Hydropower Resettlement in the Mekong Basin

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Introduction

This project seeks to better understand hydropower-induced resettlement in the Mekong River basin, specifically investigating the state actions and resettlement outcomes in Lao PDR, China, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The question that guided this project was: How do political regimes influence dam-induced resettlement and compensation outcomes in the Mekong River Basin? This answer is accomplished through a literature review studying ten separate dams—nine completed and one proposed—among these countries. By analyzing both scholarly literature and "grey" literature such as newspaper articles and NGO reports, certain commonalities emerged among the different hydropower projects: the change of resettlement policy over time, misuse of state power, and the impacts and responses of local people. Additionally, this project offers a critical analysis of pathways towards more equitable resettlement outcomes with attention to the differing conditions for resettlement justice among the countries, and ultimately arguing that resistance and organization among displaced persons is the most optimistic pathway forward.

Conceptual Framework

Resettlement as a result of hydropower development in the Mekong River Basin can be understood as part of the international phenomenon of development-induced displacement and resettlement (DIDR). DIDR describes a process of forced migration in which people must leave their homes due to the effects of development projects. The range of these projects is very broad, including agriculture, mining, military complexes, and transportation development, among many others. DIDR-impacted places also cover the complete range of urban to rural locations. Although this categorization encompasses a huge variety of places and people across the globe, this grouping is necessary to understand the legal situations of development-induced displaced persons (DIDPs). DIDPs have similar experiences to refugees in terms of the social and economic losses that are engendered by leaving their homes but are not protected in the same way as refugees under international law (Barutciski 2005). The only international policy protections for DIDPs come in the form of "soft law" which is written by the development banks that are involved in these projects. This "soft law" protects the rights of DIDPs in theory, but in practice "[development banks] may lack the strong political mandate that is required to confront governments responsible for mistreating DIDPs" (Barutciski 2005, 82).

National governments and hydropower companies are the other institutions involved in development projects, meaning that it is often not in the economic interest of any of these governing bodies to jeopardize the success of their projects for the sake of human rights (Barutciski 2005, 90). The Mekong River Basin is a perfect example of how these international processes play out within a subregion, demonstrating how the lack of enforceable protections for DIDPs manifests in negative resettlement outcomes that persist after decades of hydropower development.

Comparison of State Action and Resettlement Outcomes in the Mekong Basin by Country

This table is the product of a literature review of existing scholarly works and non-scholarly media on resettlement in the Greater Mekong Basin. The dams that were chosen as case studies are listed with a brief description underneath their respective countries. This list of dams is intentionally non-exhaustive; choosing between one and three dams per country provided a wealth of insight into the resettlement situations of the respective countries while maintaining a manageable scope and focus of the project. Excerpts and findings from each article were extracted that fell under two categories. The first, "State Action and Compensation Practices," presents specific examples of the policies and actions that states have adopted towards resettlement cases. The second, "Impact and Pathways to Improvement" demonstrates the effects of state action on communities and individuals and presents examples of efforts towards resettlement justice.

Country	State Action and Compensation Practices	Impact and Pathways to Improvement
Lao PDR Nam Theun 2 (NT2): The largest hydropower project in Laos which exports electricity to Thailand and has been widely criticized for social and environmental impacts Pak Beng: A proposed dam on the mainstream Mekong which is likely to have transboundary impacts in both Lao PDR and Thailand (Hunt 2020). Theun-Hinboun dam: A joint venture between Thailand and	Manorom et al. (2017) The government of Laos (GoL) refuses to use the term "Indigenous" for ethnic minority groups (284). The World Bank may choose to classify groups as Indigenous, a label that it did not extend to the NT2-affected Brou people (287). Brou people are facing relocation due to flooding, which the GoL did not assist with because it claims flooding is unrelated to NT2 (290). Additionally, "there is considerable evidence to suggest that funds from NT2 have not been used towards poverty alleviation efforts" (286). Suhardiman and Rigg (2021) Government compensation policies prescriptively reshape livelihood strategies prior to dam construction in Pak Beng-affected areas (9). Therefore, top-down decision-making limits the futures of resettled people (10).	Manorom et al. (2017) Brou ethnic group women are facing loss of food and income due to NT2. They are Unable to catch fish and shellfish due to flooding and aquatic environment changes as NT2 has made water patterns unpredictable and fishing more dangerous (292). These women also feel afraid to complain about their situations and lack of compensation for fear of retaliation or arrest from authorities (294). Kura et al. (2017) The livelihoods of people affected by the Theun-Hinbaun dam had disparate outcomes, and the ability to recover was dependent on household income level before resettlement. On average, incomes took two years to begin recovering and were reliant on remittances from family members and wage labor in the resettled location.

