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**Malee Traisawasdichai Lang**

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# **Management of the Mekong River Basin: Contesting its sustainability from a Communication Perspective**

Malee Traisawasdichai Lang<sup>1</sup>

Back then in Thailand's hottest summer month in April of 1995 in Chiang Rai, the farthest northern province of Thailand, where the Mekong River enters its lower basin and forms the border between Thailand, Laos and Burma, a group of state leaders gathered together. Holding the champagne glasses, the four state leaders, representing Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, made a toast for the vision of an ambitious management plan for the Mekong River, calling it 'sustainable development'. They envisioned construction of dams on both the tributaries within national boundaries and the main river of the Mekong. The notion of how to tap the energy of the Mekong in the most profitable way is high on the agenda.

The Chiang Rai summit officially rang the bell for the opening of the resource of the Mekong River to the outsiders. In the past, political and security reasons have until recently kept the river largely unspoiled by industrial development and unaffected by the state's regulation and management. This chapter is concerned with the contestation of this newly-opened battlefield of resource development – the Mekong and its tributaries. It sets out to analyze the contested meanings of sustainable development at three different levels, namely structural, project and grassroots levels. It begins with the review of the official story at the structural level how the state is moulding the meaning of 'sustainability'. Is 'sustainability' merely a glossy rhetoric promoted by both bi- and multilateral donor agencies as well as regional and national leaders in the region? A brief historical account of the development initiatives for the Mekong will be given as background. It further attempts to bring out the ambiguity and crisis of legitimacy of the role of advisors, consultants and professionals alike, subsumed under the heading of planners and their planning practice, at the project level. The case of the planned Nam Theun 2 project in Laos will illustrate this point. Finally, this chapter calls attention to an alternative way of knowing and planning that gives recognition to the collective commitment of local communities in their defence of their livelihood, culture and ecology. The story of ordinary villagers of the Mool River in the northeast of Thailand in their struggle against the Pak Mool Dam will be told. Their challenge to the state's imposition of 'sustainable development' and their strategies for resistance aimed

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at restoration of the river, their own subsistence and partial autonomy over the community's right to the river management will be recalled.

In this chapter, 'communication' is the theme for analyzing this contestable terrain of 'sustainability' of how to best manage the Mekong River and its resource. In combining the communication aspect with the dimension of planning, I apply the lens of John Forester's critical planning paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of planners and planning practice as shaping public attention and understanding (Forester 1980, Sager 1992, Sandercock 1998). Here the starting point is that communication among all stakeholders is necessary. But communication involves power and reinforces power. This very aspect of power unavoidably underlines the political nature of communication.

### **The Politics of Communication**

In the face of fierce resource contestation as in the Mekong, communication is in every sense highly contested and is deemed necessary as a means to justify ones' attempt to win access to the Mekong's resource. State is keen to use communication to shape the public's understanding of particular activities by choosing to tell certain stories, causing the public to believe what it desires to let them believe. But what are the stories that have been excluded from this official communication? Contesting the state's side of the story, affected communities have begun to seek communicative space with the public to insert their stories that have previously been erased in the official stories. Their aim is to communicate their own meanings to the public to make sure that the stories of the little people would not be reduced into one single grand narrative of the state.

Nevertheless, there is another potential level to counteract this power domination. This is through the role of planners as suggested by Forester, who is clear to say that relations of power do exist in all planning practice. He calls this relation of power as the 'structure of systematically but unnecessary distorted communication' (Forester 1980). Planners, who may wear the hats as consultants, advisors, researchers, experts and professionals, should be aware of this presence in power relations and work out to correct this 'systematic distorted communication' via their communicative action (Forester 1980). They should pay attention to listening and including the views of affected communities, seeking to understand their contextual, concrete and particular nature through a genuine consultation process. In this sense, planners have an important task to allow communicative space for affected communities in the first place when certain projects are initially being proposed. This is to keep in

mind that the ability between state and project proponents on the one hand and affected communities on the other, to access communication is highly unequal.

### **The setting: Mekong River**

The greatness of the Mekong River has been generally recognized not only because of its historical value, but also because of its natural wealth. For historians and archaeologists alike, the Mekong is the cradle of the ancient Khmer civilization prior to the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced by the existence of the glorious temples, including Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Phanomrung and Pimay in North-eastern Thailand and Wat Pu in southern Laos (Srisakara Vallibhodom in Traisawasdichai, March 15, 1992, and Kasetsiri 2000). In terms of resource, the river has, for generations, supported the livelihood of some 50 millions of people along its course and tributaries in the lower basin alone. The Mekong's natural flooding regime carries silt deposit to farm land, enriching the rice growing area of the Mekong delta in Vietnam. The fisheries resource of the Mekong is vital for the small scale and subsistence economy of local population in the region. The river itself has been the major route for people to travel from place to place, particularly significant in areas with no road access. It irrigates farmers' land in the dry season and provides drinking water for the people.

Geographically, the 4,800-kilometre long Mekong originates from the Tanghla Shan Mountains on the Tibetan plateau at the elevation of some 5,000 metres, meandering through the gorges and mountainous area of Yunnan southern province of China, passing Burma, separating Thailand and Laos, feeding into the Tonle Sap Great Lake in Cambodia, and dividing itself into nine branches at the Mekong delta in Vietnam before emptying itself in the South China Sea. The Mekong is the longest river in Southeast Asia and twelfth in the world. With its annual runoff above 475,000 million cubic metres, the Mekong ranks the eighth in the world and twenty first in term of drainage area covering 795,000 sq km (MRC Secretariat 1995).

Memories of the past as well as the river's geographical location linking six countries of different ideological and political regimes have created both unique, and at time rivalry, histories for these nations and special attachments for people along both banks of the river. The Mekong has become symbol of various imaginations: 'river of hatred, of love, of war and terror, of peace and happiness, of life and food security'. One of its legends reveals the official imaginary of the Mekong, one which is striving to tap the natural wealth of the Mekong for economic, political and strategic reasons.

## **The official vision**

‘The vast Mekong River can provide food and water and power on a scale to dwarf even our own Tennessee Valley Authority’, President Johnson of the United States (quoted in White 1969).

