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Dead in the Water: Global Lessons from the World Bank's Model Hydropower Project in Laos

BRUCE SHOEMAKER and WILLIAM ROBICHAUD, eds.
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018.

Tens of millions of dollars have been spent on environmental and social mitigation programs for the Nam Theun 2 (NT2) hydropower project in Laos, extending over the full footprint of the project zone from the Vietnam border down to the confluence of the two impacted rivers with the Mekong. What are scholars, development practitioners, and concerned citizens to make of this high-profile infrastructure project? Costing about US\$1.45 billion in the end, it made such a significant investment in addressing its socio-environmental externalities, but as the authors of *Dead in the Water* argue, has still come up short.

A first interpretation is that NT2 was, and remains, an exception. It is rare to encounter such a nationally transformative resource project, backed with loan guarantees by global institutions at the peak of their influence, in what was (as Laos in the late 1990s to early 2000s) a prototypical weak developing state. If NT2 represents a kind of high-water line for Washington Consensus institutions in Southeast Asia, this book also demarcates the limits of that power. Moreover, as is now clear, NT2 did not fulfill its promise of raising the sustainability bar for other hydro-developers in Laos. Indeed, some within the Government of Laos (GoL) seem to have drawn the opposite conclusion—that Western institutional support for infrastructure comes with too many conditions, and too many studies—and in the end, the critics are not appeased anyway (Singh, Ch. 10, p. 224). NT2 thus helped form the institutional and regulatory scaffolding for foreign investment into the Lao electricity generation sector, while also producing an unintended policy shift toward regional and state-linked investors from China, Vietnam, and Thailand, holding lower commitments for impact assessment.

A second and divergent interpretation is that, due to its shortcomings, NT2 represents a case of high ambition combined with “failing forward.” Fleur Johns (2015) has argued that NT2 “failed forward” not just in the realm of development programming and impact mitigation, but also in terms of how the project reflected the complex intersection of neoliberal policy reform within a single-

party authoritarian regime: “Neoliberal experiments ‘fail forward’ when their transformative promise goes unrealized, without this dampening the ardor of that promise’s further pursuit” (Johns 2015, 348). In Laos, this ardor has led to the initiation of the Xayaburi, Don Sahong, and Pak Beng mainstream Mekong hydropower projects, despite widespread environmental concerns.

A third possibility, which has been pursued by scholars such as Jerome Whittington (2019), is to broadly set aside disputed and possibly irresolvable claims about failure, success, and local impact, toward examining how the social production of new ecological knowledge of rivers creates new subject-positions, claims to expertise, new logics of environmental risk management, and re-spatializations of state sovereignty and authority.

Dead in the Water does not specifically set out to theorize a new framework for understanding the NT2 project or the implications of hydropower development in Laos. Its aims are more applied and grounded, and constitute a basic warning that “supporting high-risk projects—those with the potential for severe social and environmental impacts—in countries with significant governance issues is fundamentally inappropriate and likely to cause more harm than good” (p. 298). The approach is set by some well-crafted chapters by the lead editors: independent researcher/consultant Bruce Shoemaker, and conservation biologist William Robichaud, both whom have long-term experience in the country. While none of the other chapter contributors are Lao nationals, which is a shame but understandable, given the constraints with freedom of speech in the country; almost all of the other writers have spent decades working and researching about Lao resource management issues.