Laos located downstream of NT2	Katus et al. (2016) Villagers had unequal access to decision making processes, and those with more power ultimately felt more settled in new locations (11).	Katus et al. (2016) Physical proximity to the river is associated with familiar livelihood and psychological/spiritual sense of place and belonging for villagers; they resist resettlement because "We feel so close to the river" (11). Sivongxay et al. (2017) People in Central Laos experienced big livelihood benefits during construction of a dam due to temporary manual labor work (52).
China Nuozhadu Dam – (2004-2012): Located in Yunnan Province on the Lancang. Nuozhadu, when combined with the nearby dams Xiaowan and Dachaoshan, led to a collective displacement of 50,000 people (Tilt et al. 2015, 154).	Kircherr et al. (2017) Chinese dam developers' social safeguard norms adopted have "significantly changed in the past 15 years" (529). As of the 2001 Going Out Policy, Chinese dam developers "claimed to adopt standards of the host countries" and did not adopt international norms (533). In the years since, Chinese dam developers have increasingly accounted for international norms (534). Social mobilization arises as a probable cause for this change, particularly the 2011 Myitsone Dam suspension (535). Hensengerth (2017) The Lancang-Mekong cooperation shows that China is collaborating on water resources, something that it has not previously been willing to do (87).	Galipeau et al. (2013) Employment statistics suggest that the vast majority of opportunities for hydropower employment of local residents are limited to dam construction labor (444). Ma et al. (2020) Nuozhadu-affected people experienced widely disparate income outcomes but had an overall increase in mean income which could be attributed to jobs in hydropower. Resettled people also experienced dramatic loss of social capital. Zhang et al: 2013 Nuozhadu-affected people were forced to relocate to a region with a different climate and new physiographic features, requiring them to learn how to grow new crops and adapting to new farming techniques. This threatened economic development, as researchers surveyed a 65% decrease in income one year after relocation among these farmers. The survey also showed disproportionate social capital losses for women.

Thailand Pak Mun Dam - 1994: "In all, around 1,700 households lost part or all of their land, and a further 6,000 households lost part or all of their livelihood when fishing grounds were destroyed" (Dash 2009, 23). Pak Mun also caused a permanent end to fishing livelihoods, food/financial insecurity (Amornsakchai et al. 2000, viii). Sirindhorn Dam - 1971: Villagers from 396 families were resettled from 1968-1969 (Dash 2009, 23).	Dash (2009) Families never received full compensation after Pak Mun resettlement and compensation disputes were never settled (23). Corruption by village leaders also led to decreased compensation for villagers (24). Blake (2013) Sirindhorn villagers were resettled to unfertile land, many became dependent on state welfare or migrated to urban slum communities. Amornsakchai et al. (2000) The effect of Pak Mun on resettlement was anticipated to be insignificant by state officials and planners. The outcomes have made stakeholders reassess and learn to more critically anticipate social impacts (111). Kiguchi (2016) The socioeconomic impacts of Pak Mun remain largely unchanged 25 years later, indicating little willingness from the state to rectify harm.	Dash (2009) Pak Mun resettlement led to the formation of the Thai Assembly of the Poor (AOP) (24). Protests began in 1998, which were met with government crackdown but eventually led to Pak Mun dam gates being opened yearly during the rainy season in 2005 (25). These events demonstrate how Pak Mun was the first instance in which the state was required to pay the social costs of its development project (25). Blake (2013) Villagers affected by both dams demonstrated solidarity and joint organization through the AOP. Organizers are demanding compensation for lost livelihoods over four decades. Dash (2009) Resistance was "unthinkable" during construction of Sirindhorn Dam due to lack of media and education to voice demands; lack of leadership or ability to organize among villagers (25).
Cambodia Lower Sesan 2 Dam (2014-2017): A Chinese-backed dam with support from the Asian Development Bank (Hensengerth 2017, 87)	Hensengerth (2017) The state and investors of Lower Sesan 2 responded to resettlement protestors with intimidation, threats, and forced social isolation to coerce villagers to accept resettlement conditions (103).	Hensengerth (2017) Some villagers responded to resettlement terms by refusing to leave their homes. This demonstrates an assertion of physical, spiritual, and cultural needs in an authoritarian political environment (108). Hensengerth (2017) Identity, culture, and power produce different ways of understanding and being with water (91). This means that creating and validating the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) denies the heterogeneity