The first ever idea to exploit the Mekong River resource had emerged in the 1950s when the cold war confrontation in the region started to take place. With strategic interest in mainland Southeast Asia, the US was leading the planning of the Mekong resource development. The US Bureau of Reclamation carried out the first preliminary survey of the lower basin and launched its report in 1956. The United Nations helped set up the Mekong Committee (MC) in 1957 to coordinate and look for the possibility for water resource development (Sluiter 1992). Excluding Burma and communist China, the MC comprised four Mekong riparian states in the lower basin, including Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

In 1970, American engineers launched the first grand scale hydropower plan for the Mekong. The Indicative Basin Plan, known as the Mekong blueprint, was modelled on the river management of the Colombia basin in the US (George Radosevich in Traisawasdichai 1995). The Mekong blueprint envisioned the construction of a cascade of seven mammoth mainstream dams, which could store 29 per cent of the Mekong’s annual discharge and produce electricity of 23,300 megawatts (Norconsult 1994). The plan, as a product of the cold war, ‘excluded totally the portion of the Mekong in the upper basin in China like it had never existed on any world map’ (Grainne Ryder in Sluiter 1992). Two projects, Strung Treng in Cambodia and the 4,800-megawatt Pa Mong Dam with the height of over 100 metres near capital Vientiane in Laos, were planned to be the first two mainstream dams in the Mekong cascade (Norconsult).

However, no dams in the Mekong blueprint have ever been built due to three decades of civil wars. The MC was dissolved in 1975 when the Indochinese states came under full control of the communist governments and the US withdrew its influence as well as its financial contributions. The Interim Mekong Committee (IMC) was then set up in 1978, without Cambodia. Despite the turbulent circumstances, the Mekong Secretariat, the research and technical arm of the already dissolved MC, continued to function with reduced budget from the UN (Mitchell 1994). Another Mekong plan was released in 1987 but this revised indicative plan gave no substantial change from the previous Mekong blueprint except a reduction in the height of Pa Mong Dam (Mitchell). Once again conflict among member states in 1992 led to the dissolution of the IMC. When Thailand proposed an ambitious plan to divert water from the Mekong mainstream to irrigate its drought-stricken north-eastern region, Laos and

Vietnam used their right to veto. This led Thailand to withdraw its membership and it now preferred to pursue its own 'sovereign right' to go ahead with the project outside the framework of the MC (Prathet Sutabutr, personal communication 1995).

It has been clear that the US involvement in the Mekong planning from the very beginning has moulded the model of river management for the Mekong towards the US model based on grand scale scheme with construction of cascade of dams. This has subsequently become the future vision of later Mekong planners until today.

### *The Peace Era*

Interest in the regional hydropower development was renewed with the prospect of peace in Cambodia in the early 1990s. The Mekong Secretariat launched the Mekong Mainstream Run-of-River Hydropower report in 1994, which has superseded the two previous plans. The new Mekong plan envisions a cascade of eleven run-of-the-river dams on the mainstream, which stretches from Pak Beng in northern Laos to Kratie downstream in Cambodia. It is estimated to generate a total of 13,000 megawatts of electricity to be fed into the Thai power system. If built, the dams would displace 60,000 people and flood 1,900 sq kms of land (Mekong Secretariat 1994).

In 1995, under the auspice of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Mekong River Commission (MRC) was formed, officially superseding its predecessor, the Mekong Committee. The MRC has brought back all the four member states, with some rival interests, and has an ambition to invite Burma and China, in particular, into the grouping. Its mandate is to coordinate the development programmes with emphasis on joint or basin-wide development projects through the formulation of a basin development plan. The basin plan would be used to identify, categorize and prioritize the projects to seek assistance for and to implement at the basin level (MRC 1995). One point of criticism from environmentalists has been the argument that the MRC has been concerned about nothing, except making a shopping list of projects from which donors could choose and buy into.

Apart from that, the MRC has made a considerable effort to persuade Burma and, particularly, China, to join the group. Yet, China, which controls 20 per cent of the Mekong flow, has never responded to the invitation for fear of having to comply with the MRC's water usage rule. The Mekong Agreement stated on paper that the rationale for the cooperation of the Mekong member countries is to safeguard 'the conditions and ecological balance of the Mekong from harmful projects' (MRC 1995). China itself has an ambitious hydropower



programme on the upper portion of the Mekong mainstream and internal development agenda for its poorer hinterland in landlocked Yunnan area.

### *Mekong Boom Zone*

Despite the MRC's presence, the best known and most influential stimulus for economic and infrastructure integration in the Mekong has been the emergence of the Asian Development Bank's initiative Greater Mekong Sub region (GMS) in 1994. While the MRC has been seen as having a formal and clumsy bureaucratic style, the GMS operates as an informal sub regional cooperation framework. The GMS has been recognized as much more prominent than the MRC as its members consist of all the six Mekong countries, including Burma and Yunnan Province of China, something that the MRC has been striving for but has never succeeded in accomplishing. The GMS is also prominent for the reason that it has proposed the most ambitious, comprehensive and diversified infrastructure development programme ever in the Mekong region.

Its vision for the Mekong has been a picture of a prosperous region. It envisions that all six countries, in which many of their citizens presently are still living below the poverty line, will be linked together by a network of roads, railway lines, airlines, telecommunication and electric power transmission lines. The six countries would enjoy the free flow of goods and be free of trade barriers. Their citizens would enjoy the freedom of travel between states through the promotion of a tourism programme. The GMS has attracted a tremendous number of foreign private investors and financial institutions to develop the projects. For the hydropower sector in particular, the ADB-supported Nam Theun-Hinboun dam was completed four years after the GMS was launched. The ADB has recently subcontracted the study of the Xe Kong and Se San basin hydropower development study in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The bank also mobilized the Japanese fund for the construction of the Nam Luek Dam project in Laos.

### *The Power Hub*

At the turning point of the region's geopolitics from cold war to peace re-establishment over the last decade, the ADB through its GMS programme has been effectively shaping and determining the direction of development for the whole Mekong region. Following the GMS framework, Thailand is now acting as the single energy importer and the rest of the Mekong states are playing the role of the power exporters. Such influence of the GMS programme is clear when examining the national development strategies of the member states. Hydropower development has become the top priority in the national development agenda in all Mekong states.

In the Mekong region context, constructing dams has been justified by the states as a means to earn foreign exchange and, hence, to bring the countries out of

poverty. However, there is one powerful critique of this new way to justify dam building. In the past, proponents promote dam building as a means to produce clean and environmentally friendly energy and assert that dams yield multi-purpose benefits. In the Mekong region, dam building has the single purpose to generate cash by commodifying the Mekong River for export. This implies a high degree of uncertainty in which the hydro-electricity exporting countries have no control over the fluctuation of the power market. Whether or not the dams fulfil their cash-generating function rely externally on the energy market or peak demand in Thailand, so far the single energy buyer in the region.

Despite that, confidence is gained by the energy-exporting countries as they have been convinced about the stability of the energy market by the GMS's energy sector study. The study affirms that Thailand would be the region's promising energy market for the next three decades until 2020 and predicts that the Thai's energy demand will continuously increase from 9,801 MW in 1993 to 34,426 MW in 2010, or an average of around 10 per cent per year (Norconsult 1994). The fall of the Thai energy market as happening today since the beginning of the economic crisis in 1997 has not been foreseen in the GMS's plan.

