

## “Fish” and “Kai” and the Mekong dam: Pushing frontier villages more marginalized

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### Mekong, Fish and Kai

When the Mekong River has changed to fast flowing due to the Mekong dams in China, Mekong local communities in Chiang Rai Province of Thailand have been facing problems and struggling by themselves. Villagers have not got assistance from the government to support their lives while coping the change. This includes Huay Luek village in the Province where is the last Mekong community along Thai-Lao border in northern Thailand before the river enters into Lao territory. Villagers’ livelihoods in Huay Luek community mostly depended on “Pla”(fish) and “Kai” collection but not anymore. Change in the Mekong flow, fishing is only a men’s job because it is risky for women and requires physical strength whist women can only capture fish along the riverbanks and collect “Kai”, the Mekong seaweed in a shallow water.



Kai, collected in a community

Villagers really do not know exactly what happen upstream to their mother river and what life would be like in the future. Villagers have found very difficult and less access to Mekong resources due changes in flow of the river. Consequently, many men have decided to leave community to become labour in a city. Some villagers have to switch to farming but agricultural land is very limited. Women are even worse than men because “Kai” as highly important source of daily food and very significant family income for women, has mostly disappeared from the river. Kai is locally considered as core women’s social and economic status. Income from selling “Kai” strengthens women’s negotiating power in their household. Without “Kai”, women apparently less power in the family and merely push into a marginalized position



Fishing tool in Huay Luek village

### **Witnessing the change**

With regarding to villagers’ connection to the Mekong resources, according to the villagers, the Mekong River had begun to change since 1997. It has continued to cause severe impacts, such as big flood event in 2008. Villagers have believed that the main cause of the severe flooding is from dam construction in the Upper Mekong in China. Another reason is the destruction of the Mekong islands in China and along Myanmar-Laos border in order to turn the river into a waterway for the navigation of large commercial ships. The Mekong River was once seen by villagers that its natural flow could decrease or increase slowly from its lowest to its highest levels for about three months.

Nowaday, villagers have witnessed that the flow, volume and direction of the river are not normal anymore as ever. This occurrence severely disrupts the Mekong ecosystem, depletes the minerals, destroys the habitats of fish and other animals, erodes the banks, and causes the

fish to lose their instincts. Riverbank gardens are suddenly flooded or sometimes dry because water levels suddenly drop. The unusual river flow makes Pla and Kai eventually disappear.

When Pla and Kai disappear, villagers' livelihoods heavily affect. The most significant effect is the decline of fish population and species because many Mekong fish are long-distance migratory fish. When fish is gone, income goes down. In 1992, there were 60 fishing boats in the village, ten years later, it was reduced to 29, and now there are only about 15 ones left. Nowadays, no one can depend on fishing as a main occupation anymore.

Mr. Bai Waenkaew, 59, described the change in the village after the fish disappeared. He told that: "In the past, we mainly fished in the Mekong and farmed upland rice. Waking up in the morning, men from every house went down to the Mekong. Nowadays, no fish, villagers have adapted to the changes, like turning to rubber plantation like pomelo plantation, upland farming, and become a labor in town."

Besides finding fish and growing pomelo, Bai also collects Kai, but it also facing a problem. He said that

"Kai began to disappear when China built the dams. Then the water is not natural. If the water was released from the dams, Kai would come off immediately." When the impacts occurred, the villagers did not know whom to turn to. "When villagers are affected because we could not catch fish and collect Kai, no government officers have come to help. They probably thought that the lack of fish and Kai is not their responsibility."

### **Pak Bang Dam and Covid- 19: Exacerbating existing problems**

Existing problem of lacking of the Mekong resources, fish, Kai and others due to the existing upstream dams has not been resolved or even clarified by any officers. This problem have been topped up with the forthcoming Mekong dam to be constructed, the Pak Bang dam in Laos. The news about this dan has caused more distress to the villagers. Villagers have heard that the Pak Bang dam would be built in Laos, about ninety-five kilometers downstream from their village. Most villagers have known about the dam from the NGOs, especially from the Chiang Khong Conservation Group, a local organization located in the next district.

Although some villagers, mostly men and community leaders, have received some information about the dam from attending various meetings, many of them were confused with the received information. The most worrying thing for villagers including Mr. Thongsuk Inthawong, the former headman, is that they do not know where the flood level is. They just know that several protests by Thai civil society organizations have led the Lao government to lower the dam height to reduce flood levels in Thailand.



The first dialogue on 15 January 2018

Photo: The Nation, [www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/national/30336321](http://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/national/30336321)

To know where exactly the flood level is, villagers demanded the Thai government agencies to set up the flood level poles in the village. Despite the drop in flood levels, villagers think that the serious problem still arises. There will be a lot of water released from the Chinese dams, especially during the flooding season. As usual, there is no agency can clarify this problem. Worse still, if the dam is built, the villagers would not know how they would be compensated and from whom because the dam would be built on Lao territory. No other agency can answer these questions raised by the villagers too.

Another concern is the limited size of arable land if fish from the Mekong would completely gone. They could not make money from land compared to fish capture. They concern if they would get land compensation from floods because none of them have no land title. They thought that they might just sell land right now. Mr. Bai said with worrying that:

“Building Pak Beng dam depends on China and Lao. So, I don’t know if they will listen to us or not. Laos cannot resist because their system and us are different.

Villagers in the village do not know what exactly has happened to the Mekong and who are responsible for it. Even the government agencies have no information and knowledge of what is happening across the border. They do not have a policy and plan to deal with the problems that arise as said by Mr. Bai.

Hence, the villagers’ existing problem, lack of Mekong resources due to the Upper Mekong dam are exacerbated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Mr. Bai further commented that

“During the COVID outbreak, no one came to buy my pomelo, which I normally get more money as it is off-season. I could be making more income because I could sell more expensive pomelo”. But Mr. Bai could not make income from pomelo this year.



Mr. Bai's Pomelo garden

The story we are telling here reflects how importance of the Mekong natural resources for marginalized people located in in Huay Luek village. Natural resources are their crucial sources of food and income security. The Upper Mekong Dams in China's territory are putting their lives at risk and vulnerable.

Now, having more new planned dams to be built on the Mekong like Pak Beng dam puts more stress on downstream villagers and would definitely exacerbate the existing impacts generated by the current Mekong dams. Thus, we conclude that villagers' livelihoods and destiny obviously depends on what is happening upstream. Both men and women are bearing burden after upstream dams have been built. Accountability, rights of local people, good governance, and unawareness of transboundary impacts of the country upstream on downstream have rarely been put in place for serious international concerns and discussions.

The involved government agencies must set more international dialogues and platforms allowing people from downstream to raise their concerns and rights. Issues for dialogue must include impacts of those particularly planned dams beyond national boundary, how downstream affected villagers on the other side of the border would be fully informed and consulted with genial data and how fair compensation is provided for downstream villagers living in another country.