		of these ways of relating to water and obscures the conflicts and violence of hydropower (93). Resistance to Lower Sesan 2 Dam occurred because of the failure to compensate for the cultural and spiritual relations to water that are lost in resettlement (99)
Vietnam Hoa Binh Dam (1979-1994): Was the largest hydropower project in SE Asia from 1994-2012 and caused the resettlement of 89,000 people (Dao 2010, 330). Son La Dam (2005-2012): The largest hydropower project in SE Asia and is a highly controversial dam that displaced 91,000 ethnic minority speople, the largest resettlement in Vietnamese history (Dao 2010, 332). Yali Falls Dam (1993-1996): Located in the central Vietnamese highlands and has come under criticism for transboundary impacts in Cambodia	Dao (2010) Prior to 1992 resettled households were not compensated for land as all land was considered state property (328). The World Bank's influence on Vietnamese resettlement policies began in 1994 and has increased since (328). Additionally, the World Commission on Dams, NGOs, and media have all impacted Vietnamese resettlement policies that have changed to align with international standards (330). The Hoa Binh Dam had no compensation policy; compensation was poor and some households had to be resettled multiple times. Health problems and poor education were direct results of forced resettlement (331-332). The Son La Dam had formalized compensation policy and aimed to follow WCD policy but still resulted in poor infrastructure and adverse effects for resettled populations (335-336). This shows that policy change alone brings little change in practice (337).	Dao et al. (2004) Yali Falls-affected families from semi-flooded areas lost land and asked for compensation but did not receive any (13). Land shortage and mismanagement in resettlement sites leads to food shortages; "80% of the families interviewed currently face food shortages for more than 4 months a year and others face shortages for up to 10 months a year" (18). Food shortages create a cycle in which resettled families must borrow food from grocery stores and pay them back in harvested crops. "This is a yearly cycle that medium and low-income families will never get out of" (15). Resettlement houses are easily broken and sometimes dangerous to live in (22). Latrines and water sources are insufficient (23).

Discussion

State Policy and Compensation Practices

A common thread that emerges in resettlement literature across the entire basin is the change of resettlement policy over time. The earliest resettlement cases took place in Thailand with the Sirindhorn and the Pak Mun dams in 1971 and 1994, respectively. These dams were built before there was significant policy and NGO activity regarding resettlement impacts. Pak Mun affected 6,000 households despite state officials and planners having anticipated an insignificant effect on livelihood and resettlement. This was the first case in which the state had to pay for widely destructive social impacts of a hydropower project, making Pak Mun a catalyst for a more critical anticipation of the social impacts of hydropower projects by stakeholders and the emergence of resettlement policy. (Amornsakchai et al 2000, 111). There is also a documented history of policy change in Vietnam. Prior to 1992, resettled households were not compensated as all land was considered state property. This particularly affected people displaced by the 1979-1994 Hoa Binh Dam, which had no compensation policy (Dao 2010, 331). After 1992, government changes and the influence of external stakeholders such as the World Bank, the World Commission on Dams, NGOs, and media have all shaped Vietnamese resettlement policy to include more social impact assessment and compensation (Dao 2010, 328-330).