As many as 46 new hydropower projects with an overall installed capacity of 36,850 MWs have been identified in the GMS plan. All are aimed to produce energy to export to Thailand (Norconsult). However, the number of proposed dam projects in individual states varies, depending on different sources of studies. But, according to the GMS energy study, there are 5 dams (16,050 MWs) in Yunnan, 18 dams (7,483 MWs) in Vietnam, 9 dams (4,606 MWs) in Burma, 15 dams (3,660 MWs) in Laos, 4 dams (3,485 MWs) in Cambodia and another 5 projects (1,560 MWs) in Thailand (Norconsult 1994). Some members have more ambitious plan than the GMS. Laos, for example, has identified 60 dam sites with an overall installed capacity of 18,000 MWs (Phonekeo 1995). And 23 projects with 6,800 MWs have already been advanced at various stages. In Yunnan of China, the 1,500-MW Man Wan Dam has already been completed, standing as the first ever mainstream dam on the Mekong. China is currently constructing two more dams – the 1,350-MW Dachaoschan and the 1,500-MW Jinghong dams. The electricity produced from these dams will be exported to Thailand.

It is interesting that the ongoing economic slowdown in the region, resulting in the drop of energy demand in Thailand, has not seemed to threaten the ambition of the Mekong states to become the power hub in the region. The governments of Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma and China as well as the World Bank and ADB continue to actively promote construction of new dams, without fearing of losing the Thai energy market.

Yet, is this official vision for the ‘prosperous Mekong’ also desired by the citizens and communities who depend on the Mekong? In the midst of the official desire for excessive hydropower development, the MRC has come under attack for lacking the motivation to safeguard the Mekong. How can dam business, promoted by various external actors like the ADB and mediated by national governments and investors, meet the MRC’s declared objective of ‘sustainability’? Most importantly, has the MRC today become irrelevant to the present and long term needs of the local communities of the Mekong region?

## **Dams and Sustainability**

The official vision of sustainable development of the Mekong River tries to harmonize construction of dams with ‘sustainability’. Yet, there is a fundamental thinking embedded in this grand narrative of ‘sustainable development’ that excessively gives superiority to the engineers and economists’ rationalities for the officially chosen way to develop the Mekong River. On the one hand, the dam engineers see the value of a river in terms of megawatts (Grainnaie Ryder in Sluiter 1992) and the ecological function of the river to empty itself into the sea is a big loss (Traisawasdichai, December 29, 1995b). On the other hand, the economists put high value to scarcity of resource (Sager 1998) and they are trained to find a solution for the efficient allocation of this scarce resource in question.

Probing the text of the Mekong agreement, one finds that the two rationalities complement each other. The agreement states:

‘To cooperate in all fields of sustainable development, utilization, management and conservation of the water and related resources of the Mekong River Basin, including but not limited to irrigation, hydropower, navigation, flood control, fisheries... To promote, support...in the development of the full potential of sustainable benefits, and the prevention of wasteful use of Mekong River Basin waters..’ (MRC 1995: 4).

Yet who are those people making such wasteful use of the Mekong? The description of reality in this ‘public transcript’ (Bryant and Bailey 1997, Scott, 1990) entails an understanding of the existing pattern of the Mekong resource’s use by local communities as wasteful and exploitative. The common logic in this ‘public transcript’ is none but the renowned metaphor of Hardin’s ‘tragedy of the commons’ (1970). It is the logic that oversimplifies the long-standing practice of rural communities as a threat to the Mekong. When seen through this metaphor, the ‘tragedy of the Mekong’ caused by the free riders or rural communities is what the authors of this Mekong agreement strive to prevent. For

the official point of view, the solution to this imagined reality lies in the economics and technical engineering rationalities. That is to invite foreign private investors to turn the Mekong current into megawatts (Ryder in Sluiter 1992) and, then, turn the megawatts into cash through energy export.

But there are limits to these economic and technical rationalities. Be it consciously or not, intentionally or unintentionally, the consequence is the systematic exclusion of the others' way of thinking, their aspirations and preferred ways of life. What has been absent from the Mekong 'public transcript' is the description about why the Mekong has remained fertile and unspoiled until today and who has helped ensure this condition.

One serious limitation of the two rationalities is their tendency to depoliticize the political issue of resource contestation. Damming the Mekong is merely an engineering technical matter and relies exclusively on neutral manipulation of economic efficiency principle (Sager). Shifting the river resource away from local communities to serve the interests of foreign dam builders is justified as a way to efficiently manage and allocate resource for the optimal use. Thus, the apolitical language effectively distorts the real political issue of unequal distribution and reprioritisation of resource as well as displacement of the present resource users (Bryant and Bailey 1997).

Behind the official grand narrative of sustainable development also lies a 'systematically distorted communication' (Forester), which involves power. It emerges when the authors of this grand narrative, intentionally or not, communicate strategic, moral and political meaning that equates dam building to 'sustainability'. The power of such system of thought, which is both persuasive and authoritative, produces the systematic exclusions of other meanings of 'sustainability'. This excluded meaning is the one that encompasses the concerns and aspirations of rural communities of the Mekong.

As official policies have increasingly provided an open access for numerous foreign dam builders to the unspoiled Mekong River, it remains a central question, how the MRC would equip itself to prevent the 'real tragedy of the Mekong'.

### **Mekong Watchdog?**

On April 5, 1995, the heads of the four lower Mekong states arrived in Chiang Rai for the signing ceremony of the new Mekong agreement, that would give birth to the Mekong River Commission. As scheduled, the Thai hosts would arrange a symbolic cruise along the Kok River, a branch of the Mekong in

Chiang Rai, before the signing took place. But as the group of these VIPs arrived at the pier, the boat driver informed the officials that the boat could not sail because of the sudden water drop in the Kok River. The cause for this unusual water drop took place beyond the Thai border. It was in the upstream Yunnan where the Chinese was in the middle of constructing the Man Wan Dam, the first mainstream dam on the Mekong, and needed to block the water to allow the construction work. Amid the Thai hosts' embarrassment, the planned symbolic cruise was cancelled and the VIPs were driven back to the hotel (personal communication, Chiang Rai, April 1995).

The Chiang Rai provincial governor on the next day phoned the Chinese officials, informing about this unprecedented incidence. He requested China to inform the downstream countries if and when China wants to block the water in the Mekong channel again. The Chinese officials apologized and, a day later, water returned to the Kok River.

