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No. 12

Mekong Basin Development: For Whom It Serves?

August 2010

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Mekong River runs through Yunnan Province of China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Mekong River has a length of approximately from 4200 km to 4889. It has annual discharge of 475 billion cubic meters. The river links the Mekong sub-region together. It creates opportunity for the countries in the region to have more dialogues and partnership but it also creates conflict of interests between and among the countries in the region. To manage such common regional public goods is not an easy task. It needs time, patience, trust, mutual understanding, and harmonized mutual interests among the countries. The Mekong River Commission (MRC), an inter-governmental organization, was established in 1957 with the objectives to provide technical advisory and coordination work in order to manage and develop the Mekong River Basin in a sustainable way. The increase of population, urbanization, migration, and industrialization are threatening the River and put pressures on its management.

The necessity of energy to support the industrialization in the Mekong region pushes states to invest in hydropower dams along the mainstream Mekong River and its tributaries. According to the Mekong River Commission, China already completed three dams and other five are being planned. For the downstream, there more than 100 proposals for new dams construction of which 11 will installed on the mainstream (7 in Laos, 2 in Cambodia, and other 2 will be shared between Laos and Thailand). The future scenarios conducted by the research team of MRC predicted that mainstream hydro-power dams will cost a lot of damage to the fish population, decrease sedimentation, and downgrade ecosystem and biodiversity. Cambodia and Vietnam will be hardest hit by such development.

Although the dams provide lots of benefits for electric power, irrigation system and flood control, they seriously change the natural flow of the river and produce environmental, economic, and social costs. Particularly, it negatively impacts on the basin's fish stock. According the research conducted by Hortle in 2009, it estimated that the inland fishery the Mekong worth US\$ 2.2 – 3.9 thousand million

at first sale and between US\$ 4.3 and US\$ 7.8 thousand million on retail market; this make Mekong the world's largest inland fishery. This catch is vital for the people's livelihoods, nutrition and food security. Dams degrade the feeding and breeding habitats along the river and prevent fish from migrating,

The debates around the benefits and costs of hydro-dams construction have been ongoing. The question remains: Developing hydropower dams for whom? Between electricity and fish, chooses what? The ideal answer to these questions would be dams should be developed to support the livelihood and basic needs of the Mekong people who needs both fish and electricity. It is therefore necessary to balance the development needs by taking into consideration of the voices from the people whose their livelihoods rely much on the Mekong. It would be unwise and unsustainable if local people are neglected from the development projects.

People oriented Mekong Basin Development plan has to be developed and implemented. Without which the meaningful results of development are incomplete. It calls for the development partners/agencies especially Asian Development Bank to seriously consider the impacts of hydro-dams construction before lending or granting money. It requires more binding principles among the countries sharing the Mekong River in terms of development and Mekong River Commission (MRC) should strengthen and advance its institution to have more authority particularly in giving permission or restriction on the proposed dam construction based on technical research and environmental impact assessment. It would be too late once the dams are already constructed. It is unrealistic to urge or request the owner of the dam to destroy its own dam. In addition, it requires more consultation, cooperation and coordination between MRC including four member countries- Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam- and other two dialogue partners namely China and Myanmar. China has been actively cooperating with MRC by sharing information and having dialogue. Such positive trend needs to be maintained and nourished.