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Aaron B. Eisenberg

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Merging Subsistence Perspective and *Buen Vivir*: An Alternative to  
Damming the Mekong

by

Aaron Eisenberg

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2018

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal  
Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

Merging Subsistence Perspective and *Buen Vivir*: An Alternative to  
Damming the Mekong

by

Aaron Eisenberg

Advisor: Michael Menser

This paper will examine the planned development on the Mekong by looking at the historical, political, and economic reasons why largescale hydroelectric dams are now being pushed upon the river. It will then critique the international state sovereignty system focusing directly on the Mekong River Commission and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) for their inability to mitigate environmental impact while pursuing development. I analyze how the “global city” discourse cannot rationally be applied to Southeast Asia and how the urban-rural divide in Southeast Asia creates only greater problems as dam production on the Mekong accelerates. I propose an alternative vision for the future on the Mekong that recalibrates development into an ecologically sustainable and attainable form by using historical context from James C. Scott in conversation with the theoretical visions championed by Maria Mies on subsistence and the conception of *Buen Vivir*. I will then use the theories on social change from George Katsiaficas and Felix Guattari with examples of resistance in the region to showcase how this can be attained.

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## **Introduction**

Rivers are the veins of the earth. From their source, they trickle into streams and then flow onwards to link the world, connecting the rural to the urban and farms to industry easing the challenges of land transport. Civilization began in their basins as rivers provided the silt and sediments needed for agricultural production. Rivers create borders by naturally delineating and outlining territories, which makes control of a river's flow a political act. Along with sea coasts, rivers are where commerce, cultures and communities interact to exchange ideas, values, and beliefs. Since the first agricultural settlements on riverbanks, all states have tried to harness and use rivers to their advantage. By controlling them, states can increase trade, irrigate their lands and augment their agricultural production. Today, many states are trying to control rivers for their hydroelectric capabilities. This is one of the leading challenges to our collective future, as these hydroelectric power plants and dams break down ecosystems and create new conflicts. In Asia, we can see these transformations occurring in real time.

The majority of the great rivers in the world are located in Asia. All of Asia's great rivers, whether the Ganges and Indus in South Asia, or the Yangtze and Yellow in East Asia, begin in the mountains of Tibet. It makes sense then that the great river of Southeast Asia would also begin in the Tibetan highlands. Unlike the Yellow, Indus and Ganges which are so overused and overtapped that they no longer flow out to sea for months on end, the Mekong, the lifeblood of Southeast Asia, still flows continuously over three thousand miles across seven different countries before making it to sea off the coast of Southern Vietnam. Unfortunately, the lessons of the Yellow, Indus and Ganges have not been learned as the allure of controlling the river's flow is too strong and the Mekong currently has the highest planned rate of hydropower growth of any river in the world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Requiem for a River," *The Economist (US)*, February 13, 2016.



**Figure 1. Map of Mekong River**

This paper will examine the planned development on the Mekong by looking at the historical, political, and economic reasons why largescale hydroelectric dams are now being pushed upon the river. It will then critique the international state sovereignty system focusing directly on the Mekong River Commission and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) for their inability to mitigate environmental impact while pursuing development. From there, in the section entitled Urban-Rural Divide, I analyze how the “global city” discourse cannot rationally be applied to Southeast Asia and how the urban-rural divide in Southeast Asia creates only greater problems as dam production on the Mekong accelerates. Then, in the section entitled

Alternative Futures, I will propose an alternative vision for the future on the Mekong that recalibrates development into an ecologically sustainable and attainable form by using historical context from James C. Scott in conversation with the theoretical visions championed by Maria Mies on subsistence and the conception of *Buen Vivir*. I will then use the theories on social change from George Katsiaficas and Felix Guattari with examples of resistance in the region to showcase how this can be attained. To understand why this is necessary though, we must examine and understand why the Mekong is so important.

### **The Mekong in History**

Along its path, the Mekong's name changes from the Dzachu for Tibetans, the Lancang Jiang for the Chinese, the Mae Nam Khong for the Thai and the Laotians, the Tonle Thom, Tonle Sap and Tonle Thuc for the Khmer in Cambodia, and the Cuu Long for the Vietnamese.<sup>2</sup> Despite the various names and so many different cultures through which the Mekong flows, each of these disparate peoples share a critical value—the Mekong is their lifeblood. It is the basis of their livelihood. In fact, the Mekong is the largest river in the world which serves as the primary source of nutrition for a vast number of people.<sup>3</sup> The fisheries on the Mekong alone provide livelihoods to 60 million people. As the lead source of water and food, the Mekong is relied upon by more than 300 million people from over 100 different ethnic groups.<sup>4</sup> While it touches seven countries, it is primarily in the Lower Mekong Basin areas of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam that the Mekong has its largest influence.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward A. Gargan, *The Rivers Tale: A Year on the Mekong* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent H. Resh, "Multinational, Freshwater Biomonitoring Programs in the Developing World: Lessons Learned from African and Southeast Asian River Surveys," *Environmental Management* 39, no. 5 (2007): doi:10.1007/s00267-006-0151-8.

<sup>4</sup> "Conserving the Mighty Mekong River," WWF International, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://wwf.panda.org/?200000/Conserving-the-Mighty-Mekong-River>.

Until the seventeenth century, the Mekong Delta and specifically the Lower Mekong Basin were a region of swamps, forests and grasslands with the placid large river flowing through it. Aside from the Kingdom of Angkor based near the Tonle Sap Lake, the Mekong had not been viewed as a seat of empire. This allowed the river to form and flow naturally for millennia to develop into its current form. After Angkor, the Lower Basin was part of the Khmer Empire. It wasn't until Vietnamese settlers asserted sovereignty in 1802 that any effort to transform the natural land began on the lower Mekong.<sup>5</sup> James C. Scott notes the irregularity of this by saying how “striking” it was that the Mekong was not settled in force and planted with rice until the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> This allowed for the Mekong's biodiversity to grow and flourish.

Not having major cities or empires settle along the Mekong allowed for generations of small-scale subsistence agriculturalists and fisher peoples to live in harmony with the pristine river as their life support. In their profile of rural residents of Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia, Clara Mi Young Park and Margherita Maffii demonstrate that the people of Ratanakiri have Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) of practicing agriculture along tributaries of the Mekong River dating back centuries. In the literature on the “environmentalism of the poor,” these rural residents along the Mekong would be called “ecosystem people.” They are reliant on living within their local region with customs based on TEK and processes that date back “as far as the memory can go back in time.”<sup>7</sup> In a region like the Mekong, at minimum this surely means that they go back further than the settling of the Mekong in the early twentieth century.

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Gorman, "Moral Economy and the Upper Peasant: The Dynamics of Land Privatization in the Mekong Delta," *Journal of Agrarian Change*, October 21, 2013, doi:10.1111/joac.12047.

<sup>6</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 51.

<sup>7</sup> Clara Mi Young Park and Margherita Maffii, "'We Are Not Afraid to Die': Gender Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 6 (October 24, 2017), doi:10.1080/03066150.2017.1384725.

After the Amazon, the Mekong is the second most biodiverse river in the world. It is also the most biodiverse per capita of all rivers.<sup>8</sup> However, the full extent of the Mekong's biodiversity remains relatively unknown and understudied. This leads to continuous new discoveries along the Mekong. In 2009 alone, 145 new species were discovered including 29 new fish species and 96 plant species.<sup>9</sup> Currently, there are three times as many known species in the Mekong as the Mississippi River, yet, there have been 10,000 times as many scholarly articles published on the fauna of the Mississippi than on the Mekong.<sup>10</sup> The interactions between species, and the continued potential for new discoveries should make the Mekong a hotbed for scientific innovation and perhaps a protected region. As climate change endangers such a large percentage of our planet's biodiversity, the ability to discover new species becomes increasingly rare. Areas like the Mekong with its biodiversity should become more valuable. However, this does not equate to reality in the modern world as there is no economic value attached to future generational stability within the short term profit motive of a global capitalist system. Unfortunately, geopolitical and socioeconomic concerns make this a dream unrecognized as the quest for economic development has overtaken conservation concerns causing study of the biodiversity of the Mekong to be an afterthought in opposition to continued growth.

## **ASEAN and Growth**

The Mekong River is the seventh largest river in Asia and twelfth largest in the world. The largest city directly on the Mekong is Phnom Penh with 1.5 million inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> There were no

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<sup>8</sup>G. Ziv et al., "Trading-off Fish Biodiversity, Food Security, and Hydropower in the Mekong River Basin," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 15 (2012): , doi:10.1073/pnas.1201423109.

<sup>9</sup>Nancy Gephart et al., *New Blood Greater Mekong New Species Discoveries 2009* (WWF, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams* (London: Zed Books, 2001), 48.

<sup>11</sup> Ho Chi Minh City is located nearby on the Saigon River but is located outside the Mekong Delta, it is located in the Lower Mekong Basin though.

bridges on the lower Mekong until 1994. By not having major cities or industry on it for so long, the Mekong was able to outlast many of the other major rivers of the world in remaining pristine and maintaining a dynamic and vibrant ecosystem.<sup>12</sup> The river's basin, or the Lower Mekong including portions of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, is home to roughly 70 million people. Of the seven countries that the Mekong flows through, five are in ASEAN.

ASEAN was created on August 8, 1967, as Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, Singapore and Thailand formed a social and political union. At the time of formation, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were engulfed in the Vietnam War and the countries of the newly formed ASEAN saw this union as their way of protecting themselves. Today, ASEAN has expanded to ten member countries — Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. No longer is this political union seen foremost for stability, it is now viewed as a driver of economic growth and a path to uplifting the Southeast Asian nations on the global stage.

The 1970 global population was 3.7 billion people and the 1970 population of Southeast Asia was 285 million people. Today the world has 7.4 billion people of which ASEAN has approximately 625 million people. Last year ASEAN turned fifty. In analyzing ASEAN's success, the desire for economic growth above all else has made the effects of climate change underreported as researchers, journalists and leaders alike have chosen to only focus on how ASEAN functions as a business place.<sup>13</sup> This is largely to due to the fact that the countries of ASEAN remain relatively poorer geopolitically. To the world, ASEAN as an economic union presents an opportunity to promote the potential successes of globalization and sustainable development. To

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<sup>12</sup> Gargen, 147.

<sup>13</sup> Lorraine Elliott, "ASEAN and Environmental Governance: Strategies of Regionalism in Southeast Asia," *Global Environmental Politics* 12, no. 3 (2012), doi:10.1162/glep\_a\_00122.

ASEAN elites who have long felt overlooked on the international stage, this has been a welcome proposition as they have grown wealthy and begun to be included in the conversation amongst global elites.

The elites and new consumer class in ASEAN are mainly an urban elite. They can take advantage of their position in the global marketplace due to low wages and highly specialized workforces in their countries. Vietnam for example is the country where wealth grew the fastest worldwide over the last ten years with 210% growth.<sup>14</sup> In Cambodia and Laos we can see the same thing.<sup>15</sup> Yet as wealth is generated and GDP grows, the wealth largely remains trapped at the upper echelons of society. For the largely educated and largely male urban consumer class, this growth has been rapid. It affords them opportunities to rise from the middle class to the upper class of society. The formerly wealthy now occupy a new strata in society. These super high net worth individuals now exercise extreme influence in government and culture as they are the ones who have the capital to support or derail new projects, politicians and ventures. For them, having a united ASEAN provides them with a larger market to grow their wealth. On November 22, 2015 their hopes were fulfilled as the ten ASEAN countries formally became a global business hub.

Overnight, the 622 million ASEAN citizens became the third-largest labor force in the world (after China and India) as ASEAN became a single linked economic community.<sup>17</sup>

Economists around the world reached consensus in seeing ASEAN as the pivotal world market for

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<sup>14</sup> Sally French, "Wealth in This Asian Country Grew by 210% in the Last 10 Years -- and It's Not China," *Marketwatch* January 29, 2018, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/wealth-in-this-asian-country-grew-by-210-in-the-last-10-years----and-its-not-china-2018-01-29>.