What did this incidence signal to the MRC? Indeed, the 'sustainable development' rationale, which is the basis for the creation of the MRC, suggests one important task of environmental protection for the organization. The MRC is currently the only intergovernmental body which has full authority to mediate, negotiate with other parties and, importantly, at least in principle, safeguard the well being of both the Mekong River and its citizens. It is the added environmental mandate that has justified the MRC's existence and has distinguished the MRC from its predecessor, Mekong Committee, which focused narrowly on exploitation of the river (MRC 1995).

But, it is also paradoxical that the MRC's water usage rule, which signifies its environmental mandate, is weaker than the Mekong Committee's 1975 water usage rule. In the 1975 rule, member states possessed the right to veto potential harmful projects. All states were also obliged to provide water quality impact studies of their proposed projects. They must receive approval from other members before they could proceed with their projects (Traisawasdichai, December 29, 1995a). In contrast, the present water usage rule abolishes the states' veto right and the requirement to submit impact studies for all projects as the basis for approval, no matter if they are mainstream or tributary, intra- or inter basin ones. Agreement from member states is required only for proposals that feature mainstream inter-basin projects conducted in the dry season (MRC 1995). The criteria to reach 'agreement' are through the principle of 'prior consultation', which is defined vaguely as 'timely notification plus additional data and information' (MRC). The criteria to judge the suitability of the proposed projects is based on the maintenance of an 'acceptable minimum monthly natural flow' on the mainstream Mekong in the dry season at various identified stations (MRC).

One powerful critique of the MRC's water usage rule is that it reflects a compromise to accommodate different specific interests of the member states rather than reflecting the concern to protect the Mekong's fragile ecology. All member states have different positions to tap the Mekong resource as well as divergent and unique concerns over the condition of the Mekong within their borders.

Thailand is targeting the flow of the Mekong and has plans to divert this flow. It is currently undergoing two ambitious schemes – the intra basin Kong-Chi-Mool water diversion project in the northeast and the inter basin Kok-Ing-Yom-Nan diversion project in the north. Kong-Chi-Mool would involve construction of a string of dozens of weirs, currently undergoing construction at various stages, to irrigate 510,000 rai of farmland in the drought stricken north-eastern region. It is scheduled to be completed by 2035 and expects the flow from China's future upstream dams to provide sufficient surplus flow in the dry season (Prathet Sutabutra in Traisawasdichai, December 29, 1995a). Meanwhile, Kok-Ing-Yom-Nan in the north aims to tap the Mekong flow at the border province of Chiang Rai and divert the water via the Kok and Ing rivers in the Mekong basin into the Yom and Nam rivers in the Chao Phya basin (Sutabutra). These two projects have frightened Laos and downstream Cambodia and Vietnam and were the cause in the past for the dismantling of the Interim Mekong Committee in 1992.

For Laos, the 1995 water usage rule has opened the way for it to carry on, unobstructedly, construction of multiple dams for export of hydro-electricity on all major tributaries of the Mekong inside Laos. It is concerned about development activities that would cause the unnatural change of the Mekong flow in the mainstream channel. The Mekong flow is significant to the protection of the country's world-renowned Khone Falls, which is also an important fishing ground in Southern Laos, on the Mekong mainstream. The mainstream flow of the Mekong also enables the currently functioning navigation route for local communities. However, its location as an upstream country has a significant ecological implication for downstream Cambodia and Vietnam. In recent years, Cambodian and Vietnamese officials have raised concern about the reduction of water in the two countries, pointing to upstream deforestation as a result of dam construction in Laos (Traisawasdichai, December 29, 1995a).

Like Laos, the present water usage rule does not obstruct Cambodia's plan to build hydro-dams. Two of its priority projects are mainstream dams – Sambor (3,200 MWs) and Stung Treng (3,300 MWs) (Norconsult 1994). Balancing conflicting interests of hydropower development and protecting the Tonle Sap Great Lake, the largest permanent freshwater lake in Southeast Asia (UNESCO 1994), are both the concern and challenge for Cambodia. The unique dry-wet

hydrological regime of the Mekong has created special characteristics for the Great Lake and its connected Tonle Sap River. In the wet season when the Mekong rises, it pushes its flow into the Tonle Sap River, causing the Tonle Sap to reverse its course and flow back into the upstream Great Lake, which, in turn, enlarges its surface area three times from 3,000 square kilometres in the dry season to 10,000 square kilometres. In the dry season, the lake releases its water and feeds into the Tonle Sap, replenishing sufficient water flow for downstream Mekong delta (Tana 1995). The Great Lake is the main fishing ground for the Cambodians. The country's fisheries production yielded 65,500 tons of fish in 1994 and 120,000 tons at its peak in 1940 (Tana).

The lake and its wild freshwater fisheries resource have been threatened by deforestation of the flooded forest belt surrounding the lake and by competing and intensive fishing practice (Tana). But the most serious threat to the ecology of the lake is the proposed Tonle Sap dam to be located at the mouth of the Great Lake. The dam is one of the eleven projects in the MRC's present run-of-the-river dams on the Mekong mainstream (Mekong Secretariat 1994).

As for Vietnam, ensuring the natural reverse water flow of the Tonle Sap River into the Great Lake in Cambodia is, therefore, prominent in its concern (MRC 1995). The protection of the fragile Mekong delta from the seawater intrusion in Vietnam relies greatly on the freshwater replenishment from the well-functioning Tonle Sap Great Lake in its natural flow pattern (Hoang Trang Quang in Traisawasdichai, December 29, 1995b). The Mekong delta is Vietnam's most productive rice farming area and, currently, aqua culture production, particularly shrimp farming, in the area has become another major activity. Both rice and shrimps are key export commodities that have helped fuel Vietnam's economy over the last decade. In the past, the proposed Tonle Sap dam at the mouth of the Great Lake and the Thai's ambitious intra- and inter-basin water diversion schemes had long been the cause for uneasiness for Vietnam. But, this concern has been softened by an expectation that the Chinese' future dams in the upstream Mekong would yield more freshwater in the dry season to the mainstream channel (Hoang Trang Quang, personal communication, December 1995), clearing away Vietnam's anxiety about the lack of freshwater supply potentially caused by the Thai and Cambodian's planned activities.

In the past, the different concerns of the member states has, to a certain extent, provided some sort of leverage, checking and preventing proposed harmful projects that involved the use of the mainstream's water. One incidence was when Vietnam, together with Laos, vetoed against the Thai's water diversion scheme in 1992. But, the present Mekong framework, seen as a product of a compromise, facilitates each member state to implement projects using their

own sovereign rights, while ignoring a certain duty to protect the ecological integrity of the river and the responsibilities of the states not to jeopardise the water use by the downstream countries and communities as a result of their activities.

