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*The NGO Forum on Cambodia*

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# Improving Research on Hydropower Development in the Lower Mekong Basin: Key Issues, Concerns and Recommendations

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**Mekong-Splash Workshop**

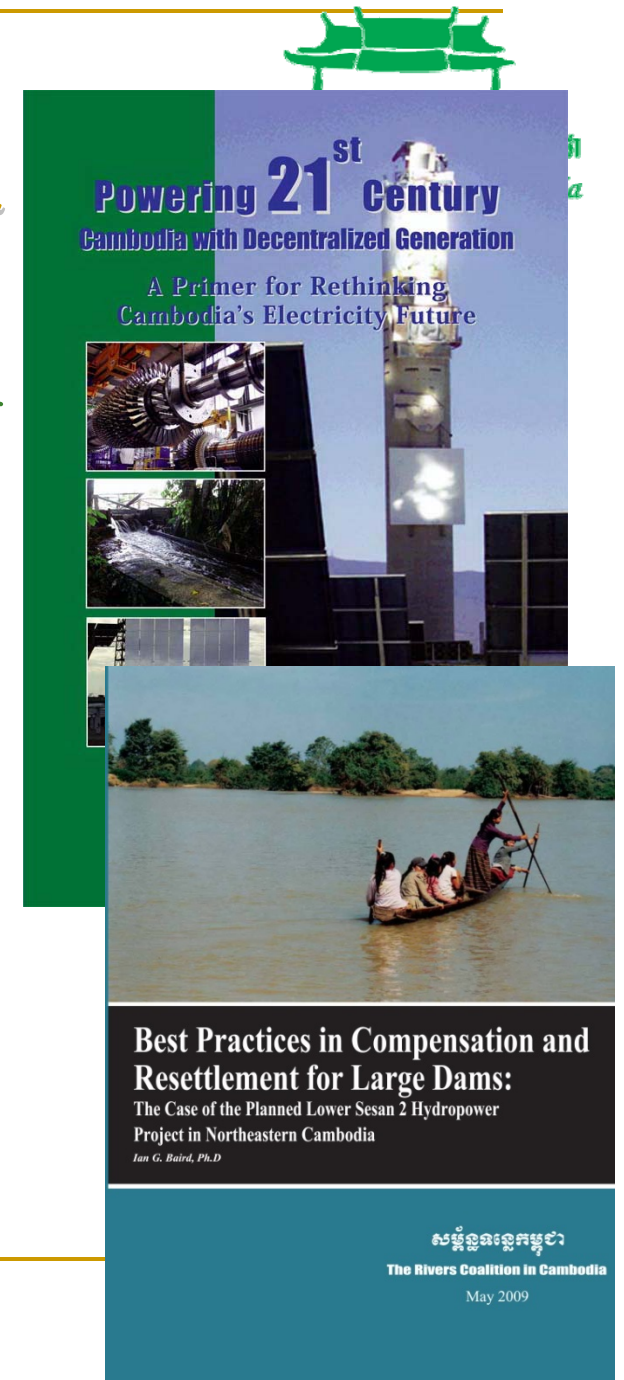
**14-15 September 2010**

Chhith Sam Ath, Executive Director

The NGO Forum on Cambodia

# NGO Involvement in Hydropower Issues in Cambodia

- Promoting Dialogue Among Stakeholders
- Raising Awareness on the Risks and Benefits of Hydropower (esp. from a rights perspective)
- Conducting and/or Commissioning Research
  - Community Based Research
  - Professional Research
  - Investigative Research
- Capacity building of civil society to voice concerns
- Advocating for international best practice standards in energy planning



# The Rivers Coalition in Cambodia (RCC)



- The RCC is made up of local, national and international NGOs concerned about hydropower development in Cambodia. NGOForum plays voluntary role as coordinator for the coalition.
- RCC envisions *that existing and future hydropower dam projects respect the rights of the affected people and ensures the sustainability of the environment and livelihoods.*
- The RCC's work entails:
  - campaigning to improve hydropower projects;
  - network building;
  - education and public awareness;
  - capacity-building for all stakeholders;
  - improving Cambodia's energy planning and processes

