

## **Cambodian Women, Views on Lower Sesan 2 Dam And the Future of Downstream Communities**

Note on July 2014 field trip  
**Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA)**

**“Make sure you write this down. Sesan dam will bring even more tragic despair than what happened in Pol Pot’s time,”** repeated a woman of fifty from Srae Kor Village. She was one of the women from Srae Kor we met during our visit to the village in July 2014. With this furious statement, the women group reaffirmed that their rejection of Lower Sesan 2 hydropower project they made has been continue for 3 years and 8 months already. These women still believe that most villagers of Srae Kor do not welcome any construction of the dam. They insisted that they would absolutely not move away from their homes. “Even if our heads will be cut off, we will not move.” The words uttered by these women against Lower Sesan 2 Dam this time make the villagers’ resentment much clearer than any time we visited the community. “Pol Pot took people away and murdered them, but he did not take away our natural resources. Building a dam and leaving us starving to death is even worse than murdering us”, said the women group. After hearing this, we wondered how the Cambodian’s present “democratic” government would react if they could hear what these women just said, or in a sense, have they already heard this?

Despite the fact that the impacts of Lower Sesan 2 Dam on fishery and local communities in Cambodia will be huge—more than 250 villages ranging from villages at the dam site to those living by Cambodia’s Sesan and Srepok River will be affected—dam operator’s compensation plan seems to disregard this information. According to the document on compensation plan (in Khmer we saw) proposed by Hydro Power Lower Sesan 2 Co. Ltd., the operator of Lower Sesan 2 Hydropower Project, in 2012, only six villages—Srae Kor 1, Srae Kor 2, Srae Kor Commune, Srae Sranok, Kbal Romeas, and Kbal Spean Srepok or Chrab—were listed on the company’s document.

Our visit in July mainly focused on 2 communities on Sesan River—Srae Kor and Kbal Romeas—and another 2 communities on Srepok River—Koh Peak and Thmey. We did not have the chance to visit Srae Sranok and Chrab this time. During the visit, we heard that documents on compensation were distributed to villagers. Authorities and company representatives also made a visit to these communities and the dam site. When we arrived Srae Kor and Kbal Romeas, we found Lower Sesan 2 Dam was the hottest topic of discussion. Among the numerous rumors flying around, only one stood out. It said that the dam was nearly finished. This explained why many villagers thought that relocation would happen. This is the reason why we decided to visit the dam site at the end of the five-day trip.

Women group from Srae Kor was the most resolute. Their rejection on Lower Sesan 2 Dam was unquestionable, and they were ready to explicit their reasonings behind their stance. With over 500 families, Srae Kor will be the largest community to be relocated if the dam is built. The village we visited was Srae Kor 1. Most villagers here are ethnic Khmer-Lao. Buddhism is prominent. Lao is the most spoken language. Housing usually follows Lao wooden-house style. Their homes are strong and secured. There was no problem for us to communicate with them in Lao. The multiple visits during the past couple years also helped established a good understanding on where we come from.

During the visit, we talked to a group of 13 women in one morning. We asked women and men to be separated into two focus groups. We did not (or in fact, had no chance to) pose any question in the beginning of the discussion. The women group spent the first half an hour to reveal their opinions and anger on what they had heard from the authority and company representatives who came to the village a few days before our team's arrival. The meeting was set up to notify about the dam. The following is the women group's summary of the resettlement and compensation plan which these women and the community heard from the meeting:

- At the moment, there is a plan to move people to a new location. There is also a plan to compensate the villagers which is created by the dam developer. The compensation plan includes the amount of compensation for the villagers' houses, trees, and other.
- Some people have already seen the document with the price and plot of resettlement village and have a picture on how it will look like.
- Dam developers said that the compensation is fixed and non-negotiable. The meeting with the villagers would only happen once to notify the community. There would be no negotiation.
- For any villager who dared to ask question or showed any sign of disapproval towards the dam project, he or she was questioned by the company representatives whether he or she was a member of anti-Hun Sen group. It seemed that the question was asked to use the politically sensitive issue to threaten the villagers. This phenomena also occurred among the villagers themselves.