The individual chapters are very readable, written with an assured touch, and here I will highlight a few of them. In Chapter 1, “Stepping into the Current,” lead editors Shoemaker and Robichaud introduce NT2 as more than just a commercial infrastructure project—it was also one of the largest rural development and conservation initiatives in Laos, that aspired to mitigate social impacts of project resettlement and the downstream inter-basin water diversion, and to secure critical biodiversity protection outcomes through the creation and funding of the Nakai-Nam Theun National Protected Area. There are solid and informative chapters on the famous octogenarian “Panel of Environmental and Social Experts” (Hubbel and Shoemaker, Ch. 2) and on *NGO Consultation and Engagement*, which, importantly, records the 1997 disbanding of the independent “NGO Forum on Laos” on orders from the Lao Government (Ch. 3, p. 73). Shoemaker and Hubbel launch a key critique, that the decision by some international NGOs to engage with NT2 ended up being manipulated by the World Bank, in a strategy to circumvent requirements for public participation in project hearings (p. 80). Meanwhile, domestic political realities within authoritarian Laos meant that there were “no mechanisms in place for decision makers to respond to input from local communities affected by the project” (p. 81).

Part 2 of the book tackles the contested social and environmental outcomes of the project. Applied anthropologist James R. Chamberlain offers an important ethnological review of the Nakai-

Nam Theun watershed area. Chamberlain decries the lost opportunity of continuing the research initiated in 1997, that was focused on how the indigenous/minority Austroasiatic ethnic groups residing in the project area were adapting to project-induced livelihood and socio-cultural changes. The author does not directly reflect upon his own early involvement in project-sponsored research, and whether this may have lent certain legitimacies to the overall project. Every engaged researcher must make their choices—as Shoemaker himself recognizes (p. 67). Nevertheless, the reader detects Chamberlain’s deep disappointment in what became of the NT2 ethnic-minority safeguard mandates: “In the end,” he writes, “alleged national sovereignty and expediency took precedence” (p. 101).

The absurdity of some of these safeguard mandates is highlighted by Glenn Hunt and co-authors in Chapter 5. Despite all the studies, when it came time to actually fill the NT2 reservoir, the project developers and local authorities were at a loss for how to actually manage the villagers’ livestock. The results were shambolic. Villagers were told to sell their animals, which crashed the market price, ensuring they received a minimal value for their primary assets. Hundreds of other animals starved in the new resettlement sites, which did not have sufficient grazeland capacities. Some remaining buffalo became trapped by the inundated water on the far side of the reservoir, within the new Nakai National Protected Area. In this spot, the herds thrived, but proceeded to cause considerable ecological damage to the new watershed protection forests. “Things fall apart” as they say—and with NT2, it appears, with a high degree of consistency.

The entire question of the conservation offset and the protected area is subjected to scrutiny by Robichaud in Chapter 7. In 2001, the GoL established the Nakai-Nam Theun Watershed Management and Protected Authority (WMPA), supported with a guaranteed funding block of US\$1 million per year for 25 years—money drawn from NT2 revenues. Despite this significant financing, the results have still been disappointing. Robichaud’s blunt conclusion is that progress with conservation outcomes depends more upon institutional culture and commitment by key agencies: “It is principally for lack of interest in its conservation mission that the WMPA has not succeeded” (p. 166).

Downstream impacts are a critical issue in the Nam Theun 2 theater. In Chapter 8, Ian G. Baird and colleagues make the point that little if any direct compensation was provided to the 150,000 people in the downstream recipient Xe Bang Fai river. The terms of the NT2 Concession Agreement meant that these very significant impacts could be externalized from project accounting, and offloaded onto local communities. Ryder and Witoon emphasize this point in Chapter 12 (p. 265), and Shoemaker and Robichaud reiterate this in the Conclusion, writing: “The institutionalised separation of revenues from a dam’s true costs and liabilities in a country where public opposition to these projects is not tolerated has created an attractive environment for private hydropower financiers and developers” (p. 294).

Part 3 examines the “Wider Legacy” of NT2. Sarinda Singh insightfully argues that the pub-

lic consultations for NT2 coincided with, rather than contributed to, a minor political opening for public debate around resource led development in Laos, circa 2005–12. This brief thaw has since closed. Substantive scrutiny and public debate of the hydropower sector by Lao citizens is now almost entirely off-limits, and viewed by the government as very close to criticizing the *party-state* itself.