As for China, information on internal resettlement policies is difficult to obtain. Much of the available literature focuses on Chinese dam-building in other countries. Chinese companies have a heavy-handed influence in dam development across the sub-region, thus examining Chinese external resettlement policies can shed a light on region-wide trends. Kircherr et al. (2017, 529) found that the social safeguard norms adopted by Chinese dam developers in lower-basin countries have "significantly changed in the past 15 years." China's 2001 Going Out Policy spurred investment into hydropower in the lower-basin countries, with dam developers at the time claiming to adopt standards of the host countries instead of international norms (Kircherr et al. 2017, 533). In the years since, Chinese dam developers have increasingly accounted for international social safeguard practices, with the interviewed stakeholders anticipating that this trend would continue (Kircherr et al. 2017, 534). This trend is particularly applicable to Cambodia, where a majority of hydropower projects are Chinese-backed, and Lao PDR, where China's hydropower influence is steadily increasing (Hensengerth 2017, 87). China has also shown a willingness to cooperate over water resources and cede some level of power through the Lancang-Mekong cooperation (Hensengerth 2017, 87). Controversies over China's foreign development projects—specifically the canceled Myitsone Dam in Myanmar—and increasing international media attention being given to its hydropower activity may continue or accelerate this shift.

Contrary to other states, the literature does not reveal significant policy change over time in Lao PDR. with recent hydropower projects, particularly 2010's Nam Theun 2, suffering from unequal decision-making processes and corruption in compensation (Katus et al. 2016, 11). Additionally, "there is considerable evidence to suggest that funds from Nam Theun 2 have not been used towards poverty alleviation efforts" (Manoram et al. 2017, 286). Indigenous groups in Laos also have little protection of ancestral right to land, as the state does not recognize these groups beyond the

label of "ethnic minority". This leaves other stakeholders, such as the World Bank, to determine the level of protections Indigenous groups are given in Lao resettlement cases. This has resulted in dangerous and unfair outcomes for Indigenous groups, with the Brou ethnic group facing uncompensated forced relocation as a result of Nam Theun 2 (Manoram et al. 2017, 284-290). Suhardiman and Rigg (2021, 9) also found that top-down resettlement decisions in the case of the proposed Pak Beng Dam are pre-emptively affecting village livelihoods. A possible reason for this lack of policy change is that the government of Laos is broadly intolerant of both local and foreign NGOs, limiting the potential of civil society to affect policy change (Felden 2014). At a regional scale, the general trend of resettlement policy changes over the last 50 years suggests movement in a positive direction, with more states implementing social impact assessments and pre-emptive resettlement and compensation planning. As the following sections of this paper will suggest, these policy changes that have occurred appear to be due to the effort of activists and civil society organizations rather than a willingness of these governments to commit to concern themselves with the rights and wellbeing of their citizens.

It becomes clearer that top-down policy changes and a greater effort by the stakeholders of hydropower projects to assess social impacts do not induce positive outcomes for local communities. For example, although Thailand's Pak Mun Dam represented a shift towards greater awareness of the social impacts of hydropower projects, the Thai government refused to fully compensate families, never settled compensation disputes, and did not address widespread corruption in the compensation system, all of which are issues that have persisted for decades (Dash 2009, 23-24). Some scholars have argued that the negative socioeconomic impacts of the Pak Mun Dam remain unchanged over 25 years after the dam's completion (Kiguchi 2016). In Vietnam, the Hoa Binh Dam (1979-1994) forced resettlement cases occurred prior to compensation policy and resulted in severe livelihood losses, health issues, and poor education outcomes for displaced people (Dao 2010, 331-332). On the other hand, the Son La Dam (2005-2012) was guided by WCD policy and established formal methods of resettlement and compensation before construction; however, it still resulted in poor infrastructure and adverse livelihood affects for the 91,000 ethnic minority people who were forcibly resettled (Dao 2010, 335-336). The persistence of poor outcomes for resettled people in Vietnam despite policy change demonstrates the ineffectiveness of top-down policy to improve resettlement outcomes.