# Problems Observed by NGOs



## ■ 1) Difficulty in Accessing and Using Information

- Hard to access private sector and government
- A lot of the MRC's information is still inaccessible to public (for example: information on China's hydropower operation, 3S rivers water level data)
- Reports are often only in English language
- Too many technical words (often undefined, for example: IWRM in written all over MRC's Basin Development Plan, but no definition of concept is provided)
- Cambodia and other Mekong countries are still data poor countries- in need of more research

# Problems Observed by NGOs (cont.)



## ■ 2) Limited and/or No Public Scrutiny in Research Process

- Academics often extract knowledge from communities but then do not fairly acknowledge their knowledge, explain the research's objectives or share the findings with them
  - Research that has public participation is often not meaningful
    - ❑ Inadequate time is given to review documents
    - ❑ Reports are not available in local languages
    - ❑ Unclear how information from consultations is incorporated into reports
    - ❑ Many stakeholders are not consulted, especially communities
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# Problems Observed by NGOs (cont.)



## ■ 3) Research Serving Development Purposes

- Some Research Lacks Neutrality and Objectivity
    - For example: Research on “Sustainable Hydropower” in the Lower Mekong Basin. This is a contested term as there are no historical examples of sustainable hydropower in Mekong basin
  - Who is Commissioning Research and Why?
    - Just as EIAs are funded by project developers, whose explicit interest is to develop a project, many academics and consultants want future work and thus may not be completely neutral or objective
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# Problems Observed by NGOs (cont.)



## ■ 4) Research is Limited in Scope

- A great deal of information exists about specific impacts of hydropower in the Mekong, but **research on alternative energy options and other uses for the river is lacking**
  - Community Based Research is not seen as “**scientific**” and thus neglected
  - Great knowledge gaps continue to exist (such as the importance of the river’s sediment flows, climate change impacts, etc.)
  - Research often **over-emphasizes quantitative assessments** (i.e income from fisheries) rather than **qualitative research on environment and development** (ie wider importance of fisheries trade)
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# Problems Observed by NGOs (cont.)



## ■ 5) Research Is Not Influencing Policy

- Research is not always **reaching top policy makers**, thus decision makers are not always able to make “informed” decisions on dams (for example: MRC’s Strategic Environment Assessment is not yet public or in local languages)
  - It’s unclear how research projects will be **incorporated into decision-making**.
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# Recommendations



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- 1) Open up **research project designs to public scrutiny to improve its objectivity and scope** and seek to reach common understanding;
- 2) **Include a range of stakeholders in the research process**, various types of stakeholders will increase research buy-in and improve local capacities to conduct research;
- 3) **Improve information sharing and flows** among all stakeholders. Project plans and documents should be accessible to the public, as this will help improve quality of research;
- 4) **Respect the added value of Community Based Research**, especially in its ability to interpret microcosms and reflect local realities;

## Recommendations (cont.)

- 5) **Improve information dissemination**
  - ❑ Information should be translated into local languages
  - ❑ Information should be synthesized
  - ❑ Technical documents should be made in understandable formats, consider popular education materials
  - ❑ All research findings should be reported back to communities and stakeholders
- 6) More research is needed in the Mekong region before informed development decisions can be made, terms of understanding the importance of livelihoods and fisheries; alternative energy options; and qualitative representations of the environment and development

# Recommendations (cont.)



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- 7) The MRC should play a key role in ensuring policy-makers and the public fully understand benefits, risks and information gaps before decisions regarding development projects are made. Forums and information-sharing workshops should be held at the local, national, and regional levels to improve awareness and understanding.



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**Thank you for your attention**

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