<sup>15</sup> Essarayos Mean, "Inequality a Defining Challenge for the World, and for Cambodia," *VOA Khmer* September 24, 2015, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/inequality-a-defining-challenge-for-th-world-and-for-cambodia/2976794.html>.

<sup>16</sup> "Growth Cuts Absolute Poverty, but Inequality Rising in Lao PDR – ADB Study," Asian Development Bank, February 06, 2018, <https://www.adb.org/news/growth-cuts-absolute-poverty-inequality-rising-lao-pdr-adb-study>.

<sup>17</sup> "ASEAN Economic Community," ASEAN | One Vision, One Identity, One Community, <http://asean.org/asean-economic-community/>.

the next decades. Within ASEAN, it is the countries along the Mekong that have the highest growth potential. Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar all had average GDP growth above six percent per year over the last ten years and are in the top twenty worldwide each year.<sup>18</sup> Measured solely on economic growth, the ASEAN is a glowing success. For the rising urban class that makes up the new consumer core within these countries, this is also welcome news as their riches grow and they enter the global middle and upper class.

What these economists and prognosticators fail to consider in talking about the rise of the ASEAN's economies is the environmental degradation attached to this growth.<sup>19</sup> For example, a 2013 analysis by the International Energy Agency predicted that if Southeast Asia maintained its current growth rate, mainland Southeast Asia alone would demand an increase in electricity of 80% over the next twenty years.<sup>20</sup> This would perhaps be possible if energy demands in the exact same region had not expanded by 250% over the previous twenty years.<sup>21</sup> By being the hot commodity on the world stage, these countries are poised to meet economic targets that will enrich their urban elites and develop and modernize their urban cores. With these projections though, the impetus becomes clear—economic growth is the main priority as Southeast Asia develops, all else, including social and environmental impacts, will take a backseat.

Unfortunately, this framework of growth above all else is the exact one that has created the global climate crisis. Since the industrial revolution began, 2,000 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub> have been emitted into the atmosphere, as the world has transitioned to an industrial globalized economy. To

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<sup>18</sup> "GDP Growth (annual %)," World Bank Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>.

<sup>19</sup> Venkatachalam Anbumozhi and Ponciano S. Intal, Jr., *Can Thinking Green and Sustainability Be an Economic Opportunity for ASEAN?* report, ERIA Discussion Paper Series (ERIA, 2015), <http://www.eria.org/publications/can-thinking-green-and-sustainability-be-an-economic-opportunity-for-asean/>.

<sup>20</sup> *World Energy Outlook Special Report 2013: Southeast Asia Energy Outlook*, publication (International Energy Association, 2013), <https://www.iea.org/publications/freepublications/publication/weo-2013-special-report-southeast-asia-energy-outlook.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

keep with the Paris Climate Agreement targets, and only warm the planet by two degrees Celsius total, the world has until 2040 at which point its current trajectory would emit another 1,000 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>22</sup> This would be calamitous, and unfortunately nothing within the current framework will stop it. Capitalism's grow or die mantra seeks continued expansion beyond tangible limitations in a world where all reputable science says that carbon emissions must be limited, cut, and capped. In Southeast Asia, this is clearly seen by placing the demand for increased economic and electrical output above all else in society. While Southeast Asians collectively did little to create this climate crisis, the model of development that they are following today is directly responsible for it. By using the same model, the problems associated to anthropogenic climate change will only grow as negative effects become further exacerbated. If all countries followed this development model, the timeline for countering climate change will only continue to shrink. As Elizabeth Kolbert documents in *The Sixth Extinction*, due to industrial capital, humans have ushered in the age of the Anthropocene—or the sixth mass extinction of biodiversity from the world. In the next fifty years, the earth will see a loss of biodiversity at unprecedented rates including the depletion of entire fish populations. The deleterious effects of fossil-fueled capitalism has plunged the entire planet into crisis. By not countering the growth model, problems only compound.

This will be particularly disastrous along the Mekong. Two-thirds of people in the Mekong River Basin continue to live in rural areas that are reliant solely on subsistence fishing for their diet.<sup>23</sup> As one of the most biodiverse places in the world, the negative effects will be augmented on the Mekong as species will go extinct quicker and the overall ecosystem will drastically change.

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<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction an Unnatural History* (New York: Picador, Henry Holt and Company, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> *State of the Basin Report 2010* (Vientiane: Mekong River Commission, 2010).

People who live off of the river for subsistence are not the people responsible for climate change yet climate change directly effects them first. Climate change makes the likelihood of flooding, drought, and heat stroke more drastic. These are unnatural changes that leave people like the indigenous ecosystem people in Ratanikiri, at the greatest risk.

Throughout ASEAN we can see this environmental risk firsthand. According to the 2018 Global Climate Risk Index “survey of the last twenty years,” ASEAN countries comprise four of the top nine most vulnerable countries to climate change in the world.<sup>24</sup> Three of these countries, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, are located directly on the Mekong. Typhoons, droughts and floods are becoming yearly occurrences without any chances of slowing down in Southeast Asia. Despite this, at the top levels of society and government, the effects of climate change do not register as something entangled within the growth paradigm. Elites and the governments of these countries can speak of crisis, however, they are speaking of environmental problems as crisis specifically through the lens of lost profit and material wealth. As they continue to argue over measures, natural disasters only become more frequent as the growth model continues its assault on the earth. These are real problems that put the livelihood of real people in flux as the Mekong is viewed as an opportunity for further development.

Instead of seeing the Mekong’s relatively untouched waters as an opportunity for global preservation and resilience, the Mekong is seen as an engine of economic development. These countries see the Mekong solely for its hydroelectric potential. This could be partly attributed to the countries on the Mekong not taking part in the globalized market economy until later than many of the western countries and feeling the desire to grow and join the global marketplace as quickly as possible.

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<sup>24</sup> David Eckstein, Vera Künzel, and Laura Schäfer, *Global Climate Risk Index 2018*, report (Bonn: GermanWatch, 2017), , <https://germanwatch.org/en/download/20432.pdf>.

## How Damming Came to the Mekong

In 1979, China enacted its market reforms. Vietnam and Laos followed by entering the global market economy in the mid-1980s and Cambodia in the mid-1990s. During the mid and late 1990s, all the countries on the Mekong realized they had an exploitable natural resource on their hands with the untouched river. Once damming became the du jour development model of the World Bank, IMF, and USAID, the Mekong Countries rushed to take part in the development race, seeing the river as their untapped resource. The international development agencies liked damming because not only did it create jobs and open new industrial avenues, but hydroelectric energy was seen as a sustainable alternative to fossil fuels. With dams, aid organizations could showcase largescale development projects while tying them to economic reforms opening up domestic markets to international finance. Whereas before dam projects, subsistence agriculture may have reigned supreme, after damming, largescale private agricultural industries could now dominate the new market. Domestically dating back to Roosevelt with the Hoover Dam, and Nehru with the Bhakra-Nangal, dams have signified “greatness, power, and domination” as they are icons of economic and scientific progress.<sup>25</sup> Historically dams and dam building are prideful nationalistic activities that project advanced development by showcasing the might of a country’s scientific proclivities.

China became the first country to move full steam ahead with dam building projects in the latter half of the twentieth century. They opened the first dam on the Mekong in 1986 at Manwan, but it was on another of China’s major rivers, the Yangtze, that they chose to target their largest damming operations.<sup>26</sup> The Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River was initially approved in 1992 and wasn’t opened until 2003. The dam is the largest in the world and cost a total of \$24

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<sup>25</sup> McCully, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Gargen, 95.

billion to construct. By 2008, even the Chinese Government was ready to acknowledge the negative environmental implications of the gargantuan dam. In the first five years of its opening, it was largely connected to landslides and radically altered the ecosystems surrounding it. Additionally, over a million people were displaced simply to build the dam. These people had to leave their homes and communities behind to relocate.<sup>27</sup> The negative effects of the Three Gorges Dam should have served as a wake-up call for all who promoted dams as a sustainable development option.

Unfortunately, in the period when China was building the Three Gorges dam there weren't many dissenting voices making this claim aside from Patrick McCully. In his book *Silenced Rivers*, McCully argues against the idea of dams as a positive form of development. He argued that:

“The damming of the world has brought a profound change to watersheds, nothing alters a river as totally as a dam. A reservoir is the antithesis of a river—the essence of a river is that it flows, the essence of a reservoir is that it is still. A wild river is dynamic, forever changing—eroding its bed, depositing silt, seeking a new course, bursting its banks, drying up. A dam is monumentally static; it tries to bring a river under control, to regulate its seasonal pattern of floods and low flows. A dam traps sediments and nutrients, alters the river's temperature and chemistry, and upsets the geological processes of erosion and deposition through which the river sculpts the surrounding land.”<sup>28</sup>

What McCully argues is that any damming will have effects far beyond the energy production created or the specific location the dam is placed. McCully takes a full scale view at the problem and notes that for an ecosystem as large and varied as the Mekong River or Yangtze, it is

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<sup>27</sup> Mara Hvistendahl, "China's Three Gorges Dam: An Environmental Catastrophe?" *Scientific American*, March 25, 2008, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/chinas-three-gorges-dam-disaster/>.

<sup>28</sup> McCully, 10.

imperative to view the river as a whole rather than segmenting it. With a resource as large and powerful as the Mekong, if there is going to be any form of development along it, there needs to be a set of agreements to monitor and oversee the impact this development has on the river and its vast ecosystem.

In writing about managing large and disparate populations Veronica Ward explains, “To manage an ecosystem, or utilize ecosystem principles, however, as with a sovereign state, boundaries must be known; managers and policymakers must be able to identify and agree upon the entity to be conserved.”<sup>29</sup> While the Mekong can delineate boundaries of nation states, in order to manage the Mekong, and especially its development, Ward’s framework thinks the best way is through the state sovereignty system. In her research, Ward uses examples such as Antarctica to prove that nations can come together to conserve ecosystems. As Ward notes, “it was the specific configuration of interests in the Antarctic, along with the acknowledgement of potentially negative environmental and economic consequences, which resulted in the establishment of this ecosystem management regime.”<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, in the rush to develop Southeast Asia and specifically the Mekong, no ecosystem management regime was set in place. In Southeast Asia, there were only eager regimes that viewed the Mekong solely for its economic development. Through this perspective, the negative environmental consequences were far outweighed by the supposed economic gains, and thus damming commenced.

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<sup>29</sup> Veronica Ward, *The Greening of Sovereignty in World Politics*, ed. Karen Litfin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 84.

<sup>30</sup> Ward, 98.

## Failures of the Mekong River Commission

The Mekong River Commission (MRC), the board created to oversee the development on the Mekong, further illustrates the inadequacies of the state sovereignty system of ecosystem management. The MRC governs the allocation and utilization of the Mekong River by the four countries in the Mekong River Basin—Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. The MRC was founded through the 1995 Treaty on Cooperation for Sustainable Development in the Mekong River Basin. The output of the development race in the mid-1990s created the MRC as an independent international body separate from ASEAN. Although the Mekong also flows through China and Myanmar, the two countries that make up the Upper Mekong Basin,<sup>31</sup> the MRC only includes the four lower Mekong countries, yet includes Myanmar and China as official dialogue partners. The MRC was created with the specific intention of governing and allocating sustainable development along the Mekong.

In 2003, the MRC adopted a notice stating that “if a country is to build hydropower dams on a Mekong tributary, it must notify the Joint Committee of the MRC.” In addition to notifying the MRC, Article 7 of the initial MRC agreement says, “When one or more states is notified with proper and valid evidence that it is causing substantial damage to one or more riparian from the use of and/or discharge to water of the Mekong River, that State or States shall cease immediately the alleged cause of harm.”<sup>32</sup> Despite this feedback mechanism, the problem with Article 7 is that its threshold remains completely arbitrary. As Simon Benedikter says, “The sheer size of the Delta, its complexity, ecological dynamics, and growing human interference have made it almost

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<sup>31</sup> Tibet is represented by China in this form.

