

The silenced river

By

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Photo: Olivier Evrard

Olivier Evrard reports from northern Laos, where a new dam has major implications for local villagers, and some of the oldest settlements in the area.

Back in 2007, *New Mandala* published [an article I wrote](#) about a potential dam to be built by a private Chinese company on the Nam Tha river in northern Laos.

At that time, locals knew very little about the technical characteristics of the dam, the number of affected villages, the resettlement plans and the compensation that would be paid by the Chinese company and the Lao authorities.

Meanwhile, teams of Chinese experts were travelling on the river and stopping by each village, quoting the number of households and barns that would soon be flooded, holding meetings with local authorities and, supposedly, writing reports to be sent to Vientiane.

Then, for seven long years, no information filtered out of the Lao Ministry of Planning and Investment. Some said the project was abandoned, others that the Laotian authorities were negotiating the amount of compensation to be given to the villagers.

During 2012, it became clear however that the project was still on and a dirt track was built from Bokeo district to the expected site of the dam, in Pha Oudom district, a few kilometres downstream from a Lao village named Ban Peng.

Finally, in November 2014, an article published by the *Vientiane Times* announced that an agreement had been signed between the Lao Ministry of Planning and Investment and the Nam Tha 1 Lao Power Co. Ltd, a company created by China Southern Grid (CSG), a major electricity company operating in Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou and Hainan provinces.

By 2017, the expected date of its completion, the 168 megawatt (MW) dam (generating electricity mostly for export and operating under a 30 years' concession) will create a reservoir of 64 square kilometres and will flood 34 villages.



The site of the new dam. Photo: Olivier Evrard

I know most of these villages, as I have been doing fieldwork in this area since 1994. My involvement with this dam is, therefore, emotional.

The reservoir will force many thousands of people to move house. It will flood temples, schools and water supply wells. It will also entirely reshape the whole socio-ecological rhythm and interethnic system that has for centuries gravitated around the river; no more high and low water seasons, no more fish migrations from and to the Mekong, no more fluvial trade to and from Pak Tha.

Some settlements will have to regroup to new locations on higher ground, implying new land agreements with neighbouring villages but also bigger village units and more difficulties accessing arable land.

These migrations will take place in a complex ethnic and historic setting: some of the affected villages are entirely Lao or Lue and are pretty old; others are Khmu or Rmet (either entirely or partly) and have already experienced successive resettlements in the last 20 years.

The resettlements that this dam project will cause are an aberration in regard to the policy followed by the Lao authorities during recent decades. In this region, more than 50 per cent of the highland villages have disappeared because their habitants have been convinced to move down into the valley and to gather in lowland multi-ethnic villages in order to get closer to public services and infrastructure.

Now, while they are not yet entirely settled, they are asked to move again. A major difference with the previous dynamics though, is that for the first time in this region, old Lao and Lue villages are directly impacted by development-induced resettlements.

Hydropower is a key strategy of the Lao government for the country's economic development. The State expects to receive substantial revenues from electricity exports to its neighbours, which can then be used to fund rural development and poverty alleviation programs.

Such a strategy is certainly not a new one. Laos begun exporting electricity to Thailand in 1971 with the Nam Ngum 1 dam and during the following decades, several other dams were built with international assistance.

What is new is that the regional private-sector developers from Thailand and especially China and Vietnam have supplanted the historical actors of hydropower in the country (representatives of the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, UNDP and bilateral Western donors).

These newcomers have picked up hydropower plans abandoned by Western companies during the Asian financial crisis and they now intend to pursue their projects, as well as to initiate new ones.

As of March 2013, according to [an official document](#) released by the Ministry of Energy and Mines of Laos, 13 dams were operational in Laos (for a total production of 2,948 MW), 14 under construction (5,053 MW), 24 planned (5,810 MW) and 32 under study (7,453 MW) – nearly all of them on tributaries of the Mekong. If all those dams are effectively put in operation, Laos will produce six times more electricity than it does now.

