

COP21, the Mekong basin & beyond: Linking Struggles for Justice

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The dams built on the Mekong mainstream and other rivers in the region have resulted in severe changes in the Mekong's ecosystems, endangering life, livelihoods and the economy of the entire region. Indigenous peoples, women and children are most affected by these changes. The dams have also worsened the impacts of climate change that we are already facing [1].

On November 26, a statement signed by more than 8000 people from local communities living in the Mekong basin and supported by 77 organisations was sent to the governments of Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The statement expresses alarm at the continuing construction of dams in the Mekong basin and asks the region's governments to assess the full costs of these dams on peoples' lives, livelihoods, environments and the climate. Seventeen dams are currently in planning and/or construction directly on the Mekong mainstream in China, Lao PDR, Thailand and Cambodia, with several more in river systems that flow into and enrich the Mekong River.

Over 60 million people living in the Mekong basin depend on the Mekong river system's waters, fisheries, soils, lands and forests. The disastrous impacts of the Mekong dams on their lives and valuable eco-systems have been raised repeatedly by affected communities and researchers. But governments and the immensely profitable dam industry remain undeterred. Hydropower is projected as "clean energy" despite growing evidence that dam reservoirs are large emitters of methane, and that dam construction materials (e.g., cement) and ancillary infrastructure have massive climate footprints, including destroying forests and wetlands that are valuable carbon sinks. Peoples and communities mobilizing against the Mekong dams—and other dams—are fighting for their own survival but also for our futures.

Climate justice cannot be separated from other forms of justice. While the climate crisis is global, people experience its impacts differently, depending on their economic, social and political circumstances, gender, race and geographic location. For thousands of rural and coastal communities, survival entails daily battles to protect their lands, forests, rivers, coasts, plants, animals and fish from predatory capital and marketeers who give little thought to the climate footprint and consequences of exploiting nature.

The most important and critical battles for climate justice are being led by local communities who are fighting to stop mining, oil and gas drilling, large dams, fracking, land and water grabbing, deforestation, luxury property development, etc. Many of them are frontline communities in every way: they face the brunt of extreme weather events and the risks of climate unpredictability, and are also most negatively impacted by fossil fuel driven development responsible for anthropogenic climate change. The fights of frontline communities for their rights must also become our fights to build a just, equitable and peaceful way of life that respects nature.

Across Asia, rural and urban communities have long been struggling against a development paradigm that is extractive, polluting, destructive and unjust, that breeds poverty and inequality, displaces peoples and fractures societies. While Asian governments rightfully demand greater emission cuts from developed countries on the basis of historical responsibility and the right to

development, the economic growth obsessed development model they promote back home serves largely elite and corporate interests. National development policies tend to favour corporate/state investments in dirty energy, extractive industry, agribusiness, industrial agriculture, real estate and infrastructure, not smaller scale, sustainable and healthy local economies, food systems and renewable energy. Development does not exist as a right for majority of Asia's factory, plantation and mine workers, or for those who are poor and marginalized. Nor do public policies recognize and valorize the crucial contributions of peasant, artisanal food producers and indigenous peoples in cooling the planet, nurturing biodiversity and feeding communities.

Resistance to hydropower projects, industrial agriculture and aquaculture, mining and logging are at the same time struggles for social-economic justice as well as climate justice. The historic victory of the Dongria Kondh peoples in Odisha, India against attempts by Vedanta Resources to mine bauxite in the Niyamgiri hills was a victory for self-determination, and social, economic, political and climate justice. Forest based farming communities in Southern Thailand are fighting the palm oil industry to both, reclaim their common lands for reforestation, as well as slow down climate change. Local communities, indigenous peoples and civil society organisations in the Philippines have organized to oppose the 1995 Philippines Mining Act and halt mining operations across the country. Coastal communities displaced by natural disasters in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the Philippines are fighting for their rights to return to their traditional lands as well as stop destructive property development that will further endanger coastlines. Forest communities reject the various manifestations of REDD because they see clearly how it enables the commodification and financialization of nature.

The COP 21 in Paris is a crucial moment in global climate talks. In order to save ourselves from the chaos and catastrophes of the deepening climate crisis, we urgently need deep emission cuts, significant reduction in fossil fuel extraction and military expenditures, increased public financing for adaptation, mitigation, loss and damage, and a complete shift towards a non capitalist, non extractive society. It is unlikely, however, that our governments will come anywhere close to a deal intended to deliver climate justice. Instead, we can expect more lucrative public-private partnerships that enable corporations and so called climate "experts" to profit from the climate crisis by rolling out even more dangerous and misleading false solutions that include offsets, techno-fixes and financialisation.

As the COP 21 buzz intensifies, it is important to not lose sight of the most powerful forces for positive change: social movements, and alliances of frontline and other local communities who are learning and sharing knowledge about living within nature's boundaries, defending their rights to live, and building climate justice rooted in their grounds and waters. Paris is a clarion call for us to look, organize and act beyond the COPs, and join frontline communities in collectively building actions and solutions that our governments are not prepared to deliver.

Shalmali Guttal, Focus on the Global South, November 29 2015

Footnotes

- [1] See on ESSF (article 36694) [Mekong governments: Listen to the people! – Statement by local people on dams in the Mekong Region](#).