

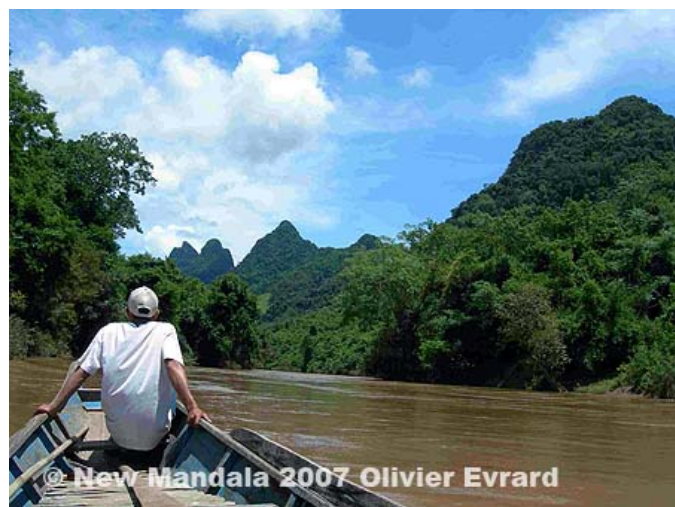
## The Nam Tha dam

By

[Olivier Evrard, Guest Contributor](#)

– 30 September 2007 **Posted in:** [Laos](#), [Trans-Border Issues](#)

A Chinese company is currently intending to build a hydroelectric dam on the Nam Tha river in northwestern Laos (other dams are being planned on the Nam Ou, also with Chinese funds). The project is called Nam Tha 1, which means maybe that there will be more dams in the near future(?). Four Chinese experts are currently living in Huay Sai, where they can be seen playing ping-pong every night in a restaurant in the centre of the town. It is very difficult to get any precise data about this project from them. Here is the limited information I was able to gather after several discussions in Huay Sai, Nalae and Namtha towns.



Nam Tha 1 is a hydropower project currently in its feasibility stage (no final contract has been signed yet with the Lao government). The dam will be constructed across the Nam Tha approximately 62 km upstream from the confluence with the Mekong (see picture above), that is in Pha Udom district but not far from its border with Nalae district (Luang Nam Tha province) which will then be the most heavily affected by the inundation. The project will also require construction of a 36 km access road to link the dam site with the National Road No 3 (Huay Sai/Luang Namtha). According to what I heard, this road will start from the Lamet village of Nam Toung and then head south to the Nam Tha river. In the middle of the 1990s, a Canadian consulting group conducted a feasibility study for this dam. Their report pointed out the technical problems which are likely to occur in the future, due to the turbidity of the Nam Tha in the rainy season. Obviously, the Chinese now know how to cope with this problem!

The proposed project (in 2006) was a 264 MW hydropower facility on the Nam Tha river. The electricity produced is to be sold to China and Burma. According to the first version of the project, the Nam Tha 1 hydropower dam would have impounded a reservoir which would have extended approximately 110 km upstream, affecting about 28 villages. Nearly all the lowland area of the Nalae district would have then been flooded (until the village of Hatnalaeng), including the administrative centre of the district (*samnak müang*). From my own calculations, based on the last census of 2005, the flood would then have affected about 11,000 people, or 50% of the population of the district.

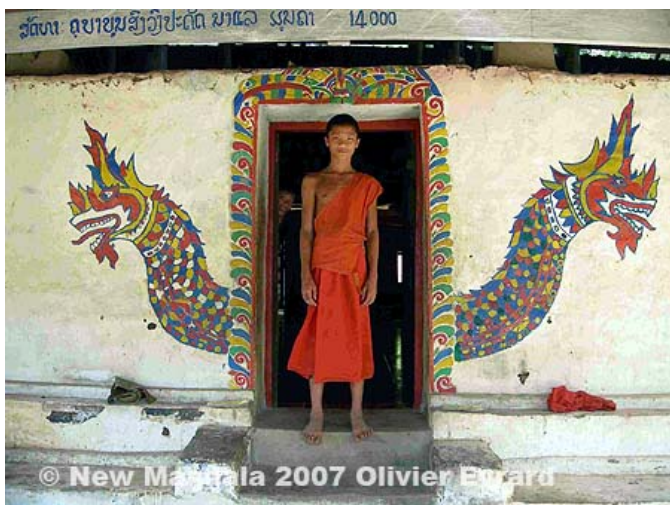
After the first preliminary surveys, the Lao government expressed some concerns on the resettlement issue and asked the Chinese company to revise their project. In early September 2007, a delegation of Chinese experts visited the proposed site for further surveys. The final height of the dam is not known yet but it is now said that the flood will reach only the southern part of the district and affect fewer villages. Still, at least 15 villages currently settled on the banks of the Nam Tha would be affected and more could have to move since the flood will extend to some minor tributaries along which the Lao government has resettled many upland villages in the past decade.