The document also shows that the main investors for the projects started after 2000 are mostly private companies from neighbouring countries, especially China and Vietnam. The involvement of these new actors is generally seen as worrying given their weak environmental and safety records as well as their willingness to avoid what they consider as burdensome regulations implemented by the World Bank and the ADB.

There is however little substantial information from the field so far, and, while the relative secrecy which surrounds these projects is indeed worrying, it can also lead to false rumours and exaggeration.

Besides, there is a kind of neocolonial attitude in the systematic denigration of the Lao authorities' choice to preference Vietnamese or Chinese companies rather than the World Bank or the ADB and their cohorts of highly-paid consultants, infinite numbers of assessments and reports, and the inevitable delays that accompany them. If a Chinese company works as efficiently, quicker and cheaper than its Western rivals, then why shouldn't the Lao government take this opportunity? Or am I playing the Devil's advocate?

To find out more, during the last week of September 2015 I went down the Nam Tha river. I stopped by several villages to gather information on their resettlement plans. The following observations are intended to provide more insight and discussion of the new "dam rush" in Laos, and to hopefully inspire further research on this important issue.

The Lao authorities have drafted two separate resettlement plans for the two districts impacted by the dam: Nalae district (Luang Nam Tha province) and Pha Udom district (Bokeo province). Altogether, the Nam Tha 1 dam will affect 37 villages, representing 1,707 households or 10,523 people.

Nalae district is the most heavily affected, with 27 villages gathering 1,320 households or 7,450 people in total but, unlike in Pha Udom district, some of these communities, especially those located at the northern extremity of the future reservoir, are only partially affected.

Therefore, in Nalae district, compensation for resettlement will be provided only to 1,172 households or 6,326 people, which means that 148 households and 1,124 people living in affected villages won't receive any support from the project. In this district, the local administration has also identified and already partially prepared 10 resettlement sites. Each site will gather two or more existing villages.

The implementation of the resettlement plan is less advanced in Nalae than in Pha Udom but the construction of new infrastructure has already started: bulldozers are opening new roads and laying out terraces for migrant households and relocated Buddhist temples. Trucks are bringing cement to build new schools, new communal houses and to set up electricity posts.

Most of the villagers have not started moving yet, but a new landscape is clearly emerging, as well as new problems. The most frequent complaint relates to the size of the relocation sites, which the villagers consider too meagre, too steep or not auspicious. Critics have also voiced concerns about the size of the houses that the project will built for them –, which range from 6m x 6m to 6m x 9 m. Many of the migrants, especially in the old Lue villages, currently live in much larger houses.

Resettlement also impacts access to arable land; some of the villages currently located near the river, like Donethip, have to move up on the slopes and will soon find themselves squeezed between the reservoir and the limits of the territory of the remaining (mostly Rmet) upland villages. Agreements may be found with Rmet and Khmu populations, when part of the resettled villagers are themselves from highland origin and have kept land rights in the hills, but this won't be systematic and it will take time to provide everyone with acceptable parcels of land (in terms of size, quality and distance from the village).



Terraces on a steep slope where the houses of Ban Nalae will soon be resettled. Photo: Olivier Evrard

There seems also to be countless unexpected or uncertain moves that contradict plans made by the local authorities. For example, some households want to settle on other sites than those they have been registered on. Some still refuse to move while others have already anticipated the resettlement plan and have started occupying new portions of land to secure their rights. Some want to go downhill to be nearer to new tracks, while others want to go back to upland sites. Finally, there are also households who asked to leave the district and to settle wherever they want providing the project takes on their resettlement costs.

Local administrators are doing what they can to positively answer villagers' requests and to ensure that the infrastructure promised by the project are actually built in due time. But they, too, complain about the lack of budget for fieldwork and follow-up and they would like to see representatives of EdL (Electricité du Laos, the state corporation that owns and operates the country's electricity assets) coming more often with them to meet and talk with village leaders.