<sup>32</sup> Mekong River Commission, *Mekong River Commission for Sustainable Development* (Phnom Penh: MRC), Article 7.

impossible to predict how nature will respond to any modification of the landscape.”<sup>33</sup> This means that the Lower Mekong Delta in Vietnam would surely be negatively impacted by any dams built higher up on the Mekong in Laos, Cambodia, or China, however the actual direct level of impact can never be quantified. Since it remains arbitrary, countries are free to essentially ignore the ruling. Additionally, Article 7 falls woefully short of a much needed veto clause which would allow other member countries to vote against a potentially harmful development. By maintaining a malleable threshold, the limits will be challenged and thus the legitimacy of an international body like the MRC remains under stress. This was seen in 2013, when Laos’ Director General for the Department of Energy Policy and Planning, Daovong Phonekeo, stated, “For the development of the Mekong River, we don’t need consensus.” With this, Phonekeo articulated the weakness of the entire MRC and state sovereignty system not being tied to specific binding agreements.

Agreeing with the point from Benedikter, McCully also argues that all dams and barrages change the flow of rivers. Since rivers span large distances, they are parts of a larger ecological system beyond the local environment where a dam may be placed. As an example, anything that occurs upstream on the Mekong in China, Myanmar or Laos will certainly have an effect on downstream fish migrations in Cambodia and Vietnam. If a river is cut off and turned into a reservoir this can disrupt sediment transfer, fertilization of agriculture on the riparian edges, and changes to the fish stocks. McCully would argue that by putting any barrage or dam up, the course of a river inherently begins an unnatural processes which must be seen as ‘substantial damage’ since it transforms the entire ecosystem. However, in the context of the MRC and sustainable development, the definition of substantial change is drastically different. Substantial change means limiting future profit or ability to dam in the future.

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<sup>33</sup> Simon Benedikter, "Extending the Hydraulic Paradigm: Reunification, State Consolidation, and Water Control in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta after 1975," *Southeast Asian Studies* 3, no. 4 (2013), doi:10.20495/seas.3.3\_547.

If utilized to its full potential, the MRC is supposed to be a safeguard for protection and sustainable development of the river within the region that contains the world's largest inland fishery. However, by having an additional political body apart from the ASEAN and the U.N.'s Mekong Committee, the MRC has failed to adequately manage the trans-boundary water issue. Additionally, institutional cooperation and partnership between ASEAN and the MRC has remained weak due to a lack of political will and resource mobilization from both institutions.<sup>34</sup> Even if there were cohesion and understanding between ASEAN and the MRC, there would still be the issue of balancing domestic concerns with international consensus. To demonstrate how this can go wrong, there is no better example than the 2010 meeting of the MRC.

### **The ICEM Report**

In 2009, the MRC commissioned ICEM (International Centre for Environmental Management) to produce a Strategic Environmental Assessment on the future of hydropower along the Mekong River. The ICEM report was researched over 2009 and 2010 and created for presentation at the 2010 meeting of the MRC. It sought to serve as a guiding principle for the future of development along the Mekong. The MRC commissioned the report because it viewed development of hydropower on the mainstream Mekong as one of the most important strategic issues facing the Lower Mekong Region. At the time of the report, the Mekong River was known internationally as one of the last large rivers on Earth not dammed for most of its length, as well as the only river which flowed uninhibited through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. With this, developers saw opportunity. The MRC wanted to make sure this was safe, so they contracted the Australian ICEM to do the major regional environmental impact report.

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<sup>34</sup> Chheang Vannarith, "Mekong River Governance and ASEAN Community Building," March 11, 2016, <https://humanrightsinasean.info/article/mekong-river-governance-and-asean-community-building.html>.

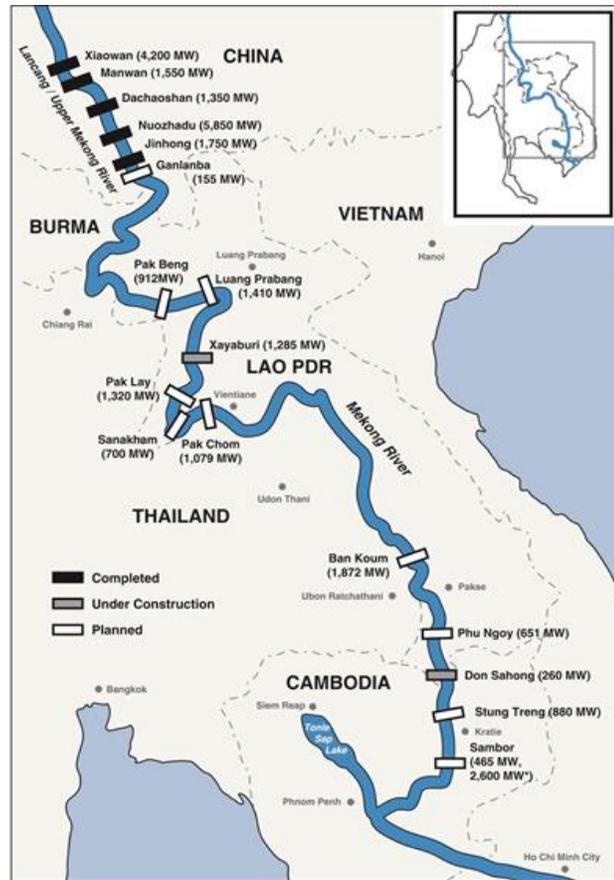


Figure 2. Map of the twelve proposed mainstream Mekong dams analyzed by ICEM<sup>35</sup>

ICEM’s final report analyzed the twelve submitted hydropower projects on the Lower Mekong Basin. Part of the structural problem with a supranational governing body such as the MRC, is that each member country must also contend with their own domestic plans. Sometimes domestic policies will directly conflict with their diplomatic or regional development efforts.<sup>36</sup> For example, at the time of the report, Laos, had embarked on a grand project to place dozens of its own hydroelectric dams along the Mekong in an effort to become the battery of Southeast Asia. The report stated that “without mainstream hydropower, Laos had sufficient hydropower potential

<sup>35</sup> ICEM, *MRC Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of Hydropower on the Mekong Mainstream: Summary of the Final Report*, report (Hanoi, Vietnam: MRC, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

on Mekong tributaries in the medium term, to continue generating healthy export earnings and encourage investment into its dynamic economy.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, ICEM’s findings showed that any further damming and especially mainstream damming of the Mekong in Laos would overextend and push the river beyond a sustainable use. The Laotian effort to become the battery of Southeast Asia is a modernization and development strategy which is predicated on short-term growth via dam building in which Laos would then export most of the hydroelectric energy to other countries. For a country where 85% of the population is employed in the agricultural sector, but only 6.6% of their land is arable, this provides Laos an economic development model that could provide wealth gains for its citizens.<sup>38</sup>

However, this reliance on growth would have catastrophic effects on livelihoods throughout the Mekong. The ICEM report went to great efforts to demonstrate this. If all twelve mainstream dams proposed were completed by 2030, as projected, the annual amount of protein lost due to the creation of these dams would represent 110% of the 2009 total of annual livestock produced in Cambodia and Laos combined. The Mekong River would be radically altered as 55% of the river would be converted into reservoirs. The subsistence agriculture and fishing techniques relied upon by so many would be absolutely devastated and the altered terrain would drastically transform the physical landscapes of these countries. Thirty million people live and work within fifteen kilometers of the Mekong in the Lower Basin. These people’s lives and their relationship to the river would be forever changed.<sup>39</sup> This would essentially be a contemporary land grab of the highest degree. As Borras et al. suggested, this proposed transformation of land should be seen “as capital’s response to the convergence of food, energy and financial crises, climate change

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "Arable Land (% of Land Area)," World Bank Data, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.ARBL.ZS>.

<sup>39</sup> ICEM, *MRC Strategic Environmental Assessment Report*

mitigation imperatives, and demands for resources from newer hubs of global capital.”<sup>40</sup> With this land grab, all the power would be sent to urban areas while leaving a large rural portion of these countries’ populations ever more precarious.

### **The Urban-Rural Divide**

Unfortunately, the population most harmed would be the most vulnerable in society, the ones with the least political voice—the rural population. Land grabs such as these upend those who make a living from the land (more than 52% of the world’s population), while simultaneously depleting resources as land grabs promote extractive industries.<sup>41</sup> The ICEM report went on to state, that the “benefits of hydropower would accrue to electricity consumers using national grids, developers, financiers, whereas most costs would be borne by poor and vulnerable riparian communities.”<sup>42</sup> The economic benefit coming from the sale and development of electricity would exacerbate problems for the livelihood of the 80% of Mekong basin residents reliant on the river. In Cambodia, where only 31% of society has electricity, and flood protection is minimal, this trade-off favoring the lives of urbanites, comes directly at the expense of, and greater exposure to risk for, the rural residents.<sup>43</sup>

While harming rural residents, the brunt of the burden is placed upon rural women. In Ratanakiri we can see this clearly. Young Park and Maffii argue that in the land grab in Cambodia, not only are women “losing the material and symbolic places of recognition that they had, but also their identities as farmers and agriculturalists, while being re-framed essentially as care providers

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<sup>40</sup> Saturnino M. Borras et al., "Land Grabbing in Latin America and the Caribbean," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 39, no. 3-4 (2012): , doi:10.1080/03066150.2012.679931, 851.

<sup>41</sup> Ian Scoones et al., "Emancipatory Rural Politics: Confronting Authoritarian Populism," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45, no. 1 (2017): , doi:10.1080/03066150.2017.1339693, 6.

<sup>42</sup> ICEM, *MRC Strategic Environmental Assessment Report*

<sup>43</sup> Borras et al, 851.

according to mainstream gender roles.”<sup>44</sup> These new roles not only take away their equal footing as farmers or agriculturalists within their indigenous societies, but also recast them as the most vulnerable group within mainstream society. In 2016 alone, one third of all Khmer television programs on the five national stations in Cambodia depicted some form of violence against women, whether physical, sexual, or emotional abuse.<sup>45</sup> The process of being integrated in the homogenized, mainstream society for these rural women upends millennia of traditions and customs that matrilineal and matrilocal ethnic groups like the Jarai and Tampouan have, while subverting and subjecting those same women to a global capitalist patriarchal system.<sup>46</sup>

These land grabs also highlight the nature of how the state sovereignty system creates competition and exploitation between countries in collaboration on other agreements. Thai, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Malaysian and Singaporean investors lead the efforts for damming along the Mekong.<sup>47</sup> Thailand started buying electricity from Laos in 1998 and sees their investments in the dams as surefire investments with low cost hydroelectric energy exported to them at a fixed cost as a guaranteed return.<sup>48</sup> China supports the investments in Southeast Asia as a way of gaining greater geopolitical influence.<sup>49</sup> By providing loans with fewer restrictions than the World Bank, they are able to gain favor with the Southeast Asian countries. Additionally, by being the most upstream on the Mekong, they strengthen their strategic positioning as they can

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<sup>44</sup> Young Park and Maffii 1236.

<sup>45</sup> Seila Sar, "Research Reveals Cambodian Television Rife with Depictions of Violence Against Women," *Asia Foundation* November 30, 2016, <https://asiafoundation.org/2016/11/30/research-reveals-cambodian-television-rife-depictions-violence-women/>.

<sup>46</sup> Young Park and Maffii 1240.

<sup>47</sup> Laura Schoenberger, Derek Hall, and Peter Vandergeest, "What Happened When the Land Grab Came to Southeast Asia?" *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 4 (2017), doi:10.1080/03066150.2017.1331433, 704.

