



**Mekong Youth
Assembly**

Sustaining
Mekong People's
Livelihoods

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Mekong Youth Assembly Statement on the Collapse of the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Hydropower Project in Laos

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We, the Mekong Youth Assembly, a self-organized network of youth from the six countries that share the Mekong River (Tibet/China, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam), wish to express our shock and concern about the collapse of the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy hydropower project in Attapeu province, Southern Laos, and our deep condolences to communities affected by this tragedy, both in southern Laos and downstream in Cambodia.

One Lao youth shared her concerns for the children who faced this tragedy. "The dam collapse in southern Laos is very worrying for the future of our children. This tragedy caused children to become orphans. They lost their loved ones like parents, brothers, sisters, and cousins, and they lost the security of their homes. This tragedy has caused deep trauma for children and it will be in their memories forever. If the Lao government does not immediately address this issue, I cannot imagine how these children's lives will be. Who they will stay with and who will take care of them?"

An indigenous Karen woman from along the Salween River shared her deep concerns for the children affected by dam collapse. "Because the dam broke, babies must cry for their parents. Because of the dam, the dreams of children have been shattered. The dam made a little boy have bad memories. Plans to continue construction of the dam is brutal to this little child."

As it was reported, 40 people confirmed dead, at least 98 more were missing and 6,600 other were displaced that included children both boy and girls from this dam collapse.[1] Almost five months since the dam collapsed in July 2018, there is still no signal of how communities will be rehabilitated, especially the lives of youth and children who are severely affected by this disaster. Still, there are thousands of people still waiting for aid at this moment.

Despite this, governments in the Mekong region, especially the Lao government, is pushing ahead with plans to build dams on the mainstream Mekong river and its tributaries without comprehensive consideration for the safety of dam construction and the cumulative impacts on the environment and communities, especially on youth and children.

A young Khmer woman added, "I would like to ask the Lao government what the 'battery of Asia' means to children, women, and local people? If your family lived close to the Xepian Xe Nam Noy Dam, how would you feel? I understand our countries need development,



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The flooding [from Xepian XeNam Noy dam collapse in Laos, seen from above (CNN)].

but what does this development mean for the poor? As international investors are doing business in our countries, our governments must love our own people and protect them. If our citizens didn't support you, I don't think you [the government] would exist. We want you to respect us as we respect you. We want you to love us like you love your children. We want you to think about your self-respect rather than just thinking about your pockets. No one honestly respects you, because what you are doing now is destroying your own life. I want to wake up in the morning with a pure smile for our nature, water, and culture. It gives me so much pain to wake up and see that our brothers', sisters', and friends' lives destroyed. Please respect our rights and the rights of nature and rivers."

A young Lao woman who has worked with local communities for years shared, "I hope this concern will be heard in the countries of free expression. My heart broke and my tears fell when I heard about the Xe-Pian Xe Nam Noy dam collapse. This would not have happened if the concerned governments and companies had given equal value to the lives of local people, The Lao government is gambling with community members' lives! Who will guarantee that community members' lives will be safe from such development projects?"

Even though the Lao Government announced a suspension of new hydropower projects following the tragic Xe Pian-Xe Nam Noy hydropower project disaster in Attapeu, Southern Laos, communities in another areas, where there is on-going dam construction, are living in fear and uncertainty.

"Local people and their natural resources should not be used for hydropower experiments. They deserve to live happy lives, not in risky conditions," another Vietnamese youth added. Until now, there is no clear message from the Lao government, and the companies and banks involved have still did not come out to take responsibility for this incident honestly.

"I want all governments who got benefits from dams to come together for a serious discussion about a solution for the people who were affected by this dam collapse. Governments also need to consider for the plans to build other dams. There must be clear identification about whether communities will really get benefits if dams are built. I also want governments to share their plans to build dams with communities before they make any decisions, because nearby communities will be the ones most affected from the projects, not governments. Governments also need to listen to children because they are the generation who will live longest with the dams" a youth from Cambodia strongly urged.

One indigenous youth from Cambodia added, "My concern about this dam collapse is that there have been no responsibility from the dam owners and the government. There's been no grievance mechanism and no resolution for the affected people at all. Especially youth and children are not considered to be part of the resolution."

A youth from Vietnam expressed, "For the people who were affected by the Xepian Xe Nam Noy dam collapse, money cannot bring back their parents, their children, their friends and their houses. It's unbelievable that the company let this happen. Everybody has the right to live. Now you destroyed their lives and took away their loved ones."

"Watching the news of the Xepian Xe Nam Noy dam collapse is deeply heartbreaking., At the same time this tragedy gives an example for us not to treat nature like a toy for personal gain. I strongly stand with the victims of this tragedy and strongly urge Laos and ASEAN Governments to consider whether building more hydropower dams is raising up your fellow people or destroying them. Be brave and take responsibility for this tragedy!", a youth from Myanmar emphasized.

From decades, many dams have caused heavy impacts to people and environments. Many beautiful things that we used to see have started to disappear, not only nature, but the livelihoods of local people, especially with the dam collapse in Laos. That disaster destroyed many beautiful things in seconds. There are many unanswered questions about the benefits of building so many dams in the region and how governments and companies can pay back the losses of local people.

One youth leader from Cambodia said, "How will hydropower dam developers be responsible to human and the environment for manmade disasters? Hydropower dams on the Mekong River and its tributaries cause humans to live in fear and environments are destroyed as a result of building dams."

One Thai Youth leader also strongly expressed, "from experiences that we have seen, dams do not solve the problems of flood, drought, or even creation of sustainable energy. On the contrary, they benefit only some specific groups."

A Chinese youth strongly emphasized that "The Xe-Pian Xe-Nam Noy dam collapse is a human made disaster for local people and children who lost their fundamental human rights to life and livelihoods because of irresponsibility. We must prevent such irresponsible companies from building dams."

Another young Khmer woman asserted, "As a person living along the Mekong river, we have huge concerns around destructive dam development. Project developers, investors and governments must seriously consider safe,



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renewable energy which causes less harm to people. Project developers, investors and the Lao government must publicly apologize to the victims of the dam collapse and make sure their livelihoods are restored after this tragedy. To all Mekong people, we have to take good care of our river, forests, and natural resources in sustainable way for ourselves and our next generation because it our responsibility!."



More than 6,000 people left homeless when the dam water wiped out villages downstream (ABC).

The dam collapse in Southern Laos was not a natural disaster. It was a man-made disaster and it put every life in the affected area in jeopardy including men, women, children and animals.

We, a group of youth from Mekong region gathered together to express our concerns and to call our leaders and all companies and investors involved to promptly resolve this issue for the people affected from the Xepian Xe Nam Noy dam collapse, especially for the children who are still waiting to see their parents, and for all people whose lives are at risk because of dam development along the Mekong and all rivers. We hope that human rights institutions will support us and help us make our voices heard by our leaders in the Mekong region to ensure that we, as youth and children, will have a safe, friendly and ecologically productive environment for us to live in currently and tomorrow.

[1] Wikipedia "2018 Laos dam collapse", Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018_Laos_dam_collapse (accessed 26/12/2018).