Thailand has been proceeding with its Kong-Chi-Mool and Kok-Ing-Nan projects. Laos is active in building dams on the Mekong's tributaries with two dozens of projects waiting in the pipeline. Cambodia is seeking funding to build Sambor Dam on the Mekong mainstream and numerous tributary projects. All of these practices have evaded the authority of the MRC and its proclaimed new environmental mandate in the present water usage rule has been criticized as none, but a lip service.

### **The Chinese Dams**

How will the four lower basin states share the Mekong with China? This unanswered question challenges the MRC's very existence and its mandate. China controls 20 per cent of the water volume of the Mekong River and its activities in the upstream reach of the Mekong has both social and ecological consequences in the lower basin.

In recent years, the effects of upstream activities in China have begun to be felt in the north of Thailand. Fishermen and boat drivers in Chiang Rai have been affected by the receding water in the dry season since China started to dam the Mekong (Kobsak Chutikul, in *The Nation*, April 2000). After the completion of Man Wan, China is currently building the Dachaoshan and Jinghong dams to produce electricity for export to Thailand. The yearly traditional catching of the Mekong Giant Catfish in Chiang Khong town has come to a standstill because of drastic decline of the fish. The decline is partly due to over fishing, the change of water flow and water quality. But fishermen do not rule out the possible impacts caused by the upstream Chinese dam construction activities, which are blocking the fish migration. Though these assumptions are speculative, they hold evidence that important baseline data regarding the Mekong's ecology, aquatic biology, hydrology and social reality have not been in place as the basis for evaluating the impacts of any proposed or ongoing development projects, particularly the mainstream ones.

Concerns of the lower riparian states over the Yunnan factor has increasingly grown over the last few years. These concerns range from China's eventual ability to control the Mekong's flow (Chrispin, et. al., 2000) and security threat by Chinese dams, to the concern about China's unilateral practice without consultation, explanation and notification to downstream states. The flood crisis two years ago, the worst ever in three decades in the Mekong region which



killed more than 400 people (Reuters, 28/9/2000), triggered such concerns. Despite their concerns, the four downstream governments have refrained from responding to any of the impacts and potential effects from upstream Chinese activities for fear of affecting the carefully groomed diplomacy with China.

Instead, they have attempted to seek greater cooperation from China when Thailand and Laos signed the commercial navigation of the Mekong River pact with China and Burma two years ago. The navigation pact, which China had long been enthusiastic for, covers navigation of 786 kilometres from Simao in Yunnan to Luang Prabang of Laos. The pact, which benefits China most, will allow free flow of goods from landlocked Yunnan to the southern Mekong market (The Nation, 21/4/2000). Yet, expectation that greater economic cooperation would bring China to closer cooperation has not yet proved right after eight years of the ongoing GMS's economic and infrastructure programmes.

Apparently, there has been no diplomatic leverage among the lower basin states to negotiate or coordinate with China to seek way for proper sharing of the Mekong River. No attempt has so far been made to use the MRC forum to voice the concern of the lower basin states over the potential environmental and security threats from the Chinese dams. The MRC has been obviously by-passed even by its member states, leaving it with no concrete diplomatic influence, nor ability to fulfil its environmental protection mandate. As critique points out, the MRC is most effectively functioning merely as a forum for member states to channel technical and financial assistance from bi and multilateral donors.

### **Consultants and dams: the case of Nam Theun 2 in Laos**

The intensification of hydropower development programme in Laos, beginning in the early 1990s, has brought two significant consequences. One is the fierce contestation of resource between the place-based local communities and the alliance of the non place-based foreign private dam building industry, the Lao government and international pro-dam agencies like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank as well as western donors from countries with strong tradition of dam-building. In such a setting of contestation, the relation of power is a dramatically unbalanced one and the shifting of power relations, in the present social and political reality in communist Laos, is unlikely to happen in the near future.

The other consequence has been the rise of the professions of environmental consultancy, hitherto unfamiliar in Laos. Yet, such expertise has been drawn internationally from countries with dam-building tradition both in the west and

within the region. There are various forms of these consultants, ranging from individual experts working for firms to staff of advocacy groups and sometimes specially-set up advisory panels. The role of these consultants is highly 'political' because their activities, pertaining the process of producing reports and documents submitted to policy makers, are the basis of the eventual 'political' decision, which determines who gets the contested resource in question and when.

The role of consultants in Laos has come under critical scrutiny through the debate of the proposed Nam Theun 2 project, the country's largest dam plan. If built, the 900-megawatt Nam Theun 2 would flood 450 sq kms of the Nakai Plateau forest with high bio-diversity, home for several threatened wildlife species, and destroy both aquatic biology and fishery-based livelihood of communities in three rivers in central Laos – Theun, Xe Bang Fai and Hinboun (Roberts 1997).

Seen as the first attempt to grapple the issues of the cost and benefit of Nam Theun 2 was the powerful justification of the project by two international conservation groups, the IUCN and the US-based World Conservation Society (WCS). They concluded in their joint report: '...the establishment of the Nakai-Nam Theun Conservation Area as a biodiversity conservation area of international standard is one of the principle mitigation measures of the Nam Theun 2 hydropower project.' (IUCN & WCS, 1997). What has been missing from this analysis is what constitutes the social and environmental cost of the construction of the dam project. The analysis simply missed out the cost of losing the entire 450-sq km Nakai Plateau forest in the proposed reservoir area. The displacement of 5,000 indigenous people in both the reservoir area and the conservation area and of some 50,000 people in the nearby Xe Bang Fai basin were out of discussion. But, both the forest loss and people displacement have been turned into a necessary trade-off for the creation of the 'world-class conservation area'. The conservationists' suggestion of the benefit of Nam Theun 2 has been attacked by other critique as supporting a paradoxical argument of 'damming to save the forest'. Yet, what has been forgotten is the description that the construction of the dam is itself the cause of forest destruction in the first place.

The quality of the study of dam impacts on aquatic biology also puts the validity of consultancy into question. In the report, there was no fundamental baseline data, including fish migration and behaviour, to form the basis to evaluate the dam impacts. Despite unknown impacts, the study proposed several possible mitigation measures, including the potential of using a fish ladder. It stressed that there was a need '...to clear the vegetation in the reservoir [to improve both water quality and fish development in the reservoir], to design and test re-

aeration devices and ..to investigate the feasibility of biologically sound fish-ladders' (Kottelat 1996).

The study added: 'If a fish way or fish ladder is considered in the final design of the project, it should be designed as soon as migration data become available, in close consultation between engineers and biologists.' (Kottelat).