<sup>48</sup> "Eppo Eyes Two Laos Power Plants," *Bangkok Post*, November 30, 2015, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/news/779993/eppo-eyes-two-laos-power-plants>.

<sup>49</sup> Frauke Urban, Giuseppina Siciliano, and Johan Nordensvard, "China's Dam-builders: Their Role in Transboundary River Management in South-East Asia," *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, June 13, 2017, doi:10.1080/07900627.2017.1329138.

control the flow of the river making the downstream countries dependent on them. Furthermore, with these dams, it is not Cambodian and Laotian companies or governments that are accruing profits from the damming, it is the investors in other ASEAN countries, as well as elites in local society. Using the advantages of the linked ASEAN marketplace, these other countries see prime opportunity in their underdeveloped neighbors to receive heavily sought after government and multinational contracts. The elites in Laos and Cambodia use this as their opportunity to increase their standard of living as well. This boosts them into the global upper class and with it brings along a lifestyle based upon consumption. This internal and external inequality can be seen as “twenty percent of the world’s population is responsible for 63% of emissions, while the bottom 20% of the world’s people are releasing only 3%.”<sup>50</sup> Transforming the rural in order to power the urban, fuels the actions of the wealthy to further accelerate climate change and exacerbate inequalities.

In the inland Cambodian and Vietnamese portions of the basin, over one million tons of freshwater fish are caught each year and over 70% of the protein consumed in the region comes from fish.<sup>51</sup> The Mekong Plume, the spillway where the Mekong exits into the South China Sea off the coast of Vietnam, is one of the top ocean fishery sites in the world which provide an additional half million tons of fish caught per year.<sup>52</sup> Not only is Southeast Asia reliant on this protein source, but one quarter of the world’s consumed fish are caught in Southeast Asia and one fifth of the world’s rice crop is grown in the Vietnamese portion of the delta, meaning the

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<sup>50</sup>J. Timmons Roberts, *Twenty Lessons in Environmental Sociology*, ed. Kenneth A. Gould and Tammy L. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 201.

<sup>51</sup> Ziv, et al. "Trading-off Fish Biodiversity..."

<sup>52</sup> Gus Greenstein and Austin Meyer, "Fork in the River," *Slate* April 18, 2017, , [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/roads/2017/04/new\\_dams\\_will\\_transform\\_the\\_lives\\_of\\_tens\\_of\\_millions\\_of\\_people\\_in\\_southeast.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/roads/2017/04/new_dams_will_transform_the_lives_of_tens_of_millions_of_people_in_southeast.html).

Mekong's impact stretches far beyond Southeast Asia.<sup>53</sup> All of these food issues would be placed in jeopardy with any transition of the river, yet the quest for short-term profits seems to be winning over food sovereignty in the region. Rural residents do not have the same level of safety as the elites though. They are completely reliant on the health of their life source—the Mekong.

Perhaps if damming on the Mekong river would allow for these countries to meet the 80% electric growth that the region projects requiring over the next twenty years, damming the main stream of the Mekong would be a difficult but necessary trade-off in an effort to lift people out of poverty and alleviate some of the hardships for all citizens in society. Perhaps then it could be acceptable to damage the future livelihoods of others in a difficult trade-off that governments would feel compelled to make. Sadly, the projected economic benefit from this preventable planned ecological destruction is for minimal incremental change. These dams are projected to meet only six to eight percent of the anticipated energy needs by 2025. Further analysis shows that investment in solar or other renewable energies such as cogeneration could create even more power for less cost, but since these technologies are in their early stages, they have been overwhelmed by the allure of hydropower on the Laotian and Cambodian governments.<sup>54</sup> The desire for growth, even minimal growth of six to eight percent has superseded millennia of history utilizing the Mekong sustainably. This puts the livelihood of future generations in an increasingly precarious position.

This precarious future is endemic of the one size fits all development model promoted by international institutions like the UN, IMF and the World Bank. Ecological concerns are demoted in order to promote market liberalization and short term economic concerns which then create

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<sup>53</sup> Amit Pandya, *Fisheries in Southeast Asia: Challenges and Opportunities*, report (Washington, D.C.: Stimson Center, 2008), 171.

<sup>54</sup> Michelle Nijhuis, "Harnessing the Mekong or Killing It?" *National Geographic*, May 2015, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2015/05/mekong-river-dams/>.

untenable and unsalvageable negative long term effects. The ICEM report clearly states going forward that any hydroelectric projects on the Mekong would degrade the overall ecosystem. It says, “The proposed mainstream hydropower represents a fundamental break from the current dynamic equilibrium of the Mekong River which converts immense potential and kinetic energy into a wide range of eco-morphological processes along its entire length.”<sup>55</sup> By fragmenting aspects of the river ecosystem, the entire systemic equilibrium is disrupted and populations are left isolated or cut off whether it be human or nonhuman species.<sup>56</sup> Focusing specifically on this, John Vidal, an environmental editor for the *Guardian* says:

“Not only is forest and farmland usually lost, but people must be evicted, and experience shows that dams can destroy fisheries, scour riverbeds, cause more erosion, and dramatically change the amount of silt and sediment transported downstream. While trying to solve the one problem of climate change, there are real fears that hydropower on the Mekong and its tributaries could make countries more prone to the floods and droughts which climate change will bring.”<sup>57</sup>

While renewable energy is created by the hydroelectric plants, the flow of the Mekong is drastically altered. Even before climate change is taken into account, by adding these hydroelectric plants to the Mekong, the changes in the river’s flow will already cause instability. Mark Goichot, a hydrologist working with WWF in Vietnam says, “The result is the delta is shrinking and sinking. If all the dams are built it will be like someone sawing off the branch on which he is sitting. The dams in Laos and Cambodia will have a catastrophic effect. Never have I seen a delta move from

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> McCully, 31.

<sup>57</sup> John Vidal, "The Mekong River: Stories from the Heart of the Climate Crisis," *The Guardian* November 26, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2015/nov/26/the-mekong-river-stories-from-the-heart-of-the-climate-crisis-interactive>.

stability to this level of stress in so short a time.”<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, these hydroelectric dams also disproportionately affect the people most vulnerable—the fifty million or so people who rely on the river for subsistence fishing.

The Nam Thuen 2 (NT2) Hydropower Project in Central Laos is a microcosm of all these fears and challenges. Originally proposed in the late 1980s, it didn’t receive financing until 2005 when the World Bank agreed to provide financial guarantees. The dam was completed in 2010 and a 2014 report confirmed all the worst fears of the negatives associated with these dam projects to be true. Ian Baird and Keith Barney analyzed the impact of this dam and found dramatic changes in the hydrology and water quality on the Mekong due to the NT2 hydropower plant. Additionally, they proved that the World Bank failed to adequately mitigate downstream impact or sufficiently compensate the affected peoples of the dam.<sup>59</sup> McCully in his excoriation of dams would consistently harp on one key point—timetable. For impact and potential negative effects of dams, the timetables are always shorter than the true long term impact of the dams. As rivers have developed and changed courses naturally over millennia, five-year, ten-year, or even twenty-year impact studies are woefully inadequate to the scale of the changes being made over the course of history.<sup>60</sup> Luckily the NT2 plant is only located on a tributary of the Mekong, the Nam Thuen River, but the results of the NT2 plant clearly indicate even when thirty years of planning goes into any of these dam proposals, the overall deleterious effects on people’s livelihoods and river quality are overlooked in the pursuit of economic development.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ian G. Baird and Keith Barney, "The Political Ecology of Cross-sectoral Cumulative Impacts: Modern Landscapes, Large Hydropower Dams and Industrial Tree Plantations in Laos and Cambodia," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 4 (2017): doi:10.1080/03066150.2017.1289921.

<sup>60</sup> McCully, 31.

## **Ignoring ICEM's Findings**

Overall, the ICEM report concluded by issuing a strong rebuke to the development model along the Mekong. Whereas the MRC considered the development of hydropower on the Mekong Mainstream one of the most important strategic issues facing the Lower Mekong region, they were not prepared for ICEM's findings. ICEM strongly recommended deferral of any dam building or any decisions on the Mekong for a period of ten years, with reviews every three years in order to ensure the safety of the river. Despite the recommendation submitted to the MRC, the MRC's lack of influence was highlighted when Laos simply decided to ignore the study and pressed on with construction of new hydroelectric dams on the Mekong mainstream. As seen before, without a feedback mechanism to stop development along the Mekong and specifically the ineffectiveness of Article 7 of the Mekong River Commission charter, it comes as no surprise that when one country ignores the ruling, the entire rule-based system of governance lacks credibility to enforce others from following their lead.

To further complicate matters, in 2015, China initiated a new cross-border sovereignty exercise with the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Mechanism. The LMC further adds to the impotence of the MRC because it now competes against the MRC. The LMC is hosted by the Chinese and includes all five other countries the Mekong flows through. In January 2018, the LMC countries came up with a new five-year plan for cooperation along the Mekong. The actual plan the delegates agreed to is so vague there doesn't seem to be any clear target or agreement other than a desire for increased collaboration. To emphasize this, the plan intentionally sidesteps the question of dam building. It provides no concrete objectives or steps to address the threats to the Mekong, it only seems to encourage greater cooperation.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, it does nothing to

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<sup>61</sup> David Boyle and Sun Narin, "China and Mekong Countries Adopt New River Plan," VOA January 11, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/asian-leaders-start-a-new-plan-for-shared-river/4203046.html>.

challenge the growth model and only continues to convene talks about the problem while presenting and creating only artificial solutions that do not challenge the fundamental root cause. By doing this, China not only undermines the ability of the MRC, but makes solutions through the state sovereignty system along the Mekong even more unlikely.

### **Problems with the System**

By looking at the limitations of the Paris Climate Agreement, we can see this as not solely a Southeast Asian problem, but rather as indicative of the greater flaw of the international system. The Paris Climate Agreement was written and drafted in late 2015 at the same time that ASEAN became an integrated community. The agreement sought to limit the threat of climate change globally by less than two degrees Celsius over the course of this century. The agreement was signed by 195 countries and signaled a leap forward in climate diplomacy. Less than three years later, we already see the limiting factors that plagued the MRC also plaguing the Paris Climate Agreement. After the first two years of reports, not even one industrialized country is on track to meet the stated goals of this agreement.<sup>62</sup> Only Gambia and Morocco of the 195 countries are on track to meet the 1.5 degree target and only five additional countries are on pace to meet the 2 degree target set out by the Copenhagen conference in 2009. Like the MRC, The Paris Climate Agreement lacks a feedback mechanism to overcome its voluntary buy-ins and targets. As seen with the MRC, when a state chooses between self-monitoring or limiting growth, they always choose growth.

Without a global accountability mechanism, the state sovereignty model leads to every country fighting for their own best interest in the short term over long term cross-border

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<sup>62</sup> Climate Action Tracker, <http://climateactiontracker.org/>.

collaboration. Additionally, without consequences for these actions, these agreements only continue to talk about the problem rather than addressing a solution. On the Mekong, this pits countries against one another in a race to the bottom, as demonstrated by Laos ignoring the ICEM report. Directly after Laos decided to go against the proposed moratorium on dams, Cambodia began ramping up its attempts at implementing hydroelectric dams on the river almost instantaneously so they wouldn't be left behind. While an agreement can be reached, all it takes is one actor to ignore the ruling in order for the whole diplomatic effort to be entirely futile. In this case, without having a veto in the MRC, the agreement was damned from the beginning.

