

MK10 Project Brief: Knowledge and Institutional Systems in the Management and Coordination of Hydropower Social Safeguards in Attapeu, Lao PDR

Ethnic minority groups' knowledge and desires are often overlooked in hydropower development decision-making processes in Lao PDR. The reasons for this have to do with systemic failures involving a lack of value placed on ethnic minority knowledge and capacity for self-determination by hydropower developers and national-level government agencies, poor community consultation practices, and low levels of capacity in provincial- and district-level government agencies.

The MK10 Project

"MK10: Knowledge and Institutional Systems in the Management and Coordination of Hydropower Social Safeguards in Attapeu, Lao PDR" was a project funded by the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF Mekong). The National University of Laos (NUOL) led the project, in partnership with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE), Electricite du Laos (EDL), and the Vietnam National University of Science and Technology's Faculty of Environmental Sciences.

The project conducted socioeconomic research and consultations in a total of 11 villages in Attapeu province: five villages affected by the Hatxan to Pleiku transmission line, two villages affected by the Xekaman 1 and Xanxai Dams, and four villages affected by the Sekong 3 Upper and Lower Dams. The primary areas of research focus were on indigenous livelihood systems, and the knowledge and engagement practices of government agencies and hydropower developers, with respect to social safeguards activities.



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An aspect of this research was to focus on specific gaps between safeguard planning by Vietnamese developers and the requirements of the Government of Laos (GoL) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The gaps, which had been identified in an ADB due diligence audit, made particular reference to the planning of livelihoods and income restoration for affected indigenous peoples; knowledge of, and adherence to, sustainable social safeguard measures by the developers; and consultation with, and information provided to, impacted indigenous people.

Researchers used several participatory research techniques to reveal the intricacies and nuances of the ethnic minorities' livelihood systems and how these were intertwined with their social structure, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs.

Participatory Research Techniques

- Agro-ecological profiling and resource mapping
- Socioeconomic survey
- Focus group discussions
- Key informant interviews
- Case studies
- Household livelihood portfolios and labour calendars
- Knowledge, attitude, response, and experience (KARE) analysis of villagers on resettlement issues

Findings

The project found that ethnic minorities depend upon swidden agriculture, non-timber forest products, and fish for their livelihoods and subsistence. Relocation frequently involves resettling highland communities in the lowlands, and a transition from swidden agriculture to sedentary crop production or paddy cultivation. There is a widespread misconception among resettlement planners that this is an easy transition for communities to make. Highland indigenous communities have no experience with or traditional knowledge of irrigated rice farming, which can lead to crop failures and hunger. Relocated communities are also often closer to rubber plantations and mines, which introduces the prospect of engagement in wage labour. Ethnic minority groups' livelihood systems are intimately linked to their social structure, culture, and spiritual beliefs. A transition to sedentary crop production and wage labour severs these linkages and causes significant disruption to indigenous social structures, cultural identity, and spiritual well being.



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Resources allocated by the project developer to relocation, resettlement, and livelihood restoration activities were inadequate and consultations with affected communities were found to be insufficient. Two of the most glaring problems were that foreign consultants and hydropower developers leading the consultation process had minimal understanding of local livelihood systems, and there was little value placed on local knowledge, desires, or capacity for self-determination. Furthermore, the consultations engaged only the leaders of the villages, rather than the villagers, and were conducted in Lao, which many ethnic women do not understand.

Provincial- and district-level government agencies have the potential to lead more effective consultation processes, as they may have local language abilities and greater understanding of local livelihood systems. However, there is a power differential between these government agencies and the project developer, such that the government agencies are not empowered to challenge decisions made by the project developer. The government agencies would also benefit from the strengthening of their research, consultation, and information sharing capabilities.



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Recommendations

a) Social safeguard research methodologies need to be improved

Social safeguard research methodologies should be based on detailed surveys, interviews, and other participatory techniques that explore local livelihood systems and their relationship to livelihoods, social structures, culture, and spiritual practices.

b) Consultation and information programs need to be fully resourced and timely

Consultation and information sharing should be conducted by national and local language speakers and in a format other than writing in order to be understood by affected indigenous peoples. Consultations should address affected women, and include visual presentations and site visits to similar projects.

c) Communities should be supported in relocating on their own terms

Self-managed relocation was seen and recorded at several villages in the study, including Hindam in Xanxai, Don Khaen in Xayxettha, Attapeu Province and Navakang in Sekong Province. All of these villages have relocated and re-established stable and viable communities under their own resourcing and management in the last ten years.

The research also indicates that there will be internal economic benefits to the concerned communities, and to the project, of leaving them to relocate where they can continue with existing swidden agricultural practices and non-timber forest product collection. Such a strategy will preserve or strengthen traditional social structures, livelihood systems and the cultural identity of self-determining villages. It will also reduce dependency on government agencies and the developer for future financial assistance.

d) Provincial- and district-level government agencies must have the capacity and authority to challenge developer decisions and engage in the consultation process

This means that there must be a shift away from the standard practice of developers assuming sole responsibility for planning and leading resettlement and social safeguard activities, to a more balanced approach where local government agencies provide oversight. Local government agencies' capacity to conduct socioeconomic research on resettlement and livelihood restoration issues must also be strengthened, as well as their ability to lead effective village consultations.

Next Steps

Two handbooks to support capacity building in provincial- and district-level government agencies, and improved research methods and consultation practice on social safeguards activities, will be produced. The first handbook is entitled "Handbook for Capacity Building on Resettlement and Livelihood Restoration," and the second is "Handbook on Social Safeguards in Lao PDR Hydropower Development." These handbooks will help bring line agency practice into compliance with national social safeguard legislation and international best practice.



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