Seen as embedded in the logic of this aquatic biology study is the assumption that the decision has already been made to build the Nam Theun 2 project. This assumption permeates the report to the extent that the purpose of assessing the dam impacts has been turned into a search for technical solution in order to reach the eventual goal of dam building. The aquatic biology impacts, involving the potential killing of large number of wild river fish and the loss of existing subsistence fisheries in the three watersheds (Roberts 1997) have been downplayed, ignored and even unstudied and hence undocumented. Instead, a range of technical solutions have been proposed, including the design and study of fish ladder, that seem likely to create new jobs for the consultant circles. A fish ladder; for example, has already shown to be an unsound mitigation measure and a waste of money for Thailand's infamous Pak Mool Dam on another important tributary of the Mekong.

The role of environmental consultants is both strategic and important and, nevertheless, not unproblematic. They can choose to keep the affected communities informed about what constitutes the risks from the project in question and encourage an open democratic planning process. Or they can choose to believe in their professional expertise and assume that they know what is good for the affected communities. Their understanding of the political implication of their role and the will to involve the task of their 'communicative action' (Forester 1980) to promote dialogue and enhance participation from affected communities are, therefore, crucial factors that determine the quality and validity of the outcome of their reports, plans and programmes.

Nam Theun 2 exemplifies how the consultants, consciously or not, have helped to advance the dam-builders' interests, while foreclosing the affected communities' awareness of the risk of the project and their effective participation, by emphasizing the project's benefits and downplaying its environmental and social impacts. Alternatively, if they are attentive to the prevalent domination of power, which is termed by Forester as the structure of 'systematically-distorted communication' (1980), they can help to redress this. They can choose to seek a way to include the views and data that those in power have wanted to erase. Otherwise, the dam consultants are merely becoming part of this pro-dam structure of 'systematically-distorted communication' themselves.

## **Communication from below: the Anti-Pak Mool Dam Resistance**

After ten year's blockade by the World Bank-sponsored Pak Mool Dam, the Mool River, Thailand's largest tributary of the Mekong, is once again running free. In May last year, the Thai government has responded to the demand of affected river communities to open the dam's gates to allow fish from the Mekong to migrate and spawn upriver in the Mool. It was initially a three-month trial period but has later been raised to one year for a full study to find out what it is like when the river is let free again and whose stories of this unresolved, perhaps irresolvable, conflict about the value of the Mool River are to be believed -- the river communities' or the dam owner's.

The Mool River villagers in their tenacious struggle against the construction of Pak Mool have today become the legend of Thailand's most organized grassroots movement overtly challenging the dominant power of the state. The movement came into existence twelve years ago in response to the plan by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (Egat) to build the 136-megawatt Pak Mool Dam near the estuary of the Mool and Mekong in the border district of Khong Chiam, Ubol Ratchathani north-eastern province. The conflict erupted when Egat secretly managed to insert on the Cabinet's meeting agenda the proposal of Pak Mool project as part of the larger Kong-Chi-Mool irrigation scheme for the drought-stricken north-eastern region during the touring of the Chatichai Cabinet in this north-eastern province of Khon Kaen. Out of the sudden, on April 8, 1989, the touring Cabinet approved the Pak Mool Dam project in principle without consultation and participation from the affected communities.

Pak Mool, seen as Egat's last possibility of dam building in Thailand, was approved amid the peak of the anti-dam building sentiment in the country. It was the period when Egat's dam-building policy was most scrutinized, following the government's indefinite shelving of Egat's two dams -- the Nam Choan Dam proposed in the World Heritage Site's Thung Yai Naresuan wildlife sanctuary in the west and the Kaeng Krung Dam in the South, as well as the eruption of local protest against the Royal Irrigation Department's Kaeng Sua Ten Dam in the north. The battle of Pak Mool is, therefore, not only a battle of the ideologies of development between the state and the communities. But, it is a battle of dignity, which Egat cannot afford to lose in reclaiming faith from the public. This battle entails a tense system of control in which Egat has resorted to its financial and bureaucratic power to monopolize the information system and the channel of communication with the public. Its tactics involved a strategy of divide and rule, thereby splitting up communities into groups of enemies. It has succeeded in keeping away the sympathy and involvement from the urban-middle class groups from the very beginning of the conflict. It could foresee that the flooding

of the Kaeng Saphue rapids, a major tourist attraction for local people and outside tourists, in Phibul Mangsaharn district, would trigger this conflict. Egat has promised to maintain the Kaeng Saphue rapids for one month in April by lowering the water level in the reservoir down to the original level. Its previous defeat to the resistance movement against the Nam Choan and Kaeng Krung dams demonstrated the strength of the middle class groups. Therefore Egat wants at all cost to keep the involvement of the urban middle class at bay. Its attempt to illegitimize the anti-Pak Mool resistance movement has for the entire period of the last decade allowed Egat to control the whole discourse of Pak Mool.

It is the familiar notion of the state that the unidimensional pro-growth development model requires sacrifice from a 'handful' group of people for the 'public interest'. Displacement of river communities, disruption of their fisheries-based livelihood and destruction of river ecology are seen as necessary sacrifice for the generation of 136 megawatts of electricity.

Yet, the anti-Pak Mool Dam resistance movement has refused to accept this official notion of development, nor the state's enclosure of communicative space. They have sought their way to penetrate the wall of state's uniformity to tell their stories in countless protests and to demand their participation in decision-making. Their long lasting and openly-declared resistance has matured them and helped them to develop a shared meaning and conception for their struggle. This shared consciousness signifies their right to the collective ownership of the Mool River. Their declared objective, 'returning the Mool to our children', serves to create a new paradigm of development, in which local communities assert their right to determine an alternative development of how to best use the Mool River's resource. Their success to force Egat to open the dam gates is a first but important incremental step towards this redefined goal of decommissioning the dam, restoring and returning the Mool River to their children.

#### *The True Story of Pak Mool*

When the World Commission on Dam released its report in 2000, Pak Mool became known for its defects of all aspects of a hydropower scheme. For the whole decade, the Pak Mool discourse has been directed towards obscuring the real cause of the conflict. The anti-Pak Mool Dam protesters have received no public sympathy but became known as greedy trouble-makers who endlessly demanded more compensation.

Yet, for the first time, the failure of Pak Mool Dam, which has long been concealed by Egat and denied by its sponsor, the World Bank, has been scientifically confirmed by the WCD report. The findings in the report have

clarified this decade-long confusion. And, if anything, Egat's credibility is seriously being questioned.

The WCD's findings stated that Pak Mool was carried out without adequate environmental impact studies. It has failed to deliver its promised benefits and created both environmental and social damage to the communities. Pak Mool produced only 20.81 megawatts, in contrast to its estimated capacity of 136 MWs. The project was presented as a 'multi-purpose' development scheme, but irrigation benefits of a 'run-of-the-river' project were doubtful. Upstream reservoir fisheries yielded around ten kilograms per hectare per year instead of the estimated 100 kgs per hectare per year without fish stocking or 220 kgs per hectare per year with the fish stocking programme (WCD 2000 cited in The Bangkok Post, December 2000 and IRN's briefing, December 2000).