An example of how this is playing out in Cambodia can be found about six hours north of Kampong Cham in Khoum Kbal Romeas, where Cambodia initiated the start of the Lower Sesan 2 Dam in 2014. This dam is set to be completed in 2018 and will help double Cambodia's electricity generation according to the Cambodian Government.<sup>63</sup> Yet despite doubling electric generation, if completed, this dam can lead to a 9.3% decline in fish biomass throughout the whole river basin.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, for this to happen, mass migration of people will need to occur as indigenous tribes will have to be relocated off of native lands. This will not only displace the 70,000 people located nearby, but also displace generations of TEK the local villagers have in that specific stretch of the river.<sup>65</sup> In Cambodia, this drastic shift is a top-down approach mandating that the electricity can be taken to the urban cores of Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Kampong Cham. Killing off nearly 10% of the entire fish biomass in the basin will have catastrophic effects as far as the Tonle Sap. The Tonle Sap is the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia and is the major food supply for much of Cambodia and the region. While Cambodia lacks energy infrastructure,

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<sup>63</sup> Greenstein and Meyer, "Fork in the River,"

<sup>64</sup> Ziv, et al. "Trading-off Fish Biodiversity..."

<sup>65</sup> Greenstein and Meyer, "Fork in the River,"

by harming its current and future food supply, it is bargaining away food security for increased electrical development.

Following the normal narrative of environmental injustice, this is another example where, “the places and communities that suffer the costs of production most directly receive a much smaller share of its benefits.”<sup>66</sup> This can be seen as a brutal race to the bottom which accelerates exhaustion of the resources of the Mekong. With China seeing Laos and Cambodia building dams and realizing since it is further up the river, it too can dam the Mekong. This model of development focuses on urban development over rural livelihoods in Southeast Asia. As long as this remains, the ecological sustainability of the Mekong River remains wholly precarious.

The country furthest downriver, Vietnam, shoulders the largest burden of the effects placed upon them by the other six countries upstream simply by being downstream. The Mekong River basin in Southern Vietnam is almost the exact size of Netherlands and due to climate change is almost like the Netherlands—under water. The delta has historically been Vietnam’s rice basket. Southern Vietnam was the Vietnamese home to much of the “Green Revolution” in the region. As Vietnam adapted to the Green Revolution, they limited the strains and varieties of crops, grains, and rice going into the ground. Prior to the Green Revolution there were many strains of “organic” and “wild” rice grown in Southern Vietnam. While some of the previous strains of rice could grow with salt water or adapt by adhering to the policies of the Green Revolution and prioritizing growth, Vietnam became reliant on a “miracle” strain of rice. Unfortunately, the miracle strain turned out not to be as resilient as the organic and traditional strains of rice. Since it was created in a lab rather than undergoing the natural transformations over tens of thousands of years, the strain was only as

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<sup>66</sup> Bob Edwards and Adam Driscoll, *Twenty Lessons in Environmental Sociology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 161.

resilient as the scientists who created it perceived it needed to be. In the age of climate change, this shortsightedness and unpreparedness for changing ecosystems may prove catastrophic.

Sea-level rise due to climate change makes farmers in Southern Vietnam more vulnerable each year as the rice cannot adapt, leaving farmers no choice but to find new professions.<sup>67</sup> This saltwater seeps into the crops and kills entire harvests of rice, as the rice cannot grow in the seawater. Now that dams higher up the Mekong continue to be implemented, farmers and fisher people alike in Southern Vietnam face the brunt of weaker harvests and harder work, compounding the issues associated with sea-level rise. What the farmers and fisher people are told to do is leave behind their livelihoods and transform to the new economy of the twenty-first century by moving to one of the two largest cities in Southern Vietnam—Can Tho and Ho Chi Minh City—and taking part in the industrialized urban life. This is the governmental solution for climate change: adapt and become part of the only potential vision for the twenty-first century economy—the urban economy.

### **The Global City Discourse**

The first decade of the twenty-first century dawned a new generation of urbanists. The United Nations reported that for the first time in human history, more people lived in cities around the world than didn't.<sup>68</sup> Another UN report said that by 2050, two thirds of the world's population was set to live in cities.<sup>69</sup> In 2008, the Rockefeller Foundation published "The Century of the City:

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<sup>67</sup> Fabian Drahmoune, "Agrarian Transitions, Rural Resistance and Peasant Politics in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2013), 112.

<sup>68</sup> "World's Population Increasingly Urban with More than Half Living in Urban Areas | UN DESA Department of Economic and Social Affairs," United Nations, , accessed April 06, 2018, <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/news/population/world-urbanization-prospects-2014.html>.

<sup>69</sup> "World Population Projected to Reach 9.8 Billion in 2050, and 11.2 Billion in 2100 – Says UN - United Nations Sustainable Development," United Nations, , accessed April 06, 2018, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2017/06/world-population-projected-to-reach-9-8-billion-in-2050-and-11-2-billion-in-2100-says-un/>.

No Time to Lose.” This report stated that the twenty-first century will be defined by mass and rapid urbanization. The report was the output of a month-long seminar at the Bellagio Center in Italy entitled, “Global Urban Summit” which hosted government officials, finance experts, urban researchers, and other innovators.<sup>70</sup> At the time of publication, the world was entering the 2008 financial crisis, but to the writers of this report, economic malaise was not a thing that couldn’t be overcome through the power of urban entrepreneurship. Cities needed to quickly modernize, and the idea of the smart city began as cities raced to become the most efficient in the world.

The idea of the global city expanded upon the homogenization project that is globalization. The theorists and practitioners that the Rockefeller Foundation brought together exalt the innovation and ingenuity found in cities by consistently pitting the urban against the rural. Here the western biases of what can constitute a global vision shines through as the idea of anything global for many of these theorists can simply be defined as western and urban centric. For example, A.T. Kearney, a leading international global management consultancy has been compiling reports on global cities since 2008. The 2017 report which is its seventh iteration, ranks cities based upon their business activity, human capital, information exchange, cultural experience and political engagement. Utilizing these categories that define the leading global cities, Kearney finds that of their top 25 global cities, six are located in the United States, eight are located in the European Union, while none at all are located in Africa or South America. Boston and Vienna are included on the list while Bangkok, Mumbai, Delhi, Dakar, Sao Paolo and Jakarta are not.<sup>71</sup> Kearney’s view of a global city is one in direct opposition to what is needed to combat the negative effects of climate change. Rather than promoting a diverse range of options, only a homogenized western

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<sup>70</sup> *Century of the City*, report, December 18, 2006, <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/century-of-the-city/>.

<sup>71</sup> Nicole Dessibourg, Mike Hales, and Andrés Mendoza Peña, *Global Cities 2017*, report, , <https://www.atkearney.com/global-cities/full-report>.

view of a global city is promoted. As the promoters of the global city continue to extol the virtues of the city, they really extol the characteristics of cities that make them western. To expand, their framework of a global city must change to meet the actual challenges facing cities.

By looking at a city like Can Tho, Vietnam we see what this would look like. In this framework, there would be a larger network of cities facing similar challenges and through collaboration they could solve these challenges collectively. Can Tho, with a population of 1.4 million people is the second largest city on the Mekong. It is the industrial port at the end of the river. Due solely to geography, Can Tho is largely dependent on upstream actions and actors. Agriculture around Can Tho is vulnerable to sea-level rise and a lack of diverse rice crops found in the delta. The way that the global city has been co-opted doesn't allow for Can Tho to connect with these other cities on the Mekong, but instead tries to connect them to global financing. It leaves this stone unturned as instead of collaboration with the other cities on the Mekong, localized mitigation efforts in Can Tho alone are supposed to create the changes needed to overcome climate change. These individual actions are heavily funded and supported by the west but offer no tangible solutions outside of lining the pockets of the western investors. For the citizens of the Mekong, resilience cannot be building to bounce back to the current system as it is already set on a path towards destruction of their ecosystem. When floods and droughts devastate the region, building to reclaim what is already consistently failing is surefire way to ensure continued future failures.

### **The Resilient City**

By 2013, the moniker “global city” had transformed into the “resilient global city” as the Rockefeller Foundation created a list of the 100 Resilient Cities. As Ashley Dawson states in his book *Extreme Cities*, “Resilience is consequently an opportune lens for elites to adopt in coping

with the extreme city. Instead of questioning and contesting the manufactured insecurities of the extreme city, resilience discourse tends to shunt the responsibility to adapt to hazard onto individuals.”<sup>72</sup> It should be no surprise that Can Tho, is included in the list of the 100 Resilient Cities. The description of Can Tho on the 100 Resilient Cities website says, “Seasonal floods can last for several weeks, leading to a drop in productivity as workers cannot reach their jobs and students cannot attend school. Can Tho is looking to implement creative medium-term solutions including infrastructure upgrades to safeguard the city’s power, water and transportation infrastructures.” Just as Dawson described earlier, none of the resiliency framework here is applied to upending or even addressing root cause of the problem. When the only conversation about Can Tho is an individualized conversation about mitigation efforts and what can work on a micro scale rather than looking at a larger system scale, the solutions can only offer partial answers, as they will continue to constantly require adaptation to their neighbors’ actions.

For certain areas in Southeast Asia, the conception of developing in a similar fashion to how New York City or other western cities developed is not an option. Places like Can Tho would be under water before they would even be able to build as such. As Le Anh Tuan, a researcher from Can Tho University in Vietnam says, “If sea levels rise one meter, 20% of the delta is affected. If two meters, it is too dreadful to contemplate. Half the delta will be lost and three-quarters of the 20 million people will be severely affected.” Despite calls to modernize into the global and resilient city coming from western leaders, places like Can Tho simply cannot afford to follow this path. Unfortunately and paradoxically, that path is directly where external aid and development funding exists for them.

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<sup>72</sup> Ashley Dawson, *Extreme Cities the Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change* (New York: Verso, 2017), 157.

In March 2015, the consumer research firm Nielsen issued a report entitled “The Age of ASEAN Cities: From Migrant Consumers to Megacities.” Nielsen, like the Rockefeller Foundation, emphasized the need for cities to quickly adapt. Nielsen’s report set out to analyze the next ten years in ASEAN and predict where people would live and what their consumption habits would look like in 2025. At the time of the report, approximately 52 million ASEAN citizens lived in megacities of over 5 million people, and an additional 35 million lived in cities of over one million. Those numbers may sound large, but at the same time over six times as many or 330 million ASEAN citizens lived in rural areas and small towns.

In fact, rural areas and small towns constituted 52% of the overall ASEAN population in 2015. By 2025, despite anticipated mass migration and growth in cities of over 1 million people leading to about 35 million new residents in these cities, the overall number of rural and small town residents in ASEAN is supposed to remain 324 million by 2025, or 47% of ASEAN’s total.<sup>73</sup> What becomes entirely clear is that the Nielsen report fails to meaningfully address that huge rural audience. Unlike much of the rest of the world where cities are the predominant form of life, Southeast Asia is not currently majority urban as these numbers show. The Nielsen report’s excitement over the growth of cities in ASEAN can be read justly for that reason as companies and businesses are Nielsen’s target audience. They need new consumers and markets they can tap into. By generating excitement over cities in ASEAN, Nielsen promotes creation of a new market to expand to. However, what becomes entirely clear, is that for both Nielsen and for the Rockefeller Foundation reports, they both overlook a large portion of the population by promoting a one size fits all western, homogenized, global city approach.

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<sup>73</sup> *The Age of ASEAN Cities from Migrant Consumers to Megacities*, report (Nielsen, 2015), 7.

## A Counter to the Urban

This development model accelerates parallel to the increased demand for hydroelectric power and urban industrial development. However, this model was not created with Southeast Asia in mind and yet is being imposed upon the population of Southeast Asia. 2017 statistics show Cambodia's urban population at 21%, Vietnam's at 35%, Laos' at 41%, Thailand's at 53%, and Myanmar's at 35%.<sup>74</sup> Despite the many reports that continue to say that the future of ASEAN is to be defined as the future of the megacity and mass urbanization, the actual numbers simply do not bear out this reality!