Impact and Pathways to Improvement

While an examination of policy change over time reveals widespread failure to improve resettlement outcomes, examining resistance and bottom-up community organization over time offers a complementary perspective. When states and large-scale actors fail to protect local communities, the agency and resistance that affected people demonstrate to organize for their own futures arises as an alternative trajectory with a much more optimistic outlook. There is a plethora of instances of resettlement resistance in the Mekong over the past several decades which offer encouraging examples to draw upon. Naturally, political and social conditions vary dramatically among countries in the Basin, with some having much less favorable conditions for successful resistance. These cases demonstrate that it is possible for affected to gain leverage and shift state action.

Pathways to resettlement justice and resistance activities have experienced a large shift during the history of hydropower activity in Thailand. During the Sirindhorn Dam's construction, affected community members claimed that resisting their forced resettlement would be "unthinkable" due to the lack of media to expose government wrongdoing, the lack of education to voice demands, and the lack of leadership among the affected villages to organize (Dash 2009, 25). 27 years later, the Pak Mun resettlement injustices led to the formation of the Thai Assembly of the Poor (AOP) to resist unfair compensation. AOP protests began in 1998, which were met with government crackdown but eventually led to Pak Mun dam gates being opened yearly during the rainy season in 2005 to help offset livelihood losses (Dash 2009, 24-25). This shows how the resistance of Thai activists and local communities were able to force the state into making changes that accounted for social injustice. This resistance was not short-lived either; the AOP has ongoing demands for compensation for over four decades of lost livelihoods and has multi-regional affiliations that advocate for broader economic equity in Thailand (Blake 2013). This demonstrates a dramatic shift over time in the way that Thai people were able to organize, create change, and form lasting coalitions in response to hydropower injustice. An increase in media activity, education, and organization among affected people in Thailand led to increased resistance between the Sirindhorn and Pak Mun dams.

In Vietnam, lacking or incomplete compensation issues persist, particularly for people with semi-flooded land (Dao et al. 2004, 13). Resettlement houses are easily broken and sometimes dangerous to occupy, and latrines and water sources are insufficient and potentially dangerous (Dao et al. 2004, 22-23). Hydropower impacts have also manifested through land shortage and mismanagement issues which have created food shortages for resettled people in Vietnam. Among Yali Falls-affected people, "80% of families currently face food shortages for more than 4 months a year and others face shortages for up to 10 months a year" (Dao et al. 2004, 18). These food shortages force resettled people to borrow food from grocery stores and pay their debts in harvested crops, creating a yearly cycle that these low and medium-income families can never escape (Dao et al. 2004, 25). Resistance to these issues takes a distinct form given the one-party nature of the Vietnamese state. The formal method of seeking different resettlement terms is to appeal to the government; central and local Vietnamese authorities reported receiving about 1.57 million grievances from 2008-2011 while only addressing 42% of them. Citizens have resisted against resettlement and land shortages through protest, with demonstrators appearing at government offices during important political events (Government Inspectorate of Vietnam 2012). Scholars have argued that although this localized resistance is important, its scale has remained too small to "considerably influence" the Vietnamese state's hydropower decisions. On the other hand, Vietnamese NGOs have been gaining increasing leverage in government decisions and have crucial to the anti-dam movement. The Vietnam River Network (VRN), which is a network of environmental activists and NGOs that was created in 2005, was responsible for exposing the national law violations of the proposed Dong Nai 6 and 6A hydropower projects, therefore stopping the construction of these dams in 2013. The VRN's efforts also caused a complete re-assessment of hydropower projects by the government, which led to the elimination of 338 hydropower projects (Pham Huu 2014, 142). This large-scale NGO opposition to dams has emerged as a powerfully successful method for resisting unjust resettlement outcomes in Vietnam.