In terms of environmental damage, the WCD report stated that the number of fish species has been reduced from 265 before the dam was built to 90 species while upstream fish catches have declined by 60-80 per cent. The dam permanently submerged more than 50 rapids, which served as the natural habitat for many fish species. The submergence of the rapids was not mentioned in the EIA report and; thus, the implication of the loss of rapids was not assessed. The actual number of households displaced by the dam was 1,700 instead of 241 as predicted in the EIA as a result of the declining fishing yields. The project cost was higher than estimated. Compensation and resettlement costs increased 182 per cent from the estimated 231.55 million baht to 1,1131.1 million baht while compensation for fisheries loss, unanticipated in the original estimate, accounted for 395.6 million baht. In terms of mitigation measures, the two-million-baht fish ladder has failed to help upstream fish migration. The stocking of fresh water prawn (*Macrobrachium Rosenbergi*) is unlikely to generate income as the species cannot breed in fresh water. In sum, the WCD's study says: 'If all the benefits and costs were adequately assessed, it is unlikely that the Pak Mool project would be [built today]' (WCD, cited in the Bangkok Post and IRN, December 2000).

### *The Voice of Difference*

At the heart of the Pak Mool discourse, several fierce contestations have unfolded, involving the issues of aquatic biology and fisheries, the ecological value of the Mool, and the dam's economic rationale. These contestations unravel the voice of Mool River villagers, in contrast to the state's dominant description of the value of the Mool, and celebrate, not undervalue, their cultural difference.

At time prior to the dam construction when the conflict erupted, the key contestation centred on whether or not fish migrate between Mekong and Mool

and whether the dam would block the fish migration. Contesting Egat's refusal about fish migration between Mool and Mekong, the Mool River villagers explained the interrelation of the two rivers and why fish was abundant in the Mool. For this, they told the story of the 'two colour rivers'.

'The Mekong is earth red but the Mool is blue. It's because the water in the Mool is clearer and the Mekong is much muddier. At the confluence, the river is called the Two-Colour River because of these contrasting colours. In the rainy season, when the Mekong rises, the fish are pushed by its strong current. Then, the clearer water in the Mool attracts them to swim upriver to spawn in the Mool. When the two river rise, they flood the forest and bushes along the banks of the Mool. This flooded forest becomes shelter for the fish that come from the Mekong,' said Roen Kluikaew, a respected old lady of Hua Hew Village, whose fishing skill and knowledge has been recognized by other fisher folk of the Mool River (personal communication, February 1992).

In response to strong criticism that the dam would block the fish migration, Egat built the fish ladder attached to one end of the Pak Mool Dam. Yet, the legacy of the fish ladder reveals both its technical mistake and the unmitigable impacts of Pak Mool. The fish ladder was built too steep and remains dry for half a year in the dry season as a result of the cost cutting from ten million baht to two million baht (Traisawasdichai, March 10, 1995). Modelled on the fish ladder in the west to help salmon jump over the dams to spawn upriver, of which success is still doubtful, the fish pass at Pak Mool has failed to accommodate the unknown and unstudied behaviour of 265 different fish species of the Mool (WCD cited in the Bangkok Post and IRN, December 2000).

Fish that use the ladder in the rainy season were found injured and some die before they could swim or jump pass the 17-metre high dam to spawn in the reservoir, as it was intended by the design engineer. For those that survive the hard journey on the ladder, the possibility for them to further survive in the unfavourable condition of the reservoir water is questionable. Some small fish were found using the ladder but they were of no economic value and were too small in size and number to be sufficient to replenish fish stock for the Mool. Many fish were often found dead in the turbine outlets, located at the other end in the opposite direction to the fish pass. The stronger water current from the turbines attracts the fish to the turbines (personal communication with villagers and fishery officials, 1996).

Despite the failure, Egat released its commercial advertisement on the television throughout 1996 to promote the success of the fish ladder, advertising that it has helped the communities to sustain their traditional diet of fermented fish.

The competing views pertaining the natural value of the Mool concerned the ecological implications of the river rapids. The Mool River villagers protested at once when Egat blasted Tad Hua Phu and Khan Hew rapids to create a water channel next to the spillway of the 'run-of-the-river' Pak Mool dam. The destruction of the rapids was not mentioned in the environmental impact studies. Speaking from experience about ecology and spiritual attachment with the Mool River, the villagers described the rapids as the 'kingdom of fish'. The pools associated with the rapids serve as the shelter for the tired fish that swim upriver from the Mekong to spawn in the Mool and as the 'asylum' for young fishes to hide themselves from their predators in numerous holes of the rapids (Traisawasdichai, March 1, 1992). Yet, this local view of the Mool River's value was both ignored and undervalued by the authority. Egat contended that rapids formations were simply rocks and that the blasting of the rapids was merely an ordinary technical work to improve the water channel (Supin Panyamark, in Traisawasdichai, March 1, 1992).

The contestation over Pak Mool's economic rationale is related to the link between the dam's projected electricity output and the unique Mool-Mekong's hydrological regime. The local communities warned from the outset that Pak Mool, with its location near the estuary of the Mool and Mekong, would risk failing to function because the Mool became a reverse river during the wet season. In the rainy season, the Mekong downstream the dam swells and pushes its flow back into the Mool, which also rises at the same time. The villagers warned that the swell of the Mekong, when meeting the 17-metre high dam, would leave no head available for Pak Mool facility to run the turbine and generate electricity (personal communication, 1992 and 1995). Yet, no one listened to their voice. Egat and its engineers chose to believe in the superiority of science and technology of dam building over local knowledge of the river ecology. Their ignorance to the local warning was more a combination of the engineers' excitement to test the new technology to build the first 'run-of-the-river dam in Thailand and the belief in the power of technology to control the flow of the Mool River. However, the villagers' prediction has proved right as the dam can only produce 20.81 megawatts – an amount over six times less than its estimated capacity. Egat engineers have also admitted this fact, saying the dam cannot generate electricity in the rainy season because of the rise of the Mekong (personal communication, January 2002).

