



To: Mekong River Commission Council and Secretariat

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Save the Mekong Coalition^[L]_[SEP]

Statement to the Lower Mekong Governments

On the occasion of the 24th Mekong River Commission Council Meeting

On the occasion of the Mekong River Commission's 24th Council Meeting, the Save the Mekong Coalition writes to express our serious concern over the ongoing development of hydropower projects on the Mekong mainstream and within the basin, despite evidence that these projects are undermining regional food security and deepening poverty.

Over 60 million people depend on the health of the Mekong River and its tributaries for food, water, transport and many other aspects of their daily lives. Rapidly declining costs now place renewables such as wind and solar close to par on price with hydropower, with far fewer environmental and social impacts. Emerging technological advances in distribution and storage mean that renewables such as solar and wind are an increasingly feasible way to meet energy needs, and better able to ensure electricity access for populations who currently lack this access. Nevertheless, vested interests within the public and private sectors remain a strong driving force behind continued dam construction.

The 24th Council Meeting is an opportunity for the Mekong River Commission (MRC) to prove true to its vision to promote an economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin.¹ We urge the Lower Mekong Governments to commit to a moratorium on dam building while regional policies and infrastructure to support renewable alternatives are put in place.

Mekong dams jeopardize sustainable development

Numerous scientific studies have shown that the series of eleven large-scale hydropower dam projects currently proposed and under construction on the Mekong mainstream threaten the region's fisheries, and consequently the food supply of millions. If built, these dams would block the major fish migrations that are essential to the life cycle of around 70% of the Mekong River's commercial fish catch. This would result in a total estimated fishery loss of 26 to 42%², placing at risk the livelihoods and food security of millions of people in the Lower Mekong Basin.

Food security is a fundamental foundation on which other important forms of development are built. Wild-capture fisheries are a vital source of nutrients to rural families throughout the Mekong region. As such, protection of wild-capture fisheries should be central to poverty-reduction efforts. Any reduction of fish catch will increase the incidence of malnutrition that is already a serious problem in the Mekong region, further deepening poverty. In addition to providing the region's main source of protein, the Mekong's waters are essential for household use and maintaining agricultural productivity across the basin, supporting the cultivation of rice and other products. .

The Mekong supplies people in the region with up to 80% of their animal protein needs. A 2013 report published by Inland Fisheries Research and Development Institute (IFReDI) of the Fisheries Administration in Cambodia shows that the combined effects of mainstream dams in Cambodia and population growth could reduce the country's consumption of fish from 49kg to as little as 22kg per person per year by 2030, amounting to a 55% reduction. This would have a profound impact on child nutrition in Cambodia, where nearly 40% of Cambodian children under five are chronically

¹<http://www.mrcmekong.org/about-mrc/vision-and-mission/>

² See SEA of Hydropower on the Mekong Mainstream at <http://icem.com.au/portfolio-items/strategic-environmental-assessment-of-hydropower-on-the-mekong-mainstream/>

malnourished, over 28% are underweight and 10.9% are acutely malnourished.³ Fish and fish products are critical sources of iron. In Cambodia, an estimated 70% of pregnant women and 74% of children under the age of five suffer from iron deficiencies⁴. Iron shortages rob people of energy, ultimately perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Malnutrition rates in the Lao PDR are likewise among the highest in the region. 40-60% of Lao children are stunted.⁵ In Lao provinces bordering the Mekong, including the sites of the Xayaburi and Don Sahong dams, fish and aquatic products contribute between 27 and 78% of animal protein intake in people's diets, and provide an essential source of micronutrients.⁶ As noted in UNDP's 2012 Country Analysis Report for the Lao PDR, unregulated development in mining and hydropower, as well as in commercial agriculture, "degrade beyond recovery the rich ecosystem, upon which the vast majority of the rural population so depend for fuel, food and fiber."⁷

Farmers and fishers downstream in Vietnam likewise face declining yields as a result of mainstream Mekong dams, putting at risk Mekong Delta food exports worth \$10 billion annually. The Mekong Delta, which produces more than half of Vietnam's rice and feeds over 145 million people in Asia, will be severely affected as dams alter flow regimes and prevent vital sediment from reaching the area.⁸

Consultation and decision-making remains flawed

The MRC has thus far failed in its mission to ensure the mutually beneficial development of the Mekong River while minimising potentially harmful effects on the people and the environment.⁹ Scientific studies have been disregarded in the rush to push forward environmentally and socially destructive dam projects, placing at risk the food security of the region's most vulnerable citizens. Decision-making processes are opaque and non-participatory and consultation with affected communities remains absent. The MRC must reform its procedures to strengthen processes and opportunities for stakeholder engagement and public participation in decision-making, especially the participation of riparian communities.

