

Joint Statement

Lack of a rigorous transboundary impact study of Sanakham put Mekong River at risk

We refer to the recent announcement¹ by Mekong River Commission (MRC) to organize the 10th MRC Regional Stakeholder Forum on a prior consultation on the proposed Sanakham hydropower project on the Mekong mainstream which will be taking place on November 24th, 2020 in Pakse, Laos. CSOs working on water governance and natural resources management in Cambodia are very concerned about issues regarding transboundary impacts on the lower Mekong river and in particular, Cambodia's Tonle Sap great lake. CSOs call the MRC to consider the following points below:

- Base on the MRC's Council Study which was developed in 6 years from 2012-2017 showed that the 11 large hydropower dams on the Mekong River's lower mainstream and 120 tributary dams planned by 2040 seriously threaten the region's ecology, economy, and food security due to 1) These hydropower plans would reduce the amount of sediment reaching the Mekong Delta by 97%; 2) mainstream dam reservoirs, flood-protection infrastructure, and barriers to fish migration are expected to harm the region's ecosystem; 3) hydropower development through 2040 will cause fish stocks to decline dramatically. The total fishery biomass will be reduced up to 40% by 2020 and 80% by 2040; 4) hydropower development through 2040 will eliminate migratory fish in large parts of the Mekong due to the fish species will not be able to survive in the reservoirs of the dams; 5) climate change combined with the loss of fish may cause acute levels of food insecurity in communities in Laos and Cambodia. These are the outstanding issues of the planned hydropower dams which were discovered by the study².
- Throughout reviewing the project documents, we have found that a project developer has used data from 2010-2011 as a basis to conduct an analysis on fishery, hydrology, sediment transport, water quality, dam safety and other impacts, even though there is more up-to-date data available. The use of out of date information has created uncertainty in the quality of the study, limiting the ability to address the current situation of the Mekong river and will not provide the comprehensive information needed for the MRC Joint Committee (JC) to provide qualified feedback.
- The lack of the current, updated information and rigorous studies is not a new phenomenon and we have highlighted this issue repeatedly to the MRC in previous projects. Repeating the same shortfalls show that the project developers do not take into account the recommendations off relevant stakeholders. Project developers should use the most updated information and data to conduct analyses in order to discover appropriate findings in relation to the current situation. It will enable relevant stakeholders to highlight observations and provide concrete and qualified comments on issues.
- The MRC meanwhile, has been implementing a pilot Joint Environmental Monitoring (JEM) operation of Xayaburi and Don Sahong hydropower dams in 2020-2021³ to monitor the impact on hydrology, water quality, sediment transport, fish migration, fishery and aquatic ecology. The result of the monitoring should be used to inform the design of new project to minimize possible negative impacts in the future.

¹ <http://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/consultations/regional-stakeholder-forums/the-10th-mrc-regional-stakeholder-forum/>

² MRC (2017) the Council Study.

³ Joint Environmental Monitoring Program Pilots Project-Factsheet

- The current water level of the Mekong river and Tonle Sap lake in the last two consecutive years has created heightened concern for the millions of riverine communities dependent on these rivers and lakes for their livelihoods. Climate change is a key worrying factor, but the increasing presence of hydropower dams on the Mekong and its tributaries has increased concerns regarding sustainability in relation to the trade-off between conservation and development and food security for millions of Mekong citizens.
- The current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has limited the ability of stakeholders to have effective consultative meetings and conduct field studies to collect information on the ground. The organization of this consultation will not produce any better outcome, however it will produce a bigger gap of the proposed project.

Recommendations:

- The four members of the MRC must strongly advocate for project developers to use the most updated information to analyze current and future projects, providing enough information for a meaningful prior consultation with all relevant stakeholders.
- The government of Laos and project developer should delay consultation until the results of the implementation of Joint Environmental Monitoring (JEM) of Xayaburi and Don Sahong hydropower projects in 2020-2021 are developed. The results will be used as a basis for improving new projects that would minimize the negative impacts on the Mekong river.
- In the current situation of the Mekong river and the COVID-19 pandemic, the MRC should advise to delay prior consultations until the situation improves, in order to ensure meaningful and full participation of all relevant stakeholders and to be confident in the provision of effective feedback on proposed projects.

List of NGOs endorse the statement

- 1) Action for Development (AFD)
- 2) Culture and Environment Preservation Association (CEPA)
- 3) Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT)
- 4) Mlup Promviheathor Center (MPC)
- 5) My Village (MVi)
- 6) Nak Aphiwat Sahokom (NAS)
- 7) Northeastern Rural Development (NRD)
- 8) The Coalition of Cambodia Fishers (CCF)
- 9) The NGO Forum on Cambodia (NGOF)
- 10) Youth Council of Cambodia (YCC)
- 11) 3S Rivers Protection Network (3SPN)