



When local power meets hydropower: Reconceptualizing resettlement along the Nam Gnouang River in Laos



Susanne Katus^a, Diana Suhardiman^{b,*}, Sonali Senaratna Sellamutu^b

^aUniversity of Amsterdam, 1012 WX Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^bInternational Water Management Institute (IWMI), Southeast Asia Regional Office, P.O. Box 4199, Vientiane, Lao Democratic People's Republic

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ABSTRACT

In Laos, hydropower development is occurring at rapid, though controversial pace. While hydropower development could in principle contribute to the country's development objectives to promote economic growth and reduce poverty, it also impacts people's livelihoods especially local communities living along the river. Focusing on the transition of Nam Gnouang River into a reservoir, this article looks at the process of resettlement of four neighboring villages in Bolikhamxai Province, Laos into one resettlement site, Ban Keosengkham. Conceptualizing hydropower development as a 'technology' of power, it illustrates how power relations between villagers, local government authorities, and dam developers determine resettlement processes and outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Mekong hydropower is developing rapidly, responding to growing regional demand for electricity, export-led economic growth, expanding domestic consumer markets, and facilitated by the emerging importance of private sector financing¹ (Bakker, 1999; Middleton et al., 2009). At present there are thirty-six dams in operation in the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB), and approximately 110 planned,² under licensing or under construction in private-public partnership (MRC report, 2009). The dams have generating capacities ranging from less than 1 MW up to 2600 MW for Sambor dam planned across the Mekong mainstream in Cambodia.³

Laos is at the forefront of this development. Currently, there are ninety-nine dams planned in addition to seventeen already under operation (MRC report, 2009). Nationally, hydropower development is perceived as the state's primary means to promote

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: susie.katus@gmail.com (S. Katus), d.suhardiman@cgiar.org (D. Suhardiman), s.senaratnasellamuttu@cgiar.org (S. Senaratna Sellamutu).

¹ Unlike before, hydropower projects are built and operated by private developers in collaboration with key government agencies, with little or no involvement from the international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

² Twelve of these planned dams are on the Mekong mainstream. For discussion and analysis on the overall power interplay and decision-making landscape for these twelve mainstream dams see Suhardiman et al. (2015).

³ For exact configuration for these dams, see the Challenge Program Water and Food data base (CPWF, 2013).

economic growth and achieve the country's defined development targets through industrialization and domestic market development and, importantly, as a means for government revenue generation. Regionally, international financial institution such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) presents Laos' hydropower potential as an integral part of its (the ADB's) regional power trade plan, emphasizing the country's potential role as the battery for South-east Asia (ADB, 2009). In this context, hydropower development is pictured both as the Government of Laos' (GoL) major asset to promote economic growth and as part of structural measure to enhance the regional economy.

In practice, however, the rapid pace of dam construction in Laos has also caused environmental and socio-economic changes, impacting resettled communities and people living downstream of the dams (Baird et al., 2015; Bakker, 1999; Baran, 2005). Resettlement has always been a major issue in Laos, both historically and in the present (Baird and Shoemaker, 2007; Evrard and Goudineau, 2004; High et al., 2009). While past resettlement was driven primarily by the state's political security concerns, to move ethnic minorities out of the mountainous area, and thus not necessarily related to hydropower development, the scope and scale of resettlement as a core technology of state-based development planning continue to be applied in hydropower-induced resettlement (Delang and Toro, 2011; Singh, 2009).

Partly complying with the way resettlement is presented as part of the state-based development planning, current discussion on the impacts of hydropower development and with regard to

resettlement in particular tends to homogenize local communities as a group and gives them the appearance of passive recipients (Baird et al., 2015; Bui et al., 2013). Partially overlooking the fact that some villagers are better off economically and politically to cope with resettlement processes than others (Kura et al., 2014; Sayatham and Suhardiman, 2015), current research on resettlement tended to have polarized views on how it impacts local communities. For example, while a few studies have shown that resettled communities can regain or improve their living conditions (Agnes et al., 2009; Souksavath and Maekawa, 2013), other studies have also shown how resettlement can reduce living standards and result in rural impoverishment (Bartolome et al., 2000; Lerer and Scudder, 1999). Moreover, current discussion on the impact of hydropower development seems to overlook the blurred boundary between the state and society (Delang and Toro, 2011; Singh, 2009), especially with regard to the role played by the local elite in directing and influencing the overall negotiation processes with regard to resettlement.