Along the Mekong River we already see that this mass urbanization entails not only a radical reshaping of the terrain and life for millions, but also a desecration of the Mekong's biodiverse ecosystem. The idea of urbanization as the only form of development comes directly out of a western framework based only on processes that were implemented in the global north. This model is based on increased and furthered capitalist development and expansion. In his essay "Visitors to the Commons: Approaching Thailand's 'Environmental' Struggles from a Western Starting Point," Larry Lohmann argues that much of the discourse around Thai environmental movements has been drawn from western frameworks. This can be taken and applied also to forms of development throughout Southeast Asia. He goes on to argue that the way Thai environmentalism is viewed is from ways in which it can be connected to western environmental movements.<sup>75</sup> What is lost is the inherent value in the local environmental knowledge of the area and whether that knowledge or ethic can be of utility in creating a future. This relates back to the

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<sup>74</sup> "Urban Population (% of Total)," World Bank Data, , accessed March 31, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS>.

<sup>75</sup> Larry Lohman, "Visitors to the Commons: Approaching Thailand's "environmental" Struggles from a Western Starting Point," in *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism*, by Bron Raymond. Taylor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 126

TEK that is being erased through land grabs. These areas and ideas become as Anna Tsing calls “Zones of Erasure.”<sup>76</sup> What Tsing attacks is something seen over and over again around the world. Within the homogenization project of globalized capital, ideas not promoted within elite consensus remain outside of the realm of acceptable discourse. Hierarchies emerge and ideas from the Global South are discarded as backwards and substandard. While these ideas may provide solutions and fixes, they are omitted from the discourse, which remains dominated by those who have the most hegemonic power within society.

Thinking about the damming of the Mekong in purely economic terms, it is possible to follow the sustainable development model. However, when the effects of climate change are taken into account, any further damming along the Mekong becomes a clearer and clearer structural preference for urban elites over the masses of rural peoples who will have their livelihoods upended. This can be seen by looking again at the Nielsen report. The word “climate” does not even appear once in the entire Nielsen report and the words “environmental” and “sustainability” each appear only one time. The word “environment” appears only in relation to consumer worries about health and safety within these new cities. After reading this report, one is left to conclude that the only path forward for ASEAN is the path toward greater urban development. The environmental and climate crises are seemingly not even worth mentioning.

This, however, cannot be the case. In 2016, Southeast Asia experienced its worst drought since 1926 as Thailand and Cambodia had their highest recorded temperatures ever. Vietnam had to plead for China to release water from the upstream dams of the Mekong because water levels in

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<sup>76</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt. Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Southern Vietnam were lower than they had been in a century.<sup>77</sup> These changes to the Mekong are already having real effects now. Vandana Shiva says that, “Diversity is the best strategy for preventing drought and desertification. What the world needs to feed a growing population sustainably is biodiversity intensification.”<sup>78</sup> It would only seem to make sense then that the biodiversity of the Mekong would be celebrated and promoted. However, by accelerating deforestation in congruence with the damming of the Mekong, the mangroves and forests that formerly absorbed water during floods are no longer around to do so. Cambodia, for example, once known for lush fauna and tropical forests, may be completely deforested in the next five years if it continues at its current pace.<sup>79</sup> Cambodia’s primary rainforest cover fell from over 70% at the end of the Vietnam War to just 3.1% in 2007 and continues to get worse. Between 2001 and 2016, Cambodia has lost 22% of the total trees it had in 2000.<sup>80</sup> If this was just in Cambodia it would be a tragic case of domestic mismanagement. However, if the ASEAN countries continue on their current rates of deforestation and growth, they will collectively surpass China and become the world leader in global emissions by 2030.<sup>81</sup> The effects of deforestation also allow for greater flooding on the Tonle Sap Lake. This jeopardizes the protein base for the majority of the region as fisheries become more and more vulnerable.

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<sup>77</sup> Greenstein and Meyer, "Fork in the River,"

<sup>78</sup> Vandana Shiva, "Globalization and Poverty," in *There Is an Alternative: Subsistence and Worldwide Resistance to Corporate Globalization*, by Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Nicholas Faraclas, and Claudia Von Werlhof (London: Zed Books, 2002), 59.

<sup>79</sup> Zsombor Peter and Aun Pheap, "Unprotected Areas," *The Cambodia Daily* August 1, 2015, <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/unprotectedareas/>.

<sup>80</sup> "Global Forest Watch," Interactive Maps | Global Forest Watch, , accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.globalforestwatch.ca/interactive-maps>.

<sup>81</sup> Anbumozhi and Intal, 14.

## Alternative Futures

The growth model along the Mekong is creating a new generation of rural people who live in a constant state of precariousness while enriching urban elites. Therefore, it is important to seek an alternative to the present growth model. Offering critiques is helpful, but without solutions, they allow the growth model to continue unchecked. Even incremental changes within the growth model do nothing to change the power structures and systems in place. These measures do not address the underlying issue of the current global capitalist system being predicated on growth. This alone is fundamentally unsustainable as capital recognizes no boundaries or borders, it only creates new ones.

Each day of delaying robust climate action hastens a more limited opportunity for repairing the breach. As Veronika Bennholdt Thomsen and Maria Mies argue, capitalism “limits the time horizon of the participants in the economy to their own lifespan. At the most it allows them to think of the interests of their own children...creating a sustainable human society demands of us that we care for the interests of all coming generations and of all people in the world. This is incompatible with the spirit of capitalism.”<sup>82</sup> While capital’s drive for growth has enriched many and thereby defines the narrative in Southeast Asia as one of opportunity and urban prosperity, alternatives must be proposed to challenge the Southeast Asian growth model’s newest folly—damming the mainstream Mekong.

To embark on a new future within Southeast Asia, a new ecological framework must be created. Elinor Ostrom is a champion of moving beyond simple answers to complex problems.<sup>83</sup> For her, the idea that “The Commons” can be boiled down to a one-size-fits-all framework is one

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<sup>82</sup> Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Nicholas G. Faraclas, and Claudia Von Werlhof, *There Is an Alternative: Subsistence and Worldwide Resistance to Corporate Globalization* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

<sup>83</sup> Elinor Ostrom, "A Diagnostic Approach for Going beyond Panaceas," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104, no. 39 (2007): , doi:10.1073/pnas.0702288104, 15181.

of the great disservices to our world. She takes on Garrett Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" and shows how if just one second tier variable is altered, the outcome of Hardin's hypothesis would change.<sup>84</sup> According to Ostrom, managing a social-ecological system is a trade-off between the interactions and outcomes of four interrelated inputs: a Resource System (RS), Resource Units (RU), Governance System (GS), and Users (U). Resource Systems and Resource Units directly come into interaction with Governance Systems and Users creating the equilibrium of an ecosystem. If any one of these inputs is altered, the entire ecosystem may change. In the case of Southeast Asia, the Mekong River Delta offers a case study for managing the social-ecological system.

Using her framework, the Mekong River Delta (RS) and the 800,000 square kilometers watershed (RU) comes into contact with national laws from each and every one of the six countries the Mekong flows through or ASEAN and MRC rules (GS), affecting all seventy million people reliant on the Mekong daily (U). Figures 3 and 4 on the next page exemplify this. As can be seen by looking at Figure 3, any changes in second-tier variables such as human-constructed facilities or in this case the hydroelectric dams (RS5) shift the inputs and the management away from being a resilient system. To create a truly resilient system, these inputs and variables must be shifted in accordance with the proper interactions and outcomes to find the appropriate governance systems. Currently the (U) section is being overmatched as the history of use (U3) the norms (U6) and dependency on resources (U8) are being ignored. This hinders the outcomes of resilience along the Mekong and directly impacts the River Delta by changing the equilibrium point of the system (RS6) through a feedback. For the Mekong to be truly socio-ecologically resilient, the norms and history must be reclaimed as the users must have a real voice in the process.

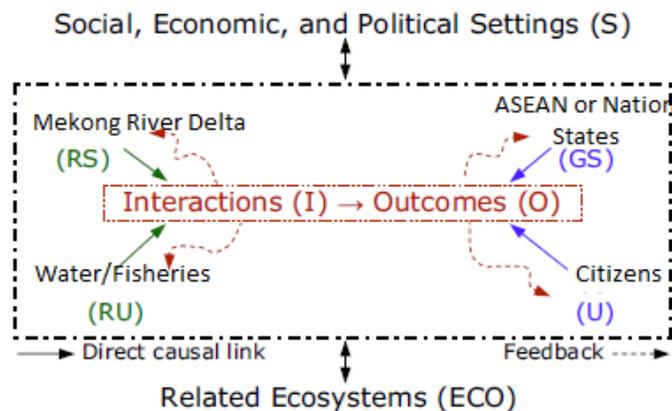
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<sup>84</sup> Ostrom, 15183.

**Second-tier variables in framework for analyzing an SES**

- Social, Economic, and Political Settings (S)  
 S1- Economic development. S2- Demographic trends. S3- Political stability.  
 S4- Government settlement policies. S5- Market incentives. S6- Media organization.
- Resource System (RS)  
 RS1- Sector (e.g., water, forests, pasture, fish)  
 RS2- Clarity of system boundaries  
 RS3- Size of resource system  
 RS4- Human-constructed facilities  
 RS5- Productivity of system  
 RS6- Equilibrium properties  
 RS7- Predictability of system dynamics  
 RS8- Storage characteristics  
 RS9- Location
- Governance System (GS)  
 GS1- Government organizations  
 GS2- Non-government organizations  
 GS3- Network structure  
 GS4- Property-rights systems  
 GS5- Operational rules  
 GS6- Collective-choice rules  
 GS7- Constitutional rules  
 GS8- Monitoring & sanctioning processes
- Resource Units (RU)  
 RU1- Resource unit mobility  
 RU2- Growth or replacement rate  
 RU3- Interaction among resource units  
 RU4- Economic value  
 RU5- Size  
 RU6- Distinctive markings  
 RU7- Spatial & temporal distribution
- Users (U)  
 U1- Number of users  
 U2- Socioeconomic attributes of users  
 U3- History of use  
 U4- Location  
 U5- Leadership/entrepreneurship  
 U6- Norms/social capital  
 U7- Knowledge of SES/mental models  
 U8- Dependence on resource  
 U9- Technology used
- Interactions (I) → Outcomes (O)  
 I1- Harvesting levels of diverse users  
 I2- Information sharing among users  
 I3- Deliberation processes  
 I4- Conflicts among users  
 I5- Investment activities  
 I6- Lobbying activities  
 O1- Social performance measures (e.g., efficiency, equity, accountability)  
 O2- Ecological performance measures (e.g., overharvested, resilience, diversity)  
 O3- Externalities to other SESs
- Related Ecosystems (ECO)  
 ECO1- Climate patterns. ECO2- Pollution patterns. ECO3- Flows into and out of focal SES.

**Figure 3. Second-tier variables in framework for analyzing an SES<sup>85</sup>**



**Figure 4. First-tier interactions mapped<sup>86</sup>**

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

To determine how to reclaim norms to ecologically sustainable practices, Melissa Lane argues that there is a need for “a transformation of the ways in which we conceive the terms of political and economic life.” She believes we need a new mythology, one rooted around ecologically sustainable practice.<sup>87</sup> To Lane, there is no way that the world can transform without “reconsidering the basic value and meaning which we perceive.” She believes in the idea of creating new stories and she is not alone in this vision. Many others also believe that there is no way to make a sustainable transformation to the future without invoking a religious transformation. Bron Taylor calls this a “Dark Green Religion.” This religion would take spiritualism from the animist and primitivistic traditions but be post-Darwinian.<sup>88</sup> According to Taylor, “The quest for sustainability in a world characterized by multiple crises, most of which are exacerbated if not precipitated by environmental decline, has the greatest chance when people remain open to rethinking everything.”<sup>89</sup> To rethink everything gives an opportunity for a fresh start.

