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New Mekong dam ignores threats to UNESCO World Heritage city, livelihoods and ecosystems

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The river Mekong at Luang Prabang. Photo: Skylar Lindsay

AUGUST 13, 2020

In Laos, the push for hydropower near the ancient capital of Luang Prabang shows that plans to dam the Mekong River basin are already going awry. But rather than learning from its missteps, the government—with the help of Thai and Vietnamese developers—is going ahead with a dam that could endanger a UNESCO World Heritage city.

Editorial

As US-China **tensions** turn towards the Mekong River and its dams, the area near Laos' latest hydropower project on the river is already seeing major controversy around existing dam projects.

The Lao government is **preparing** to start construction on the Luang Prabang Dam, a 1,460-megawatt (MW) project that will be the largest on Laos' portion of the river. Located near the UNESCO World Heritage city of Luang Prabang, the dam—like others along the Mekong—threatens the river's ecosystems.

The impacts of Mekong dams on fisheries and agriculture also jeopardize the food supply of over 60 million people who rely on the river. The Mekong basin is the most productive **source of freshwater fish** in the world and it represents 15-25% of the global annual fish catch, worth billions of dollars to the countries along the Lower Mekong.

Mekong dams are now also coming into play in US-China dynamics. A **study** earlier this year showed that China's 11 dams on the upper portion of the Mekong withheld nearly all of the river's flow in 2019, while the Lower Mekong countries saw a record-breaking drought.

On the local level, other hydropower projects in the same area as the Luang Prabang Dam have already been mired by **reports** of forced displacement and broken promises.

Over 600 families in Luang Prabang province are reportedly still **waiting** for the Lao government to give them new homes after they were displaced nearly five



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years ago by the construction of the Nam Khan 2 and Nam Khan 3 dams. The city of Luang Prabang sits at the confluence of the Nam Khan River and the Mekong.

Local residents displaced by the Nam Khan dams and their large reservoirs have been living in temporary camps since 2016, waiting for the government to follow through on promises to give them new land on which they can farm and live.

“We will wait to hear no matter how long it takes,” one local resident **told** *Radio Free Asia*.

The affected residents also say compensation for their land and farms flooded by the dams was far too low. Many of the approximately 100 families who have already been resettled say their new land isn’t large enough to support their livelihoods and doesn’t account for lost orchards and other investments they had made on their old land.

The issues in Luang Prabang are common among hydropower and other large development projects in Laos. Laos has **plans** for six other dams on the mainstream of the Lower Mekong and **72 large dams** across the river basin.



The Nam Khan at Luang Prabang. Photo: Skylar Lindsay

The Nam Khan dams were built by China’s state-owned Sinohydro Corporation, which is also building a series of

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seven dams on Laos’ Ou River. The Ou dams are mired in **similar controversies**.

far can they go?

“I have to move because they tell me to move,” one woman in the village of Lat Thahae along the Ou **told** *The New York Times*. “Our life on the river is finished.”

But the stakes—as well as the potential dangers—of building near Luang Prabang are also unique. The new dam will be built less than 10 kilometers from a **fault line**—the Dien Bien Fu Fault Zone—and seismic activity in the area may present a **major danger** to the UNESCO World Heritage city.

Laos races ahead on hydropower in Luang Prabang, rather than studying its impacts

Despite these unresolved issues in the same province, the Lao government and developers are pushing ahead with plans for the Luang Prabang Dam.

The project is being fast-tracked despite the fact that Laos’ first two Mekong dams—the 1,285 MW Xayaburi Dam and the 260 MW Don Sahong Dam—only began operation less than a year ago.

The new project is a joint venture by the Lao government, Vietnamese state-owned **company** Petrovietnam and Thai construction **firm** CH. Karnchang, which also built the Xayaburi Dam.

The developers of the dam are required by the Mekong River Commission to carry out a public consultation process involving all four members of the commission—Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This process is now in its **final stages** despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both Cambodia and Vietnam have **asked** the Lao government to commit more time and resources to

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studying the dam's potential impacts, and Thai Deputy Prime Minister General Prawit Wongsuwon recently **called** for international cooperation to monitor the project.

Vietnamese government officials have said that upstream dams and climate change could displace up to a million people from the Mekong delta. One Mekong River Commission **study** showed that damming on the Mekong could rob Vietnam's river delta of 97% of its sediment, effectively ending agriculture in the region. Vietnam has historically been opposed to upstream dams on the Mekong, though the involvement of Petrovietnam in Luang Prabang throws this policy into question.

As for Cambodia, a government spokesperson **announced** in March that the country will suspend all hydropower projects on the Mekong for 10 years while the government conducts a review of its energy policy. The announcement has left Laos as the only country in the Lower Mekong region that is still planning to build dams on the river. Cambodia is already purchasing **power** from the Malaysian-built Don Sahong dam and **signed** a deal with Laos in 2019 to purchase 2,400 MW of power from coal as-yet unbuilt **power plants**.

The momentum behind the Luang Prabang Dam has continued despite COVID-19, the failures around the Nam Khan projects and the unique risks of building near the ancient capital city. With the pre-construction phase already underway, the government appears to be ignoring a crucial chance to change course and take a more responsible approach to its hydropower push.

“Transparency and accountability?” Bruce Shoemaker, a researcher specializing in natural resource conflicts in the Mekong region, **told** *The New York Times*. “Those aren't words I'd use to describe Laos.”

But if Laos can acknowledge the **impacts** of its push to become the “battery of Southeast Asia”, its government

will have the support of regional and international allies, especially as US-China tensions highlight the consequences of development along the Mekong.

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