According to the villagers in Nalae district, several meetings have already taken place with the local authorities concerning this dam. Lively and sometimes tense discussions have focused on the compensations which the Chinese company will have to pay to the flooded villages. Obviously, payments will be made for rice granaries and houses but I did not get more details. Rice granaries in a village in Nalae district are

being surveyed (red letters and numbers in the picture above) to calculate the amount of the resettlement budget which will be provided by the Chinese company to the villagers. As a point for comparison, we can look at other dams currently being built in the country by private Chinese or Vietnamese companies. In Attapeu for instance, a Vietnamese company is currently building a \$135 million dam (electricity will later be sold to Vietnam) on the Se Kamman. About 1% of the total investment is devoted to resettlement issues. Each of the 260 families who will have to move will receive assistance of \$5500 which will be distributed as follow: 1 year of rice supply, 75 corrugated iron sheets, some other construction materials (cement, wood), one buffalo and \$1500 in cash.

The Chinese company in Nalae will probably follow more or less the same procedure as the Vietnamese in Attapeu. The difficulty here is that the dam is not flooding “only” remote minority villages, it concerns also numerous old and quite prosperous Lü and Lao villages settled on the banks of the Nam Tha for at least two centuries. These villages have long specialised in fluvial trade and transportation rather than agriculture (the Khmu and Lamet produce the rice on swiddens, the Lü and the Lao transport it and sell it in Pak Tha). During the last decades, tourism has also provided them with a good opportunity for extra money. The dam will profoundly affect the old existing trade patterns. Boats will have to stop at the dam site, and all the passengers and goods will probably go toward Huay Sai along the new road built for the dam construction. The revenues for the boatmen will then be lower than in the past. Will this loss be taken into account for the calculation of the resettlement plan? I wonder also if the Chinese will take into account the numerous beautiful temples which their dam will flood. Most of them are not very old (200 to 300 years), but their architecture and the drawings on their walls should be considered as part as an heritage for Lao culture (see pictures below). A job for Unesco?



This dam will also flood numerous schools, dispensaries and water pipe systems which have been built with funds and technical support from the German aid agency GTZ, the French NGO Action Contre La Faim, the World Bank, the ADB and the European Commission (who obviously have not been consulted yet!). All this infrastructure was built to improve the sanitary and education conditions of the local people, especially those who, coming from uphill, were asked to “settle down” by the local administration and “to join their efforts for national advancement”. One can easily guess how difficult it is for these people to really “settle down” when all the investments made during the last ten years in the new villages are wasted just like rubbish in a dustbin.

Another issue relates to the location of the site for the resettlement of all these villages. Concerning the Lü and Lao villages, if the authorities just allow them to go uphill (so that they can enjoy in the future the vicinity of the reservoir), it is likely that land problems will arise with the Khmu and Lamet neighbours. Concerning the Khmu and Lamet villages which have been resettled ten years ago near the river and who will have to move again, the situation could be even worse since the economy of these villages still bear the costs of the first migration.

The situation of these highland villages currently living near the Nam Tha river can be seen as a summary of the resettlement practises in Laos since 1975: they were often poorly conceived and poorly implemented and they have created as many problems as solutions. International aid was called upon and used to ease the transition of the resettled villages. Now new infrastructure is being built with foreign private funds and new resettlements are taking place. What is happening now in Nalae will probably also occur on the Nam Ou river. How long will the international donors tolerate such a contradictory policy? Undoubtedly, some of these dams can have positive economic impacts in the future but their construction and their monitoring should involve all those who have worked in the area in the past ten years, and not only private Chinese and Vietnamese companies.

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## 16 Comments

1. #1

[Reply](#)

chanhma sayasene

Posted October 2, 2007 at 8:46 AM

I think we're as people should consider that life of people that more important than just the dam. but some body will be responsibility for that people's life the lao government should look at closely, if it's benefit to the country but not for the people than they should consider.

Quality comment or not? 0 0

2. #2

[Reply](#)

Sayasith YangSao

Posted October 2, 2007 at 2:05 PM

All right my friends,

Keep building dams to produce all the electrical energy needed by Laos' neighbors—Thailand, Vietnam, China, Myanmar and Cambodia. After the expiration of all the concessions, who will ensure that the dams built will survive for life, and that Laos will have enough technical personnel to manage all those energy producing landmarks?

Just my very humble thoughts.