Examining Chinese impacts and future pathways provides a very different perspective to this conversation. China's political environment renders it difficult to access information about the attitudes and actions of resettled people in China. Literature on the impacts of resettlement schemes in China echo findings in other countries, finding that resettled people—specifically Nuozhadu Dam-affected people—have widely disparate livelihood outcomes (Ma et al. 2020). Employment statistics suggest that the vast majority of the instances of income increase in these situations are explained by manual labor employment during dam construction, which disappear after constructed is completed (Galipeau et al. 2013, 444). China's various regions have a high level of physiographic and climate diversity, which presents a unique challenge to relocated people. Nuozhadu-affected people, who are predominantly farmers, were forced to move to a region with different landforms and weather patterns than their homelands, meaning that they had to adapt to new farming techniques. These farmers reported a 65% decrease in income after relocation (Zhang et al. 2013). Researchers have also found that people displaced by hydropower projects in China experienced a dramatic loss of social capital and loss of kinship bonds after resettlement, with this figure being more pronounced among women (Ma et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2013). Resistance and advocacy for local livelihoods is limited in scope due to China's political environment. Chinese policy dictates that environmental NGOs may "communicate and cooperate on environmental and biological diversity protection with local governments," with scholars noting that this implies a lack of allowance to directly oppose the government (Hensengerth 2013). While unable to use direct opposition, Yunnan Province NGOs have been able to use methods of cooperation to shift the practice of local governments to pay closer attention to livelihoods. A strategy employed by the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge in the Tibetan and Yunnan areas is to lend community skills and knowledge about agriculture and conservation to local governments in an appeal to keep traditional livelihoods intact (Hensengerth 2013). However, it is unclear exactly to what extent the activities of Chinese NGOs have actually shifted on-the-ground resettlement experiences. The limited transparency and ability of outsiders to study internal Chinese resettlement cases makes it very difficult to speculate on future pathways to resettlement justice. With an increasing number of Chinese-funded dams being constructed in the lower-basin countries, it is also necessary to pay attention to the unique political tensions and resistance that these dams generate. As noted earlier, Chinese hydropower investors have become increasingly sensitive to social impacts in their projects over the past 15 years, of which social mobilization arises as a strongly probable cause. A particular turning point was the fierce resistance by the Kachin people to the Chinese-funded Myitsone Dam in Myanmar which led to its suspension in 2011 (Kircherr et al. 2017, pg 535). The failed dam has since remained an embarrassment to the Chinese hydropower agenda, forcing stakeholders to adopt different measures to prevent a repeated incident. The geopolitics of Chinese hydropower development are much more intricate than this singular case, but the Myitsone Dam is a powerful demonstration that resistance abroad is capable of changing external Chinese hydropower policies.

In Cambodia, resettlement justice conflicts over Lower Sesan 2—a Chinese-funded hydropower project—demonstrate the challenges of forming coalitions through NGO-based advocacy. Villagers who faced forced resettlement responded to the compensation terms by refusing to leave their homes, asserting that compensation was not adequate for the physical, spiritual, and

cultural losses associated with resettlement. Both the Cambodian state and Lower Sesan 2 stakeholders responded to protestors with intimidation, threats, and forced social isolation to coerce villagers to accept their resettlement conditions (Hensengerth 2017, pg 103). The violence Scholars have documented tensions between the wants of individual villagers who resisted Lower Sesan 2 relocation and the NGOs who claimed to represent them. Tensions arose between villagers who were explicitly anti-dam and the Rivers Coalition of Cambodia—a group of NGOs—who negotiated for higher compensation on behalf of villagers without being explicitly anti-dam (Baird 2016). This case highlights potential issues with trying to scale up local resistance. Although NGOs can have more power to create state-level change, as evidenced by cases in Vietnam and China, they are liable to perpetuate harm if their work is not firmly grounded in the desires of local people. It is also important to note that the resistance to Lower Sesan 2 was fueled by cultural and spiritual values, which underscores the need for the respect and compensation of the losses that extend beyond livelihoods. The Lower Sesan 2 case demonstrates that advocacy for affected groups must be grounded in the support of Indigenous sovereignty and ontologies of the natural environment.