The followings are the opinions from the Srae Kor women group on the dam project, the resettlement plan and the compensation plan:

- The women group sees that Srae Kor Village is already experiencing serious negative impacts from the Yali Falls Dam. The people will not be able to survive if Lower Sesan 2 Dam is built.
- The 13 women in the focus group had a unanimous opinion: They insist that they will not move away from the village (even if their heads would be cut!) and they would not accept any proposed compensation. This means that if, in the end, the dam is built, their relocation would happen because they are forced to move away, NOT because they agree to move out.
- The women group emphasized that the community is most concerned about their lands, farms and the river because these are their main natural resources. They stated very clearly that people belong to natural resources and at the same time, natural resources belong to them.
- With that belief and concerns, the women group posed one question on the whole issue: "Do the people have the rights to their property and resources?"
- The women group saw that, at the moment, a few Srae Kor villagers are being heavily induced to agree with the dam project. These individuals, although they believe are still a minority of the villagers, may accept the compensation because they are being bribed in different way by the dam builders, not well informed, afraid, or originally do not have much/no farmland or capital but hope that the compensation would give them something. The women group worried that some men or elders who had more authority in the village are leaning towards that direction (of accepting the compensation).
- The women group believed that the current situation is much worse than the time during Pol Pot or Khmer Rouge when a lot of people were killed. Building a dam and leaving the people with nothing or letting them starve to death is a worse kind of human oppression.
- The women group saw that allowing any project to make people starve like a hydropower project would only spark more violence. It is possible that this might force "the poor to kill the rich".
- The women group said that any compensation proposed by the authority or the company, or any rumor, would be an imaginary proposal. They did not believe that dam developers would ever have the money to compensate the people as they claimed.
- The women group saw that the compensation plan proposed by dam developers was neither an honest plan nor a transparent one. This was because, previously, the villagers were told that their homes would be relocated in a new place. The structure would be the same as the ones they are living. However, the plan is now different. It is said that every family has to move into one type of housing; everyone would live in the same kind of house. New families (young couples) would not have the right to houses in the resettled area. These conditions are unacceptable for locals. They believe no one would want these conditions. What the villagers would get is only a small fee for their fuel to move their belongings out from the village and after that they would have to face their uncertain future by their own.
- The women group said that, up until now, there is still no evidence to show any effort or action to respond to the people's needs. No construction or any kind of public facility has taken place. These factors prove to locals that it would be nearly impossible for any proposal to happen.

- The women group said that if there is no evidence, they would absolutely not believe in any word claimed by the company or authority. In comparison, they said this is just like when a man wants to get a woman. He will give lots of promises. Once the woman gives away her virginity, she cannot ask for anything.
- The women group said that the compensation stated in the compensation document was also noticeably very low. For example, it takes at least 10-15 years for a coconut tree to bear fruit but the compensation for one coconut tree would be only 22.5 USD. Bananas would be compensated by "clump"--instead of by a single banana tree--at the price of 6 USD per clump even though each clump would have several banana trees.
- The women group said that the proposed public facility, including the market, would be useless for the community since locals no longer have fertile land and rivers to feed their lives; they would not be able to produce or sell anything in the market.
- The women group believed that money is not the most important thing for the people's survival especially for elders who do not need to use money. It is more important to have natural resources. Forcing them to start from scratch would be extremely difficult. They would have to slowly mold the dirt to create their paddy fields and this is one of the most painstaking job. The villagers understood that they could go to work and "sell their labor" to make money, but that is different from what they already have. Nothing would be able to compensate or replace their lives which have agriculture and fishery as the basis.
- As for the community's effort to fight on this issue, the women group understood that it would not be an easy fight. Many villagers are afraid to express their opinions; only a few people dare to speak up or talk about the villagers' worries. What is worse is there are some people who would just agree to anything like raise their hands when the village committee asked them to do so. These people are used by dam proponents to say that the community agrees with the project. However, even though the majority of the villagers are afraid to speak out, the women group said they have some strategies to resolve these challenges in order to prove that the community does not want the dam project.
- The women group representatives insisted that if there is a process for them to speak their worries and hardship to relevant authorities including those in Phnom Penh, they would be glad to participate and they would not be afraid because this is a life-and-death issue for the community.