Planning and decision-making for the development of hydropower projects on the lower Mekong River mainstream has to-date taken place on a project-by-project basis. The problems caused by this piecemeal approach are compounded by the absence of adequate baseline data, transboundary or cumulative impact assessments for mainstream projects already under construction, and no comprehensive plans for long-term monitoring of project and basin-wide impacts. The Prior Consultation process has been characterized by weak scientific analysis, and a lack of due regard to the legitimate concerns of local people, who stand to lose the most from damage to the river's resources. These problems have persisted through the Xayaburi, Don Sahong, and Pak Beng Dam planning, approval and Prior Consultation processes.

³ See World Food Programme website at <http://www.wfp.org/node/3418>

⁴ Roos et. al. (2007). Iron content in common Cambodian fish species: Perspectives for dietary iron intake in poor, rural households. *Food Chemistry* 104 (3): 1226-1235.

⁵ https://www.wfp.org/sites/default/files/WFP%20Lao%20PDR_Mother%20and%20Child%20Health%20and%20Nutrition%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf

⁶ Baran, E., Jantunen T., and Chong C.K. 2007. Values of inland fisheries in the Mekong River Basin. WorldFish Center, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. 58 pp.

⁷ UNDP 2012. Country Analysis Report: Lao PDR. Vientiane, Lao PDR: United Nations.

⁸ <https://www.voanews.com/a/vietnam-rice-industry-faces-threat-from-climate-change-mekong-dams/3574158.html>

⁹ <http://www.mrcmekong.org/about-mrc/>.

In early November or 2017, Thailand's Supreme Administrative Court admitted for consideration an appeal in the lawsuit regarding harms caused by the Pak Beng Dam. The court's acceptance of the case is an acknowledgement of Thai governmental agencies' responsibility under Thai law and the 1995 Mekong Agreement to inform and consult with its citizens on the cross-border impacts of projects such as the Pak Beng Dam. The decision signifies a growing regional trend in favour of public participation, accountability and transparency in the planning, development and approval of large infrastructure projects.

Alternatives to Mekong dams are available

Governments have justified the mainstream Mekong dams as necessary to meet growing energy demands in the region. In fact, the 11 mainstream projects would only provide about 8% of forecast Lower Mekong Basin power demand.¹⁰ If the mainstream projects are not pursued, there would be minimal risk for electricity security in the Lower Mekong Basin countries and the forecast electricity demand could be supplied by alternative energy sources such as solar and biomass and improved energy efficiency.¹¹

Alternatives already exist to meet this demand in a more responsible and sustainable way. In the coming years, new GMS hydropower projects will be competing with ever-cheaper options, including more competitive natural gas prices as well as increasingly affordable and efficient solar and wind technologies. Prices for non-hydropower renewables are falling at a rate far faster than anticipated. Between 2015-2016 alone, the global average price of solar dropped 13% and wind dropped 10.75%.¹² Rapidly declining costs now place solar close to par on price with hydropower, with fewer environmental or social impacts. There are also significant opportunities for accessing support for wind and solar power development through climate finance assistance to developing countries.

The 24th Council Meeting is an opportunity for the MRC and Lower Mekong Governments to provide the leadership and vision to drive a future that is sustainable and prioritizes preservation of the region's rich fisheries and other riverine resources. Rather than continuing to support environmentally and socially destructive dam projects, the MRC should recognize the potential of innovative renewable and decentralized electricity technologies that are now readily available and cost-competitive.

We urge the Lower Mekong Governments to commit to a moratorium on large-scale hydropower projects while regional policies and infrastructure to support renewables are put in place. Doing so would help ensure truly sustainable growth for the region without losing the benefits that healthy rivers bring.

Sincerely,

Save the Mekong Coalition

28 November 2017

¹⁰ Intelligent Energy Systems Pty Ltd (IES) and Mekong Economics (MKE) (2016). Alternatives for Power Generation in the Greater Mekong Subregion: Volume 1 Power Sector Vision for the Greater Mekong Subregion, World Wild Fund for Nature.

¹¹ https://cambodia.oxfam.org/policy_paper/economic-evaluation-hydropower-projects-lower-mekong-basin

¹² https://www.stimson.org/sites/default/files/file-attachments/SC_EnergyPublication.FINAL_.pdf