The pathways to resettlement justice for people in Lao PDR arguably face the biggest challenges. These hurdles include a political system that is rife with corruption, a state that is unwilling to recognize Indigenous land rights, and a lack of opportunity to mobilize civil society. The politics of resettlement become incredibly complicated in a country where top-down decisions are the norm. People who possess greater social and economic power reported greater satisfaction with resettlement terms in a case study in Lao PDR's Nam Gnouang Region (Katus et al. 2016). This demonstrates how power relations among various levels of government and social hierarchy in Lao PDR are intractable from these resettlement cases. Those who lack power face additional vulnerabilities; for example, women of the Brou ethnic group who were affected by Nam Theun 2 have faced food sourcing shortages due to dangerous fishing environments but reported feeling afraid to complain about their situations due to fear of retaliation or arrest from authorities (Manoram et al. 2017, pg 294). Villagers who have resisted in central Lao PDR reported doing so because "We feel so close to the river" (Katus et al. 2016, pg 11). Physical proximity to the river represents practicing ancestral livelihoods, as well as a psychological and spiritual sense of place for these villagers. The gravity of hydropower issues in Lao PDR is growing more serious as the Lao government aims to push forward with four mainstream dams on the Mekong, the first of which is the Pak Beng dam. Even though international NGOs, media, and affected people in Thailand and Lao PDR have raised concerns and petitioned against Pak Beng, state attitudes have been unreceptive (Radio Free Asia 2021).

Conclusion

In a region where the concept of "sustainable hydropower" is constantly contested, the injustices of forced resettlement impel us to critically consider the uneven distribution of hydropower effects. The governments of the various Mekong countries are the main actors driving hydropower development yet are also the biggest obstructors of resettlement justice. Although the Mekong states have demonstrated a shift towards more positive resettlement policy throughout hydropower history, much of this progress can be attributed to outspoken activists and organizations that demanded this change.

Comparing state action and outcomes among the Mekong states is important because it reveals the massively disproportionate distribution of the costs and benefits of dams. These findings produce a region-wide trend: the brunt of the negative effects of hydropower are burdened by forcibly resettled people in every country. This finding is incredibly important to the prospects for hydropower in the Mekong region. Hydropower is often touted by governments as sustainable social and economic good, but the findings raise the question: Who exactly is hydropower sustainable for? Certainly not the people who are forcibly resettled from their homes. As in line with the conceptual framework of DIDR, resettled people in the Mekong Basin have virtually no enforceable policy protections for land, livelihoods, and socio-cultural ties.

Resistance at the scale of civil society organizations emerges as one of the most effective pathways forward, with some reservations. Resettlement resistance is complicated by the fact that all of the Mekong states practice varying degrees of authoritarianism. On one hand, the courage of those who have practiced resistance shows promise for the willingness of communities to continually stand up to heavy-handed states that abuse human rights. There have also been documented successes in several countries of CSO activity influencing national and local government action over the past five decades. Specifically, the success of Vietnamese NGOs to unite as the Vietnam Rivers Network under an anti-dam mission and eliminate 338 proposed hydropower projects stands out as particularly inspirational. On the other hand, conflicting interests and power relations are barriers to successful resistance at the scale needed to impact state action. As evidenced by the case of Lower Sesan 2, NGO activity can obscure and undermine the wishes of affected people. The threats of retaliation from authoritarian states is also a powerful factor in limiting resistance, as displayed by the fears of Nam Theun 2-affected Brou women in Lao PDR.

If given more time for this project, further research should be conducted into the geopolitical intricacies of hydropower development at the nation-scale. This is particularly important to understanding the duality of internal and external Chinese hydropower, which is much more nuanced than is presented in this study. Closer attention is needed to the geopolitics of Chinese-driven hydropower development in lower-basin countries, and the relational power dynamics this creates among the Mekong nations. This project reveals certain policy and outcome discrepancies among countries, which would be enhanced by a deeper study of why these disparities are present among nations.

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