

Mekong's future looks dark as new dam mooted

Milton Osborne
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2 October 2015 1:34PM

Mekong news comes in fits and starts, and the Lao Government is adept at not revealing its intentions until its plans are well advanced. The Xayaburi dam, now under construction, is a notable case in point, with the Government suddenly announcing the official opening of the dam in a manner that blindsided critics.



Now, with attention focused on whether or not the Lao Government is indeed going ahead with the controversial dam planned for southern Laos at Don Sahong (an issue canvassed in many of my Interpreter posts), I have learned courtesy of a short CSIS report that matters are moving forward in relation to a planned dam at Pak Beng, a site approximately 100km upstream from Luang Prabang as the crow flies, or a day's journey in a slow river boat. The topography of the area around Pak Beng makes it ideal for a dam (as my photo attests).

According to the CSIS report, Lao officials met with a Chinese developer, China Datang Overseas Investment Company, on 21 September to discuss the project, which would generate 4700 gigawatt hours of electricity a year. In entering discussions, the Lao representatives have spoken of their concern to ensure the proposed dam is 'sustainable and economically friendly'.

This development underlines the repeated concern of those who fear for the Mekong's future as a vital provider of protein from its stock of fish and as a source of nutrients in the sediment flowing down its long course. The long-standing concern has been that once one dam is built on the river outside China, as has now happened with Xayaburi, other dams would follow, despite the clear risks such a development involve.

So as matters now stand, Xayaburi is being built, construction of the Don Sahong dam seems likely to go ahead, and Pak Beng has now been brought into the mix. With continuing uncertainty about the possibility of a Cambodian dam at Sambor and that government's construction of the Lower Se San 2 dam on a major tributary to add to the picture, the Mekong's future is not looking bright. The feared 'domino effect' poses the real possibility that the Mekong River in the Lower Mekong Basin is set to be altered in an irretrievable and negative fashion.

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I'm not quite sure exactly what Milton Osbourne is saying here (and in his various earlier good posts about dams along the Mekong).

His broader argument presumably runs along one of two lines: (1) Laos should not proceed with these dams; or (2) It is reasonable for Laos to proceed with the dams provided proper attention is paid to issues such as environmental and social problems caused by the dams (that is, in technical jargon, provided there are "safeguards" to provide a check on the "negative externalities" caused by the investments).

Presumably Milton does not favour argument (1). Laos is a poor country which doesn't have much electricity. It is not reasonable for the Laotian Government to aim to invest in power. Electricity consumption in Laos is around 400 kWh per year per person compared to around 10,000 kWh in Australia. It would seem that development of hydro makes sense in Laos.

It's worth noting, in passing, that hydro is generally regarded as "green energy." Most of the global environmental community is favourably inclined to hydro. Many current international targets for "green energy" widely praised across the global community actually include large targets for hydro power.

But what about argument (2), which is that Laos should ensure that there are proper safeguards for negative externalities? Sure, in principle, this is a good idea. In principle, I certainly agree. However it's hard to see why there should be standards for Laos that don't apply across the rest of the world. Sadly, the rest of the world is doing great damage to the global environment. It hardly seems right to try to focus on problems in Laos.

Laos is a poor country, and all over the developing world wherever you look, governments and poor societies ignore negative externalities. The unfortunate truth is that the dams in Laos are

just one more example of the problems of negative externalities of development. Further -- and surely more important -- rich countries such as Australia are mainly the ones responsible for the current extremely serious threats to the global environment. Rich countries need to lead the way in tackling these problems. And since so little is being done by rich countries themselves, it's hard to see why Laos should do anything else but build dams. At least the dams are "green." That's a small step in the right direction.

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