However, both Lane and Taylor don’t acknowledge capital nor challenge capital in their respective assessments. For both of them they are convinced that nothing new can emerge without a fundamental breakthrough and transformation of society and human nature. In addition to this countering the idea of reclaiming norms, it also asks for a large-scale transition without offering a viable path towards it. While they both agree that something must be done, by proposing something akin to a new religion, they afford themselves time that we simply do not have. If creating a new ethic is so important, then perhaps it would not necessarily need to be a new shift, but rather a reclamation of history and rethinking how we see the world.

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<sup>87</sup> Melissa Lane, *Eco-republic: What the Ancients Can Teach Us about Ethics, Virtue, and Sustainable Living* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 9.

<sup>88</sup> Bron Raymond Taylor, "Kenya's Greenbelt Movement: Contributions, Conflict and Contradictions.," in *Civil Society in the Age of Monitory Democracy* (New York, NY: Berghan, 2013).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

## A Reclamation of History

In his book *The Art of Not Being Governed*, James C. Scott argues in favor of a new form of area studies. He formulates his region of study “based on ecological regularities and structural relationships that do not hesitate to cross national frontiers.”<sup>90</sup> Countering area studies based on nationality (Laos, Cambodia, etc.) or strategic conceptions (Southeast Asia) the conception of “Zomia” in this area of the world allows for new forms of analysis. In his book, Scott focuses squarely on cultures in and around the Mekong. He argues that much of the history of Southeast Asia is a dialectical history of upstream and downstream people, a history of living under a state and a history of living in active resistance to state power. Scott says:

“Most, if not all, the characteristics that appear to stigmatize hill peoples—their location at the margins, their physical mobility, their swidden agriculture, their flexible social structure, their religious heterodoxy, their egalitarianism, and even the nonliterate, or oral cultures—far from being the mark of primitives left behind by civilization are better seen on a long view as adaptations designed to evade both state capture and state formation. They are, in other words, political adaptations of nonstate peoples to a world of states that are, at once, attractive and threatening.”<sup>91</sup>

What Scott argues here is that the conceptions of civilization, especially in Southeast Asia, actively suppress the material historical conditions. Rather than being backwards people, he argues that there is much more agency in the histories of the “hill peoples.” He calls this an anarchist history of Southeast Asia, but he views this history as completed. He argues that this history of evading state control that appeared in the Zomia for more than a millennium ended in the last sixty

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<sup>90</sup> Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*, 26.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

years.<sup>92</sup> To Scott, the history of Southeast Asia that was so vibrant has fallen prey to the imperial natures and homogenization project and was killed. While he documents and reexamines history, Scott fails to connect this to an opportunity for a reclamation of norms and a path forward for the Mekong.

While Scott may see this as merely an historical event, it provides a great opportunity for reconsidering alternative forms in Southeast Asia. Rather than following Lane or Taylor and having to start fresh, why not look toward history in Southeast Asia using Scott's own words and see if that can provide a framework for an alternative. Scott focused on hill people versus valley people in his form of analysis but in his preface to the book he wrote, "Had I the patience and even more the impulse to comprehensiveness there would and should have been a chapter on watery regions of refuge. I mention them only in passing and regret I haven't been able to do them justice."<sup>93</sup> With this, Scott acknowledges that evasion of states and alternative forms of governance do not need to be solely based on foraging in the hills, but could utilize water just as easily. Later on he says "rivers or sea transportation take advantage of 'routes of least friction,' of least geographic resistance, and thereby vastly extends the distance over which food supplies, salt, arms, and people can be exchanged. In epigrammatic form, we could say that 'easy' water 'joins'"<sup>94</sup> There needs to be an inclusive nature for building any alternative form of society. The fact that water can connect and join people across different places so easily can serve as the basis for forming solidarities and creating inclusiveness. Additionally, in his critique of the major state projects in Southeast Asia, Scott touches on something important but doesn't dive deeper into it. He writes, "The common denominator here is that all such states have been created near navigable

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, Preface xiv.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 45.

water courses, but above the flood plain, where a flat arable plain and perennial streams made wet-rice cultivation possible. It is striking that none of the early mainland states was located in the delta of a major river. Such delta regions—the Irrawaddy, the Chao Phraya, and the Mekong—were settled in force and planted to wet rice only in the early twentieth century.”<sup>95</sup> Scott fails to recognize the importance of this since his project did not address promoting an alternative future or taking the findings from the study of Zomia to interpret the present day. However, by saying that none of the major delta regions were settled in force by major kingdoms throughout history highlights something important—that these regions have the ability to connect but not dominate. That none of the major mainland states were located on the major deltas signifies that the rivers were used to connect with other places but remain in harmony. Historically, for those trying to dominate other cultures or subsume other peoples, this was not helpful. For a politics of solidarity and inclusiveness, though, this would be fantastic. These regions would be ideal for as Scott said earlier, “water joins.” Additionally, that none of these delta regions were settled in force and planted wet rice only in the twentieth century shows the ability of these regions to change.

### **Subsistence Perspective and *Buen Vivir***

Maria Mies formulates what this might look like by calling it the “subsistence perspective.” She says, “A subsistence perspective can be realized economically only in smaller, regionally limited, decentralized areas.”<sup>96</sup> A largescale biodiverse river like the Mekong that already is so enmeshed in daily life for so many provides the perfect location for a subsistence perspective to be enacted. Additionally, since subsistence fishing and agriculture along the Mekong has existed

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>96</sup> Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy* (London: Zed Books, 2000), 58.

for millennia, there is already the fulfillment of Mies' definition of subsistence production or "the satisfaction of limited, concrete needs."<sup>97</sup> Mies continues in delineating what it would look like to reinvent the commons by making an argument for regionalization and localization and calling it a resistance tactic.<sup>98</sup> She says, "This means production, exchange and consumption within the region, so that an ecological regional reproduction takes place. Only in such regions can people form communities and feel responsible for the region."<sup>99</sup> What better place for this to occur than on the Mekong River. On the Mekong, disparate cultures are already tied together through their historical ties to the river. The biodiversity and health of the river affords the people of the Mekong the opportunity for a robust regional economy based around caring for the river. Since these 50 million peoples are all reliant on the river, they need the river to be socio-ecologically resilient. As in Ostrom's charts before, they need the reproduction of the river to occur so they can continue living. They are the ones who are being squeezed and pushed up against by the interests of capital in the current framework. The subsistence perspective is based on creating and maintaining life.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, the subsistence perspective in rural areas along the Mekong can be implemented easily as, historically, gender relations amongst indigenous communities have been relatively egalitarian.<sup>101</sup>

The subsistence perspective provides an alternative framework but doesn't answer for what the quality of life would be within this subsistence-based production. The concept of *Buen Vivir* (Spanish for "good life") can help formulate how Mies' subsistence perspective could work as an alternative to the homogenization effort of capital along the Mekong. *Buen Vivir* means living as

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>100</sup> Bennholdt-Thomsen, *There Is an Alternative*, 87.

<sup>101</sup> Clara Mi Young Park and Ben White, "Gender and Generation in Southeast Asian Agro-commodity Booms," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 6 (2017), doi:10.1080/03066150.2017.1393802.

part of the natural world and embracing indigenous knowledge by placing the world in a bio-centric rather than anthropocentric framework. Along a biodiverse hotbed like the Mekong, this makes sense as many diverse ethnic groups all prioritize different aspects of the river. *Buen Vivir* views the human relationship with the natural environment as key and under this framework development is not achieved by reaching a consumption-based modernity but rather by achieving the “good life.” This has been used around the world, and in Ecuador they were able to include *Sumac Kawsay*, the Ecuadorian version of *Buen Vivir*, into their constitution.<sup>102</sup>

While this may not sketch a concrete solution or path, it may not have to. Pushing for the sustenance of society by following traditional values is inherently a resistance activity since the homogenization project of global capital accelerates a shift away from indigenous norms and values.<sup>103</sup> Ian Scoones et al. contend that, “A new politics therefore must combine concerns with redistribution (and so concerns with class, social difference and inequality), recognition (and so identity and identification) and representation (and so democracy, community, belonging and citizenship).”<sup>104</sup> The subsistence perspective incorporated within the conception of *Buen Vivir* would do this by maintaining the local environmental and indigenous knowledge and supporting it. If it is the homogenization project that got us into the problem, then it would need to be an alternative to solve it. Scoones et al go on to say. “Alternatives are increasingly framed as inherently relational, multi-class and multi-sectoral, historical and global. Across the world, movements around environment/food/energy and sustainability/justice are building alternatives based on distributive networks and collaborative commons.”<sup>105</sup> Localizing it on the Mekong provides an alternative that can follow this path and create a more just and equitable region.

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<sup>102</sup> Sustainable Economics Skene and Murray

<sup>103</sup> Young Park and Maffii 1238.

<sup>104</sup> Scoones et al., 9.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 10.

For this, Felix Guattari's treatise, *The Three Ecologies*, provides more on how to expand. He states, "One might object that large-scale struggles are not necessarily in sync with ecological praxis and the micropolitics of desire, but that's the point: it is important not to homogenize various levels of practice or to make connections between them under some transcendental supervision, but instead to engage them in processes of heterogenesis."<sup>106</sup> For Guattari, it becomes clear that not only alternatives must be found, but they must be found by avoiding panaceas or one-stop solutions. Scoones et al. agree in saying, "there will never be a one size fits all version of emancipatory rural politics, and locating our debate about alternatives in different contexts will hopefully generate a more nuanced and variegated view."<sup>107</sup> One thing that is certain is these alternatives cannot look like what is currently constructed. In trying to overcome the global climate crisis, if western elites intervene in this crisis and are allowed to be the leaders seeking to transform any indigenous or local knowledge into the terms that they have championed, we have already seen the failures that will occur. Negating that, and looking for the heterogenesis of alternatives focuses directly on the overlooked indigenous knowledges for answers.

## **Prefiguration**

In Cambodia there is an opportunity for this. With the Land Law of 2001 and the Forestry Law of 2002, Cambodia was the first country in Southeast Asia that gave indigenous peoples specific land rights. The law "provides those defined as "indigenous" with extraordinary land rights and recognizes their right to manage and use the land according to their customs with collective ownership."<sup>108</sup> While this does nothing to contend with the aspect of the dam building

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<sup>106</sup> Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008).

<sup>107</sup> Scoones et al., 9.

<sup>108</sup> Young Park and Maffii, 1241.

and stopping dams, it legally gives indigenous peoples the rights to challenge capital and showcase alternatives based on TEK. The key resistance activity becomes social reproduction of their customs and maintaining their livelihoods through living sustainably. In fact, these indigenous knowledges have been characterized by elites within society as “backward destroyers of natural resources and forests.”<sup>109</sup> This has been the main justification for intergovernmental plans at ‘modernizing’ the indigenous areas between Southern Laos, Northern Cambodia, and Central Vietnam.<sup>110</sup> This modernization effort is what Scott describes as an effort by state systems to conquer and subsume indigenous peoples. It is a top down homogenization effort to bring all who oppose under the global capitalist regime. By utilizing the Land Law to their advantage these indigenous Cambodians can offer a framework for the future.

While ignored at the elite and governmental level, this issue of livelihoods and survival, can serve as a catalyst for resistance. Bron Taylor states that “popular ecological resistance often originates in a desperate quest for survival as industrial processes threaten habitual modes of existence and as people recognize that their well-being is threatened by environmental degradation. Most ecological resistance is indeed *In Defense of Livelihood*.”<sup>111</sup> This has been included in the literature on the “environmentalism of the poor.” This framework puts people who otherwise would not be politically active in a position of agency and perhaps more importantly resists the homogenization project. As Guha and Martinez-Alier say it, “To put it in more explicitly ecological terms, these conflicts pit ‘ecosystem people’ – that is, those communities which depend very heavily on the natural resources of their own locality—against ‘omnivores’, individuals and

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<sup>109</sup>Christian Erni, *Shifting Cultivation, Livelihood and Food Security: New and Old Challenges for Indigenous Peoples in Asia* (Bangkok: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2015).