A useful chapter by Carl Middleton, focusing on the discourse of “sustainable hydropower,” rounds up the third section. Middleton challenges the branding of NT2 by the World Bank and the wider hydropower industry, “as a model to legitimize their claim that sustainable hydropower is possible” (p. 271). The second identified narrative is that of the poverty reduction and development connection. The chapter effectively traces how these models and narratives have been circulated by industry, construction companies, dam operators, and financiers. The irony, of course, is that NT2 is now viewed as something of an anachronism, and newer dam developers active in the Mekong region typically have weaker standards, and less transparency and accountability (p. 287).

If NT2 ultimately failed in establishing something that could be called “sustainable hydropower”—and this book makes a convincing case for this interpretation—what hope is there other major dam project in the Mekong basin? The International Finance Corporation is still carrying the flag in countries like Myanmar. However, the collapse of the Xe Pian Xe Namnoy saddle dam in Sanamxai district of southern Laos in July 2018—surely due to a catastrophic engineering and regulatory failure—and the apparent lack of progress in improving governance standards or transparency in the Lao hydropower sector more broadly, indicate that the Mekong hydropower sector is in many ways failing backwards, not failing forwards. In the end, as Hubbel and Shoemaker summarize: “The Bank’s money and the advice of independent panels are no substitute for an engaged local citizenry and a government accountable to its own people” (p. 59).

The close empirical approach to analyzing this transformative dam megaproject is not a point of weakness of this book, but rather, its core value-added. It does much to clear the mystifying narratives which have built up around NT2, particularly as forwarded by the World Bank, the Nam Theun Power Corporation (NTPC), and indeed from the GoL agencies. Although I have followed the academic and gray literature on this project quite closely for the past decade, there were still many new things I learned, particularly about the early project debates. Overall, this is an essential sourcebook for anyone interested in Lao PDR, hydropower in the Mekong basin, or indeed broader questions of the political ecology of conservation and development. The volume is also relevant for those interested in the social and environmental implications of large infrastructure projects underway in the region under the umbrella of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. A close reading of *Dead in the Water* is highly recommended.

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Slow Anthropology: Negotiating Difference with the Iu Mien

HJORLEIFUR JONSSON

Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014.

Slow Anthropology presents chapters with ethnographic and historic data about the Iu Mien, originally from the uplands of Laos, who after being caught up in the disruptions of the American–Vietnam war, now live in three different countries (Laos, Northern Thailand, and California). The author argues for an approach to understanding the upland-dwelling communities of Southeast Asia, such as the Iu Mien, from a perspective that focuses on their myriad relationships with other peoples, or what the author calls “intersections” and negotiations of identities. Jonsson wants to call attention to how peoples situate themselves through contracts with others, and reconstruct culture along various social and cognitive causal chains. For him, culture is what happens among people across difference and not what distinguishes one group from another. This approach allows for a representation of upland peoples as politically active and historically situated agents negotiating their own identities and futures.

The thrust of the argument and ethnographic presentation is based on an opening critique of James C. Scott’s book, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. There, Scott argued that the upland peoples of the Southeast Asian Mainland Massif, or Zomia (a name he takes from Schendal), lived in societies and reproduced cultures that developed through state evasion. As the modern nation-state has absorbed territories that were once the homes of state-evading, upland-dwelling peoples, these strategies of evasion have come to an end, heralding the demise of the societies and cultures of the peoples who practiced them.

Jonsson’s critique points out that Scott’s approach lumps the social and cultural diversity of the Mainland Massif together under the name Zomia to enable him to develop an ideological argument that is built on the notion that states are by their very nature oppressive institutions, and sedentism entails subjugation and control. For Scott, human freedom is dependent on mobility and strategies of evasion. But according to Jonsson, Scott’s model takes away the peoples’ ability to engage the state through negotiation. He further stresses that the examples Scott gives of upland people evading the state are atypical and are of situations when political relations had bro-