly with dam affected communities and provide adequate time for them to work and comment on proposed project.
- Decision making on hydropower project should not be made on a project by project basis ignoring cumulative and basin wide impacts. It should be ensured that the finding of Council Study and other basin-wide studies, which provide assessment of the losses and trade-offs inherent in these projects, meaningfully inform decisions on individual hydropower dam projects.
- The Mekong country's governments should find other energy options which are not destructive to social and the environment. The renewable energy such as solar and wind energy should be highly considered and integrated into Energy Development Plan because those energy alternatives are perfectly suitable solutions for our country and the region. We urge regional governments to prioritize introduction of renewable and decentralized electricity technologies that are increasingly available and cost-competitive, without the harmful social and environmental impacts of large-scale hydropower dams.

- The Mekong country's governments should provide the legislation and commitment to an ecosystem approach to fisheries management (EAFM) for maintaining sustainable fisheries and protecting key habitats and spawning areas.
- The governments should also consider demand-side management and energy efficiency measures in their energy development plans.
- The Mekong country's governments should consider and increase budget for preserving Mekong Forestry Watershed Areas which are the main water sources to ensure of sustainable water using in the Mekong Region.

List of NGOs endorse the statement

- 1) The NGO Forum on Cambodia (NGOF)
- 2) Culture and Environment Preservation Association (CEPA)
- 3) Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT)
- 4) My Village (MVi)
- 5) 3S Rivers Protection Network (3SPN)
- 6) Tonle Sap Lake Waterkeeper (TSW)
- 7) The Coalition of Cambodia Fishers (CCF)
- 8) Northeastern Rural Development (NRD)
- 9) Cambodian Volunteers for Society (CVS)
- 10) Save the Vulnerable Cambodia (SVC)
- 11) Cambodia Indigenous Youth Association (CIYA)
- 12) Mlup Promviheathor Center (MPC)
- 13) Non-Timber Forest Product--Exchange Program (NTFP-EP)
- 14) Nak Aphiwat Sahokom (NAS)
- 15) Cambodia Rural Development Team (CRDT)
- 16) Tekdeysovanphum Organization (TDSP)
- 17) Neakpoan Organization for Development (NOD)
- 18) Kampuchea Women's Welfare Action (KWWA)
- 19) Cambodian Community Development (CCD Kratie)