As our boat goes down toward Pak Tha, we enter Pha Udom district, where 12 more villages are going to be flooded.

Those located upriver, mostly Rmet, will move either to Sangaen, the major relocation site currently under construction in Nalae, or will join other Rmet villages in the upland. There is a great share of uncertainty on their move and my time was too constrained to travel by foot in the upland villages to gather more information. It seems to me however that monitoring the impact of the dam in that area, at the junction of the two districts, will be the main challenge for the local authorities.



Ban Peng is one of the oldest Lao village in that area and has for long specialized in fluvial trade, connecting overland tracks in the Rmet hills with the Mekong banks. It is (or rather was) nested at the foot of a spectacular cliff, at the bottom of which a Buddha image is carved in the lime and covered with gold. When we arrived, the village was already of the move. Photo: Olivier Evrard

The remaining villages, from Ban Kuen to Ban Phasang, altogether around 600 households, will all move to a relocation site called Ban Hadmuark, located only a few kilometres downriver from the bridge where the road linking Hueysay and Pha Udom towns cross the river.

When our boat arrived in Ban Pheng, one of the oldest Lao settlements in the area, we discovered that the whole village was already on the move. Its habitants had been told that by early October, the Chinese company would complete a first stage of the dam's construction and that the flow of the river would be reduced by 30 per cent, thereby flooding their village as well as putting a final term to a several centuries-old fluvial trade between the Luang Prabang and Chiang Rai regions and the Nam Tha basin.

The villagers were disassembling their houses and bringing as many materials as they could, especially the fibro-cement tiles on their roofs, because they said that the new houses built by the project had only iron-sheets roofs. They invited me to follow their boat down to their relocation site. I ended up strolling in the streets of Ban Hadmuark, with my boat driver and his wife, both of them from Nalae and both of them keenly interested in knowing what kind of house they will be offered by the project once it is their turn to abandon their old village.



A few kilometres downstream from Ban Peng, the Chinese company is building the Nam Tha 1 dam. Construction should be completed by 2017. Photo: Olivier Evrard

Ban Hadmuark is what the people call a *moo baan chatsan*, a “modern” settlement where the streets crisscross like the bamboo sections of a mat or of a basket. The houses are all built on the same model: 6×6 metres, on stilts, the walls and floor made of plywood, the roofs covered with corrugated iron sheets. There is a hospital and two elementary schools, all brand new. A few families had already settled in and watched us walk by in the heat and the dust.

There is an atmosphere of Chinese industrial suburb here, minus the industry. Looking at the houses, my boat driver’s wife says jokingly: “I hope husbands and wives won’t quarrel too much. The walls won’t stand the hits and they will fall down in the streets!”

On a more serious note, she says that some of the new settlers have already voiced concerns about agricultural land. The houses have been built near rice fields belonging to Ban Vangphom, another village located on the other side of the river. There is no free flat land left around Ban Hadmuark, and the new settlers have already started to look for potential swiddens (land cultivated by slash and burn techniques) that they will have to clear illegally next year to ensure their subsistence.



Ban Hadmuark, the relocation site for 600 households affected by the Nam Tha 1. Photo: Olivier Evrard

From what I saw during my short visit, resettlement in Ban Hadmuark certainly seems much better planned than those I witnessed during the 1990s and 2000s, when Khmu, Akha or Hmong highland villages from Bokeo and Luang Namtha provinces were hurriedly resettled downhill and experienced harsh conditions of living for many years (see Evrard and Goudineau, 2004).

For all that, the huge size of the settlement, compared to the villages those people are coming from, as well as the lack of available arable land, will almost certainly generate sanitary and agricultural problems. I was not able yet to gather any information on the types of impact assessments done by those in charge of the Nam Tha 1 project and on the follow-up procedures they will implement in the years to come.

That will be one of the objectives of my next visit in the area.

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