### *The Mool River's Defenders*

If the portrait of a nation is created by its selection of certain memories for its citizens to remember, causing them to forget certain events, then the struggle against being forgotten is the strategy of resistance for the Mool River communities. Their gathering at the three-year-old protest village, called Mae Mool Man Yuen (long-lasting Mool), which signifies the 'nodes of resistance',



juxtaposing the 'nodes of control' of the Pak Mool Dam and its power plant (Bryant and Bailey 1997), indicates the villagers' determination to refuse to accept the official vision of development. Organized on a rotational basis to standby in the protest village, they have turned the makeshift huts into their second home, making a real living from fishing, weaving baskets and grass brooms and opening a village coffee house. They have turned the property, Egat has planned to build a recreational park, into a lively village with a school for the protestors' children, a monument of the poor, a meeting hall overseeing the dam's spillway and a centre stage which they use both for serious gathering for the protest work and for the village's traditional drama and music performance at night to entertain themselves.

On a deeper level, they are there to tell their stories about what it is the construction of the world Bank-sponsored Pak Mool has done to their life, to revitalize their own vision of the kind of development they hope for, to reclaim the pride of their river-based livelihood and to assert their right to force the state to return the river to the communities. In short, Mae Mool Man Yuen is the village of the Mool River fighters and the school for those who are interested to learn and appreciate the fighting spirit and the struggle of the ordinary people against power.

Yet, the growing strength of the Mool River villagers and their conceptual sophistication in their struggle for inclusion into the decision making process was not built in a day. They started out twelve years ago as unorganized inexperienced submerged networks (Escobar 1998, Mittelman 2000), seeking way to create their own channel of opinion formation and communication. As the impacts of the dam became more apparent, the submerged networks grew, gaining new members, and networking with other peripheral, grassroots groups. Their method through the exercise of 'war of position and war of movement' (Mittelman), has always been non-violent, despite at times confronting with official use of force, propaganda and imprisonment intimidation. This involves persistent rounds of writing appeals to authorities, visiting the World Bank office in Bangkok, marching the town barefoot, exhibiting their unused fishing gears, staging hunger strikes and sit-in protests, occupying the dam site, blocking Bangkok streets, camping outside the Government House and invading it to meet the prime minister when he fell on deaf ears to listen to their voice after months of protest. Their three-year-on camping at Mae Mool Man Yuen protest village at the dam site is ensuring that their struggle, suffering and intention will not be erased from the history of the Pak Mool Dam like other forgotten stories of their fellows who had been sacrificed to make way for construction of other dams in Thailand.

Their unending struggle against the Pak Mool Dam has set a new standard for the politics of resistance to both the state and other marginalized grassroots groups. New kinds of demands have emerged, challenging the state's dominant culture of rule-setting pertaining compensation for affected communities in development projects. Their demand for compensation for lost income from fishing in the Mool River during the three-year construction phase of Pak Mool and for the lost livelihood after the completion of the dam are evidence of the previously erased impacts that the state's construction of a dam could cost. Pak Mool has become the most expensive dam Egat has ever built because of the unexpected increase of compensation cost (Egat officials, personal communication, 1996).

Yet, the Mool River villagers are not fighting only against the Pak Mool Dam. They are now engaged in a broader political commitment, in which they have become part of the larger network of marginalized grassroots groups, called the Assembly of the Poor. Encompassing diversified objectives, yet with a shared identity of the marginalized poor, the Mool River villagers through the Assembly of the Poor are now aiming for a broader goal towards a 'post development' agenda (Escobar 1998). They are challenging the Thai state to acknowledge and respect their different culture, pride and aspiration.

Through time and maturation, their 'hidden transcript' (Scott 1990, Bryant & Bailey 1997) has been elaborated and become deeply sophisticated. A new dimension and way to assert their right to defend and restore the Mool River has been added. By demanding the opening of the dam's gates to allow the fish to return to the Mool River, they have turned the agenda of the Pak Mool discourse upside down. They have now refused to negotiate under the presupposition of the singular owner of the dam, but have created a new agenda based on the collective ownership of the river.<sup>♦</sup> In other words, the owners of the Mool River have decided that they want to stop granting permission for the dam owner, which has been operating on a part of their river for the last twelve years. 'Returning the Mool to our children' is, therefore, a strategy for the counter-hegemonic agenda, guiding the Mool River villagers movement towards their eventual goal of decommissioning Pak Mool.

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<sup>♦</sup> The concept of ownership of the river was once proposed by a Thai scholar, Nithi Eawsriwong, as a basis for conflict resolution of Pak Mool Dam between the authorities and affected communities. He proposed that the resolution should be based on a dialogue among communities along the Mool, who are the owners of the river, to define and decide the pattern of how to best manage the Mool (personal communication with second hand source).

## Conclusion

In the complexities of resource contestation, the profession of planning is applied as a tool to decide the distribution of the resource. Planning is not an objective, value-neutral and non-political device as planners and those who hire them, like to think of as such. Planners can serve to mediate the distribution of wealth and reinforce power, or alternatively, withhold them. In the Mekong context, regional and national authorities, influenced by external bi- and multilateral agencies, are keen to promote the official top-down development process that increasingly creates social, economic and political marginality. They are imposing a grand narrative of 'sustainability' on to the people, deciding on their behalf that this official vision could be reached by the construction of dams. Yet, the official narrative of 'sustainability', based on economic and technical rationality, clearly precludes ecological protection and reinforces social inequality by obstructing communities from their present access to the resource. In this context, planners are operating in the face of power domination of the bureaucracy and institutions or in Forester's sense the 'structure of systematically distorted communication of assurance, threat, promise and legitimation' (Forester 1980: 283). Here, planners must make a choice about whom they want to serve and which sets of values they are promoting. Planners can redress this power imbalance and promote the consultation process and dialogue with affected communities. However, the interplay of power in the hydropower discourse in the Mekong has made it impossible to create enabling communication that ensures the authentic inclusion of the affected communities in the planning and decision making process. More often than not, planners, such as environmental consultants or advisors for hydropower projects, as shown in Nam Theun 2 case, become part of the structure of 'systematically distorted communication' themselves.

In response, affected grassroots communities, as the anti-Pak Mool Dam resistance movement demonstrates, mobilized themselves, launching their struggles in defence of their culture, livelihood and ecology. They are communicating other forms of knowledge that encompass difference and diversity. They insist that planning needs to pay attention to context specific and respect the culture of the others.

The interplay of power in the Mekong oriented towards dam building implies that the collective actions of the affected local communities based on defence of nature and ecology -- either organized or unorganized, articulated or unarticulated forms of submerged networks (Escobar), are the main ingredient to counteract the 'structure of distorted communication' and transform undemocratic into democratic decision making. Yet, this is not to dismiss the possibility to encompass the aid-for-undistorted communication (Sager 1992)

based on communicative rationality in the formal planning and decision making process. Yet, this is provided that planners must drop the deeply-embedded pretence of the apolitical nature of their profession. Indeed, both approaches – the collective social movement and communicative rationality, are necessary, if the counter-hegemonic efforts are to effectively challenge the asymmetrical distribution of power.

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