SYS

Quality comment or not? 0 0

3. #3

[Reply](#)

V

Posted October 2, 2007 at 2:43 PM

The Vientiane Times is running an article today, "Work on Nam Tha 1 dam to start in Bokeo" with some additional specifics. For example, the name of the Chinese company is the China Southern Power Grid Co. that is also involved in the feasibility studies for the Sambor dam in Cambodia (signed MoU with Cambodian government in October 2006).

See: [http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/Business/Business\\_Work.htm](http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/Business/Business_Work.htm)  
or wait until tomorrow to view it for free.

Quality comment or not? 0 0

4. #4

[Reply](#)

Sangalee

Posted October 3, 2007 at 2:44 PM

The Jeck are everywhere in northern Laos. They built Laos Vegas in Boten, Luang Namtha province. They took over the market in Oudomsay, Luang Prabang and Vientiane's Nong Douang market. They are very stingy and don't hire Laotian. Instead, they bring their own people to work for any project given to them from the Lao gov'n't. Once they are in Laos, they refuse to return to China. Their dream is to live in the Souvannaphoum land, the Laotian Golden Land. They want to have Laotian dream with more freedom to raise more children, not one child like their homeland. In 10 more years, Laos will have a population of 10 million and half of them will be Jeck. Wake up uncle Choummaly and camarade Bouasone, your ethnic people in Saravane and Attapeu will be disticted.

Quality comment or not? 0 0

5. #5

[Reply](#)



col. jeru

Posted October 4, 2007 at 2:06 AM

Damn those dams! There must be better alternatives now, and if not, better to wait for technology to catch up.

Surely after all we now know about dams and how they wreck the environment and the people and their culture within the vicinity of the dams, those development experts (and development bankers) would know better..

The Chinese huge dams (3-Gorges) will be their colossal curse. Exporting their cursed dam building technology to Laos and impoverished neighbors look good on paper but with untold social and environmental costs tagged on for decades to follow.

Quality comment or not?  0  0

6. #6



[Reply](#)



James Haughton

Posted October 4, 2007 at 11:19 AM

It's not that they don't know better, it's that they make heaps of money from such things. cf Arundhati Roy's essay "[The Greater Common Good](#)" on the Narmada dam in India. Same Iron Triangle here, I bet. Except Laos and China don't even pretend to be democratic.

Quality comment or not?  0  0

7. #7

[Reply](#)



Diego Perin



Posted February 16, 2008 at 12:48 AM

We are a company specialist in dam's construction all over the world. We are interested to contact the construction company to offer our services.

If someone can approach our companies we will very thankful and offer a comission if the contract will result positive.

Please contact us, [diego@tecbarragem.com.br](mailto:diego@tecbarragem.com.br)

Thank you, Best regards

Quality comment or not?  0  0

8. #8

[Reply](#)





Micko

Posted April 30, 2008 at 2:19 AM

The popularity of large dams comes from the fact that they possess massive 'contingency funds' at the ready to pave (read 'pay') the way through all beaurocratic, human rights, environmental and social justice obstacles. It is no coincidence that nearly every developed country in the world where corruption is less pervasive currently refues to continue building these monstrosities due to their extremely well documented downsides which outweigh the benefits.

The winners of the Nam Tha nation building charade are the Chinese dam developers and the Lao officials who clean up by signing off on the projects. The losers are the Lao people and their wonderful environments. It used to be the world bank and the Asian development bank who mainly funded poorly thought through dam projects but with China now loaded with funds a lot worse is to come. My sincere sympathies go out to the Lao people.

The best we can do is bring pressure to bear upon China to address it's appalling lack of respect for human rights and the environment. Press your government to boycott the Olympic opening ceremony as this is the clearest way to send a message to Beijing that their Human rights and environmental policies simply dont cut it in the real world.

Quality comment or not?  0  0

9. #9



[Reply](#)



Val

Posted September 11, 2008 at 9:50 PM

Very good report, Olivier, thank you. Are there any organisations trying to stop the dam, or educate people on the consequences?

Quality comment or not?  0  0

10. #10

[Reply](#)



Dr Bruce Moon

Posted May 6, 2009 at 5:52 PM



Olivier

It's now 2009, and I'm interested in any 'developments' regarding the 'progress' of Nam Tha dam #1.

Also, as the distance between Nalae to L. Nam Tha is approximately 60 kilometres (on a twisty road – so probably only 50 k). The proposed 110km 'flood' tail would appear to also reach beyond Nam Tha (on a straight line basis). But, as the topography upstream of Nam Tha rises quickly and significantly, if 110km WAS to be the distance, it'd be a MASSIVE dam.