We endeavor to move the analysis of hydropower development and resettlement further by highlighting the heterogeneous nature of resettled community, the multiple rationalities it embodies, and the role of local elite in determining resettlement processes and outcomes. We suggest that resettlement processes, not unlike other processes of social and political change, are also defined and influenced by different segments within the community and the wider society at large, in this case involving the district and provincial governments and dam developers. We examine how local communities in the four dam affected villages along the Nam Gnouang River, Bolikhamxai Province, Laos cope differently with resettlement processes and the socio-environmental changes resulting from the Theun Hinboun Expansion Project (THXP), as derived from their conceptualization of space and place in relation to the water sources, political connections and initial knowledge of the resettlement site. Conceptualizing hydropower development as a technology of power, this article positions resettlement in the central stage of the country's development agenda and illustrates how the blurred boundary between the state and society manifests in the actual process of resettlement and livelihood transitions, as derived from power relations between villagers, local government authorities, and dam developers.

2. Hydropower development as technology of power and the shaping of 'hydroscape'

Shifting the emphasis from state's territorial control to a more nuanced notion of 'governmentality' manifested in complex relationships between men and things, Foucault (1991) highlights the importance of understanding the interrelationship between space, knowledge and power in analyzing power. As stated by Foucault in Crampton and Elden (2007: 6): 'if we want to do an analysis of power... we must speak of powers and try to localize them in their historical and geographical specificity'. Perceiving power as heterogeneous, and moving from juridical conception of power based on state sovereignty to a conception of a technology of power that highlights the role of both state and society in knowledge generation and power production, Foucault develops an analysis of power that goes beyond actors who use it as an instrument of coercion to a notion that 'power is everywhere' (Foucault, 1991), and which is in constant flux and negotiation. Or as stated by Gaventa (2003: 1): '[According to Foucault] power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them'. Power pervades society and cannot be absolutely hegemonic because it involves people, their social

systems, and the ideas they hold about themselves and each other. Power thus travels through social space and time.

Bringing to light the role of powerful and less powerful actors, in particular the local elite in the resettlement processes, this article aims to enhance our understanding of local power geometry. It highlights the villagers' relative positions of power through the transition of four local communities lived in four neighboring villages into one resettlement site: Ban Keosengkham. Here, the constructed landscape involves a business of dwelling that celebrates the individual as an active participant in the perpetual construction of that which surrounds her. How do the different villages within the resettled community of Ban Keosengkham shape resettlement processes? How does it reflect the existing power structure and relations within the community and in relation to local (district and provincial) government authorities, and dam developers? And how does this power dynamics determine resettlement outcomes? These are the questions explored here. While the dam developers and local government authorities are indeed protagonists in the 'grand narrative' (Massey, 2005: 82), they will remain backstage within this article as the villagers take center stage.

3. Research methodology

The line of analysis and arguments presented in this article are derived from in-depth case study research (Burawoy, 1991; Yin, 1994), conducted by the first author from June to December 2011 supported by a literature review on hydropower development and resettlement in Laos in general, and with regard to Theun Hinboun Expansion Project (THXP) in particular. As part of the project, four villages along the Nam Gnouang River were to be resettled to the defined resettlement site to give way to reservoir construction. These four villages are Phonkeo, Sensi, Thambing, and Sopchat. Rooted in a constructivist epistemology, this research interprets social phenomena through the network of interactions between different actors and institutions (Bryman, 2008) while focusing on the resettlement processes from these four villages to the defined resettlement site: Ban Keosengkham, in Bolikhamxay province, Laos.

To understand how different villagers view and perceive hydropower development impacts in relation to resettlement, we look at: (1) how resettlement processes and outcomes are determined by the villagers' conceptualization of space and place in relation to the water sources; (2) how powerful and less powerful actors direct and influence resettlement processes; and (3) how resettlement impact the distribution of, access to, and use of water sources.

To understand how resettlement processes and outcomes are determined by the villagers' conceptualization of space and place in relation to the water sources, we look at the overall negotiation processes of the resettlement site, involving village government authorities from the four villages, dam developer, as well as district and provincial governments. We look at how various actors build strategic alliance to excel their goals, relying on their political connections and some knowledge of the resettlement site.

To understand how powerful and less powerful actors direct and influence resettlement processes, we look at how potential resettlement sites were negotiated locally between relevant villages, centering on how the different village heads participate in the actual negotiation processes in relation to the villagers' preferences of the resettlement site. Moreover, we look at the actual zoning process, which defines the division of land, area/zone in the resettlement site, and how the different village heads and villagers influence the process.

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