<sup>110</sup> Jeremy Ironside, "The Changing Face of Swidden Agriculture: A Case Study of Two Villages in Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia," in *Shifting Cultivation Livelihood and Food Security: New and Old Challenges for Indigenous Peoples in Asia* (Bangkok: FAO).

<sup>111</sup> Bron Raymond. Taylor, *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 335.

groups with the social power to capture, transform and use natural resources from a much wider catchment area; sometimes, indeed, the whole world.”<sup>112</sup> Therefore, in this instance, resistance offered by the people reliant on the river, functions as Guha and Martinez Alier’s qualifications for environmental reaction of the poor.<sup>113</sup> These ecosystem people are people within Southeast Asia who historically have not depended on the global capitalist system. In Cambodia specifically, they were granted a period of relative isolation and continued their longstanding indigenous traditions after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. They have been incorporated in the global system recently, but are seeing their livelihoods challenged as their innate indigenous knowledge is not recognized as valuable in the western framework. Their livelihood and life processes are antithetical to the government policies promoting dam building. This recent transformation of society affords an opportunity to resist by enabling mobilization and politicization of a new generation of ecosystem people who seek to preserve their indigenous heritage, cultures, and livelihoods.

In Scott’s earlier work, he provided circumstances leading to when peasants in colonial Southeast Asia engaged in rebellion or fought back. Scott argued this resistance focused on a moral threshold. When this threshold was met, an actual existing political, economic or social system strayed too far from what he calls the ‘notion of economic justice’ or the just distribution of assets, resources and opportunities.<sup>114</sup> By pushing people off of their lands and forcing a specific form of external development upon them, the notions of economic justice have strayed too far along the

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<sup>112</sup>Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martínez Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism Essays North and South* (Baltimore, MD: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 12.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 1976), 3.

Mekong. The question then becomes what are the principles that would enable the lack of economic justice to create a true resistance?

## **Eros and Disasters**

While sometimes described as utopian, principles of solidarity, collaboration, liberty and social justice have been proven to galvanize the masses. Solidarities so forged can produce an “eros effect.” This eros effect, first articulated by Herbert Marcuse and then expanded upon by George Katsiaficas argues for transcendental qualities of social movements wherein suddenly popular moments occur and radically transform the social order. Eros doesn’t deny the hegemonic power the elites have in society. However, “during moments of the eros effect, universal interests become generalized at the same time as dominant values of society (national chauvinism, hierarchy, and domination) are negated.”<sup>115</sup> Instead of trying to compete with the elites at their own struggle for power and control, eros is based on moments of spontaneous uprising and solidarity. What becomes clear in these moments, is that potential alternatives must be articulated as options for a future, otherwise the unique indigenous identity and authority of these people is undermined.

In his book *Asia’s Unknown Uprisings*, Katsiaficas documents the uprisings that swept across Asia during the 1980s. Like Guattari, Katsiaficas documents how diversity of tactics are essential for successful resistance.<sup>116</sup> He also documents how in times of eros, communication and messaging in favor of emancipation can catalyze across borders. In contrast to Samuel Huntington’s “Third Wave” of democratization, Katsiaficas sees continued and sustained

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<sup>115</sup> George N. Katsiaficas, *Asia’s Unknown Uprisings: People Power in the Philippines, Burma, Tibet, China, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand, and Indonesia, 1947-2009* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013), 10.

<sup>116</sup> Katsiaficas, 408.

uprisings against a structurally unjust system as the only way toward a true and just democracy based on freedom.

As climate disasters only accelerate throughout the world, alternative visions have the ability to spread like never before. In her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit argues that disasters momentarily suspend the established social order and generate fluid situations where people react with feelings of empathy and collaboration that flip the capitalist-established social constructions.<sup>117</sup> Both Katsiaficas' and Solnit's theories breathe life into the increased potential of an alternative future especially one which pays heed to maintenance of an ecosystem in equilibrium.

In a time of crisis and disaster all potential responses must be included in the discourse in order to find true solutions. While elites will push for the status quo, during our potentially imminent climate catastrophe, the status quo has proven that it is a failure. With continuing and greater environmental problems on the horizon, it is in this moment that Katsiaficas sees an opportunity to install a Guattarian style heterogenesis of ideas for a future based upon *Buen Vivir* principles and Mies' version of subsistence. By showing the morally corrupt global system's inherent failure to not consider its most vulnerable people, Guattari sees moments of crisis as a time, "to get social and political practices back on their feet, working for humanity and not simply for a permanent reequilibration of capitalist semiotic Universe."<sup>118</sup>

### **The Situation Today**

In Cambodia, 65-year-old Hun Sen has ruled for over thirty years and has claimed he will rule until death. He has recently been asking western leaders for help in mitigation efforts on

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<sup>117</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2010).

<sup>118</sup> Guattari, 51.

climate change. Although he admits climate change is an issue, he prioritizes short term economic growth seeking short term solutions to lift his country out of poverty over creating a sustainable future. In Laos, Bounnhang Vorachith, the President, is 79 years old. He has continued the push for Laos to become the battery of Southeast Asia through dams in direct opposition to the ICEM report. In Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Trong, the General Secretary of the Politburo, is 73 years old, and has said he sees one party rule as the best direction for his country in order to transition into an industrial economy.<sup>119</sup> By having highly-centralized leaderships, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam's governing structures make potential alternatives nearly impossible through the state system. Looking elsewhere along the Mekong, better options do not exist through the state either. Thailand has been under a military junta since 2014, Myanmar remains under constant threat of military control as well, and in China, Xi Jinping controls the government and curbs any form of dissent. While these leaders maintain a stranglehold over the political sphere, the social spheres are rapidly transforming.

The median age in Cambodia is just over 25 years old, in Laos it is 23 years old, and in Vietnam it is 30.5 years old.<sup>120</sup> In the entire ASEAN, 65% of the region is under 35 years old. According to the World Economic Forum these countries have some of the highest percentages of workers in vulnerable employment. Vulnerable employment is the characterization of the number of unpaid family workers or informal "own-account workers." In other words, this translates to workers who are not enmeshed in the global capitalist system. Since these respective populations are largely rural, the majority of people are already taking part in subsistence-based production. 64% of Cambodia, 83% of Laos, and 63% of Cambodia's labor force fall under this

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<sup>119</sup> AP, "One-party Rule Best for Vietnam, Says Leader," *The Guardian*, January 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/28/vietnam-nguyen-phu-trong-one-party-rule-leader>.

<sup>120</sup> "CIA World Factbook," CIA, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2177.html>.

categorization.<sup>121</sup> The World Economic Forum (WEF) sees this an opportunity to transform these countries' economies in their own way. However, the report on the future of human capital issued by the WEF, recognizes that the biggest challenge to the future of ASEAN are two key concerns: resource constraints and pressure from shareholders/short term profitability.<sup>122</sup> These concerns confront the future challenges of ASEAN and the region. The WEF, as champion for the global economic system, must prioritize changing these countries' economic growth to work within the global system. However even in the report's future challenges section, it notes that these short term profits directly coincide with destruction of natural resources. We see that directly with the proliferation of the dams along the Mekong. The short term economic growth and electric growth generated is no salve for the long term devastation it places upon communities. Much like a previous generation of land grabs with mining, profiteering corporations are able to pack up and leave after extracting the natural resources. The case of a river is different from a mine however as a river does not remain isolated and it directly serves as the connection for such a large portion of peoples.<sup>123</sup> This connection provides a spark for organizing and uniting the disparate populations of over 100 ethnic groups and the rising young population growing up in the face of greater climate chaos all of whom are reliant on the Mekong.

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<sup>121</sup> World Economic Forum, "WEF Human Capital Outlook Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)," news release, June 2, 2016, World Economic Forum Regional Community Briefing, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_ASEAN\\_HumanCapitalOutlook.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_ASEAN_HumanCapitalOutlook.pdf).

<sup>122</sup> *ibid*

<sup>123</sup> This has been seen in other countries around as indigenous populations have fought for rivers to have juridical rights and won. As Tanasescu documents, the Whanganui River in New Zealand, the Vilcamba in Ecuador, and the Ganges in India all have gained legal status and people have sued on their behalf to maintain the quality of the water source. Unfortunately on the Mekong, granting the river legal rights would still fall prey to the same issues that the MRC faces. Even if one country granted legal rights to the river, there would be no reason why the other countries would adhere to these guidelines. Just as the MRC cannot supersede national sovereignty, granting rivers rights while a possibility elsewhere in the world, does not work in the case of the Mekong.

## Conclusion

On the river, following a drought or flood, the local populations who have lived for generations off the land have adopted and learned how to react resiliently. Ashley Dawson argues that the character of the modern state is to outsource risk to individuals and communities.<sup>124</sup> In doing this, the state abdicates or never took on many of the responsibilities necessary in order to respond to emergencies like droughts and floods.<sup>125</sup> The absence of state oversight allows for those effected to prefigure what their ideal society would look like without state intervention, much as Scott argued is the historical background of Zomia. George Katsiaficas sees much of Peter Kropotkin's ideas fitting in perfectly within his idea of *eros*.<sup>126</sup> Kropotkin wrote the best response to a disaster is that "which springs up spontaneously, under stress of immediate need, will be infinitely preferable to anything invented between four walls by hidebound theorists sitting on any number of committees."<sup>127</sup> The indigenous knowledges in Southeast Asia present an opportunity for reclaiming norms based on the principles of sustainability and subsistence. Katsiaficas notes that uprisings and resistance efforts are essential to revolution and alternative futures. Kropotkin said the reason people revolt is "simply because the conditions grew unbearable. Not one or two, or tens, but *hundreds* of similar revolts have preceded *and must precede* every revolution. Without these no revolution was ever wrought."<sup>128</sup> We can see traces of this in Krasaing, Cambodia. It was there that Laura Schoenberger documented how the Land Order 1 could be used to galvanize a movement to win back land. She says, that the "uncertain and arbitrary nature of state and state authority in Cambodia" can be destabilized by the Land Order 1.<sup>129</sup> By showcasing the lack of

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<sup>124</sup> Dawson, 242.

<sup>125</sup> Dawson, 253.

<sup>126</sup> Katsiaficas, 397.

<sup>127</sup> Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (London: Penguin, 2015), 61.

<sup>128</sup> Peter Kropotkin, "Modern Science and Anarchism," in *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*, ed. Roger Baldwin (New York, NY: Dover, 1970), 164.

<sup>129</sup> Schoenberger, 887.

responsiveness from the central state to the rural citizens, the indigenous people in Kraisang were able to oppose the state. Not only did they express opposition though, they delegitimized the state by creating a campaign focused on enabling citizens to have the legal rights afforded to them with Land Order 1. In that community they won and proved that rural resistance even in modern Cambodia can prevail.

It is these types of wins that can serve as catalysts for a larger movement. The people of the Mekong have an opportunity for an alternative future. This alternative is necessary to maintain their survival. Elites and peasants alike recognize the entire river ecosystem is in a period of change. As the Former Prime Minister Dung of Vietnam says, “Never before has the Mekong river basin been confronted with so many challenges.”<sup>130</sup> Whereas elites are seeing these challenges as ways for them to profit, it is the ecosystem people along the Mekong partaking in subsistence activities that provide the opportunity for an alternative sustainable future for the world. It is the biodiversity of the river and the diversity of tactics that may save them and provide a path forward. Perhaps it does not take a radically alternative future, but rather it takes reclaiming history and learning to live via the subsistence perspective to achieve *Buen Vivir* that is necessary along the Mekong. Hopefully this can serve as inspiration to other resistance struggles elsewhere and provide the basis for a heterogenesis of a new ecologically sustainable world.

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<sup>130</sup> Vidal “The Mekong River”

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