I'm not sure the Chinese know how to deal with siltation (the cause of turbidity). The 'mighty' 3 Gorges dam will have a life of only 50 years precisely because the Chinese don't know how to address the impact of siltation on the dam floor.

Cheers on a great article.

Quality comment or not?  0  0

11. #11

[Reply](#)*Bounmy in Luangnamtha based*

Posted August 30, 2009 at 6:09 PM

As someone said this project will help eliminate poverty of villagers but in fact it is not. Do you know it is very hard for the villagers to changes their new livelihood. Maybe someone don't understand much about the rural lifestyle. I am one who is from rural country in Luangnamtha province. I know much effectation about every project such as: Nam tha Dam, Road construction, and Rubber plantation. I know the Dam project will not help release poverty of villagers. Although we are poor, uneducation but we may live happiness than others in developed country. We practiced following the teaching of our religion said that whenever we still have greed, hatred, and delusion that we are unhappiness. We live without terrorist, no economics conflict, no corruption, no robbery. We lived in the village for several years without high technology we can. The main purpose is to live dependent on natural and natural dependent on human beings we both dependent on each other. We don't need to leave our old prosperous and hard to make a new one. Some thing we can move but some thing we can't move such temples or spirit worship places. We always worshiped spirit in our village but if we change it will effect us because it makes wrong behavior of the spirit and some one died because move the spirit place. I know that you maybe not believe about this but you have never been in our village for long term

Quality comment or not? 0 0

12. #12

[Reply](#)*bounmy*

Posted August 30, 2009 at 7:15 PM

I am a rural villager in LuangNamtha province which effect about many problems. I would like to say we should consider in the negative way too much before doing any project because the problems are effect to rural people who live in the area. Every thing changes including their lifestyle, old prosperity, Land for earn living as well know that they dependent on forest for living. The environment is very important of them. We can't live without forest and we haven't no experience to work cooperation with the project. I can say that I am proud to be born rural villager. Our village lack of electricity, high technology but we live happiness without terrorist, corruption, murder, drug addict. We are low education but we use local knowledge to deal with every problem in our society. We aim to develop our mind first and later material this is the way of Buddhism.

People will live happiness when their mind is peaceful we believed that the more develop material the more lead problems to our society. Therefore, I would like to request all Lao have to consider much in the affection unless it will lead our society to the disadvantages like developed country which are many problems although they are rich country but they also can't deal with this problems. Our country which plenty of forest and prosperity of environment will fade down because human destroy. In the former time we combated the war and stop the war but now It will be war of economics. We should seek the way which is not devastated environment, social, culture, tradition and religion

Quality comment or not? 0 0

13. #13

[Reply](#)*Dr Bruce Moon*

Posted August 30, 2009 at 11:31 PM

bounmy

I am reading you to say that as a rural Laos person, and coming from a poorly educated area, you believe that the natural environment is the key for villagers to make a living. I also read that you believe that the promise of economic benefits will not help local rural villagers.

I agree with you. Unless all the money from 'economic progress' goes to the villagers (neither the Nam Tha head man, or the government) the villagers will lose access to their lifestyle.

Thank you for speaking out.

Cheers

Quality comment or not? 0 0

14. #14

[Reply](#)*John Roberts*

Posted August 31, 2009 at 6:22 PM

An interesting blog on the subject of Laos hydropower is kept by Mr Phanomsinh who works in the field and whose banner reads.

"Laos hydro power development

Hi every body. welcome to Phanomsinh's blog. It is about electric power situation here in Lao PDR – the country which going to be power exporter in ASEAN. Many dams are going to be constructed here by investors from every parts of the world. My company constructs electric power distribution networks throughout Lao PDR"

The only thing he has on the Nam Tha is from January 2008 – linked <http://pnomsin.blogspot.com/search/label/Nam%20Tha%201> .

The main page is <http://pnomsin.blogspot.com/>

Quality comment or not? 0 0

15. #15

[Reply](#)



bounmy

Posted October 15, 2010 at 4:29 PM

Absolutely the money goes to the villagers and the company pays the compensation to them who effect from the dam. But I believed that these compensations can't raise their life forever and the environment that effected can't revive again. The local people depend on forest and rivers to be their feeding ground for many years and never goggle to the money compensation but when the investors came, the indigenous people change their lives. Do you know, local people are lack of knowledge they see only the money but they don't think to the effect in their future. we who have knowledge, who know the effect to their culture, tradition , their lifestyle and feeding area why we don't urge them to preserve their original way of life. I don't think Laos will use local villages' area to make money. I know the law of Laos but do you think the local people know the law?

Thank you  
Sincerity

Quality comment or not? 3 0

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