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The Rivers Coalition in Cambodia

Statement

Questioning the MRC's "Sustainable hydropower development"

24 September 2008

Extensive hydropower development continues to threaten the ecological integrity of the Mekong River Basin almost a year after 201 organizations and individuals from 30 countries called on the Mekong River Commission (MRC) to sound the alarm on the serious consequence of hydropower dam development on the lower Mekong River. The MRC has continued to fail in promoting the findings of its own scientific research to the public and to the region's governments that points towards the fact that extensive hydropower development will threaten the river ecosystems and the livelihoods of riparian communities.

Instead, the MRC has delayed action and only initiated further research, planning exercises, and dialogues, leaving a vacuum of accountability that has allowed hydropower developers to take their projects forward unchallenged.

It is now time that the MRC's role is reviewed to ensure it is acting in the manner befitting an objective, scientific river basin management organization that it was set up to be. An important first step would be for the MRC to publicly call for a dam development moratorium until scientific evidence of the individual and cumulative impacts of dam development is in the public domain and all party stakeholders including public consensus has been achieved on the best way forward. Otherwise, the MRC's role in the future is in doubt.

Unfortunately, historical precedent indicates that reform may be beyond the MRC. The MRC's precursors – known as the Mekong Committee from the 1950s until the Mekong Secretariat in 1994 – have actually supported damming the Mekong River's mainstream and major tributaries by developing various hydropower masterplans.

The MRC's recent behind-closed-doors role in advising the Lao government on the Don Sahong Dam would suggest that little has changed; the MRC has yet to publicly release its study of the Don Sahong's draft Environmental Impact Assessment report, despite a request by letter from civil society in March 2008.

That the MRC continues to withhold scientific information of critical interest to the public interest is of serious concern, and undermines the trust that it hopes to build with civil society groups. The only way for the MRC to prove that it is capable of generating objective scientific data is to open its results and conclusions to public scrutiny. The MRC's unwillingness to do so is beyond comprehension, but not beyond suspicion.

Throughout the region, the many hydropower projects now planned for the Mekong basin are justified by electricity planning processes that are kept behind closed doors which are biased towards developing large power projects. These planning processes have not promoted energy efficiency, demand side management measures, nor renewable and decentralized energy technologies to their full potential. Although environmentally sustainable and socially desirable solutions to meeting the Mekong region's energy needs do exist, they are not being considered in any regional energy plan at the expense of promoting the region's financial economy.

The MRC has declared itself a supporter of “sustainable hydropower development”, but has failed to define the term or even to ensure compliance to its 1995 Mekong Agreement, as demonstrated by the suffering caused by Vietnam’s hydropower dams on the Sesan River to downstream communities in Cambodia and its failure to adhere to its commitment “to make every effort to avoid, minimize and mitigate harmful effects (Article 7).” Implementation of the 1995 Mekong Agreement together with globally recognized best-practice standards for energy and water sector development is urgently needed. The World Commission on Dams framework, which provides a comprehensive set of principles and guidelines from planning to decommissioning of dam projects, can help to better define how hydropower development should occur.

Large hydropower dams – especially on the Mekong River’s mainstream – reflect an outdated development model. In the Mekong region and around the world, the larger body of evidence points to the unsustainable cost of large dam development and the costs inflicted on communities once dependent on these rivers

The experience of hydropower throughout the Mekong Region has been that of unsustainable and unjust development. From Chiang Khong in Northern Thailand to Ratanakiri and Monduliri Provinces in Cambodia, tens of thousands of dam-affected villagers have suffered the loss of their fisheries, irregular water flows, poor water quality, and the loss of their rivers biodiversity without consultation, compensation or redress.

The Mekong River is a fisheries-rich river on which millions of people living under the poverty line depend for their food security; and that is also a significant contributor to the region’s economy. Before moving forward with its Hydropower Programme, the MRC - and its funders - must publicly declare the standards that they will work to uphold and how they will be clearly accountable to the regional public. Only, once standards are declared and there is review and recognition of the MRC’s past failures, can the MRC begin working towards the sustainable river management urgently needed by the millions who rely on the river as their lifeblood.

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