After the visit, we and the Cambodian visitor team agreed that most of the people from Srae Kor Village still strongly reject Lower Sesan 2 Dam. The opinions of the men group aligned with the women group's. The men group insisted that there is still no progress on the resettlement area which is located on the other side of the river from the village. There is still no new road construction or any facility as said previously by the dam developers.

The team concluded that most of Srae Kor villagers do not want the dam project. The main reason is they do not wish to move out from their village as the village has been established and follow all relevant requirements to declare it as a rightful community. Many people were born in this village and they have close connections with their birthplace. Some villagers explained that their ancestors and parents are buried in the village and **"leaving their parents' bones drowned"** is the most evil thing. If the situation remains this way, they would be struggling. They still do not have any way to solve the problem and cannot really rely on any party to help them. At the moment, it is like the villagers are forced to accept the conditions proposed by dam developers. They are stormed with advertisements and false information. They are threatened. Some villagers who had been persistent are getting weaker and seem to yield towards the dam developer's side.

The most concerned issue is the possibility that the process leading to dam construction may disunite the villagers--from the same village and those from different villages. Another issue to worry is the fight over resettlement lands. It appears that there is a process to determine how the resettlement lands are divided



## Visiting dam project site

Not much has happened at the dam site. Even though we were not allowed by the guard to go across the fence and travel on the 15 kilometer-long dirt road created by the company, we did make it to the dam site by boat. We took off from Phluk Village and traveled along the river for 3 kilometers by boat to the dam site. There was a floating bridge facilitating cars to cross the river; however, local boats were not allowed to pass the bridge. The dam site was next to the bridge. At the time of visit, there was no sign of any structure blocking the river. The company had only begun to build roads on the two sides of the river.

What is clear is the restriction on fishing in the area. Villagers were prohibited from boating and fishing in the proposed dam site. There were rumors about the dam being near completion. These rumors play a great role in influencing locals' decision on the compensation offers. But this visit falsifies the rumors and proves that construction has not started.

Phluk villagers told us that water flow by the dam site became more turbulent and any temporary-built structures may not be able to persist the strong current. They said that they are observing and want to know if the dam will be able to really “fight with the water”. Phluk villagers understand that, as the most downstream community, the impacts would be detrimental and there would be no compensation of any kind. “We probably have to find our own way to run away from this approaching death”, said one villager.

## Final Remarks

Here are our comments based on the July 2014 field study trip:

- We see that there are still campaign opportunities to stop Lower Sesan2 Hydropower Project but there needs to be a system for the village—that has been acting as the central hub for continuing solidarity against the dam—to speak their minds and be protected. Srae Kor might be the village that able to play this role.
- Any information on impacts and/or questions on the economic, environmental and social value that will be destroyed by Lower Sesan 2 Dam shall be put together, discussed, released and immediately used by relevant organizations and local communities.
- It is necessary and urgent to release true and correct information on the progress of the dam project as well as any opinion or concern raised by villagers to other communities located on Sesan and Srepok River. More importantly, it is necessary for communities to be supported to share their concerns and opinions.
- Communities' concerns and opinions, including those from Kbal Romeas Village and any comment after visiting the resettlement site, need to be urgently monitored and collected in order to understand the thinking and movement of village people.
- Every involved party should pay attention on land issues and conflicts over lands among villagers who are considering resettlement. It is possible that these problems will exacerbate in the future.
- Compensation is now the most sensitive issue among the villages we visited. However, villagers do not believe in the compensation or its process. We think this perception is real. It will be very difficult for any organization which is not dam proponent to come in between and guarantee for the compensation plan or the process to reach the actual compensation, even the basic goals.
- With that, we strongly believe that civil society groups' major tasks are to seek for the most trustworthy information about the dam to support the people and to bring the voice of the people and the actual values of Sesan and Srepok River to the public.
- We believe that local people still need to know that CSOs stand on the same position with villagers. Villagers need to know that we share our stand with them and will not lower our stand, because it can be a very discouraging thing to do during such a critical time like now.

- Another thing to be aware is if the compensation can be announced as ‘agreeable’ from either local people or NGOs in Cambodia, it will definitely affect future movement on hydropower dams in this country in the long run.