

Hydropower Dam and Development, Whose Development and for Whom?: A Lesson Learnt from Pak Mun Dam

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Abstract

Pak Mun hydropower dam is one of several government's development projects in which emerged from the claim of national security and rural development. Due to the long and continuing protests against Pak Mun Dam, the project is one of the most outstanding cases that capture the interest of the civil society in local, national and international context. The case is also considered as one of the longest social movements by grassroot people in Thailand and the world. In 1991 since the dam was built and up until now, the requests and protests of the Assembly of the Poor (affected people) against Pak Mun dam have continued for more than two decades due to the dam's severe impact to thousands of livelihoods and the ecology of the Mun River and many local communities at large. The impact of the dam has also generated the conflicts among stakeholders in the society. By conducting ethnographic study in the field site of the issue along with empirical evidences elicited from the community, the study presents the authentic data rooted from the field site. Therefore, this article is aiming to shed light on making understanding of how did government's development project generate social conflicts, how the problems

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were formed, how many social actors are interplayed, and how those conflicts can be solved as a lesson learnt and concerns for the government's policy planners and policy makers. At most, how this case could enhance classroom discussions in terms of the significance of local voices and public participation in the process of policy planning and decision making in government's projects of development in order to avoid future social conflicts.

Keywords: Pak Mun Hydropower Dam, Government's Development Project, Social Impact, Conflicts, Civil Society's Participation

DRAFT

เขื่อนผลิตกระแสไฟฟ้าพลังน้ำและการพัฒนา การพัฒนาของโครงเพื่อโครง: บทเรียนจากเขื่อนปากมูล

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บทคัดย่อ

เขื่อนพลังน้ำปากมูลลือเป็นหนึ่งโครงการพัฒนาในหลาย ๆ โครงการที่เกิดจากนโยบายของรัฐมีจุดประสงค์เพื่อการ改善ความมั่นคงทางพลังงานพร้อม ๆ กับการพัฒนาชนบทโครงการนี้ได้รับความสนใจอย่างกว้างขวางจากภาคประชาชนทั้งในระดับท้องถิ่น ระดับชาติ และระดับนานาชาติ หลังจากเขื่อนปากมูลสร้างขึ้นในปี พ.ศ. 2534 ได้มีการประท้วงคัดค้านจากกลุ่มสมัชชาคนจน ร่วมกับชุมชนที่ได้รับผลกระทบ ซึ่งได้ดำเนินเรื่อยมาจนถึงปัจจุบันยังวนกวนว่าส่องทศวรรษ ปรากฏทางสังคมนี้ถือเป็นหนึ่งในการเคลื่อนไหวของภาคประชาชนที่ยาวนานที่สุดในประเทศไทยและในบริบทโลกสาเหตุหลักในการประท้วงเกิดจากการได้รับความเดือดร้อนอันเป็นผลกระทบจากการสร้างเขื่อนต่อชุมชนหลายชุมชน จำนวนหลายพันคน ไม่ว่าจะเป็นด้านอาชีพ วิถีชีวิต รวมถึงระบบนิเวศของปลา แม่น้ำและชุมชน นองจากนั้นเขื่อนปากมูลยังเป็นที่มาของปัญหาและข้อพิพาทมากมาย ระหว่างกลุ่มคนหลายกลุ่มการศึกษานี้ใช้วิธีทางชาติพันธุ์วรรณ ซึ่งเป็นการศึกษาภาคสนามในพื้นที่จริง ใช้การเก็บข้อมูลโดยการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก ร่วมรับฟังข้อเท็จจริงจากคู่ขัดแย้งหลายกลุ่ม การศึกษานี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายในการทำความเข้าใจสาเหตุที่มาของปัญหาและข้อพิพาทของเขื่อนปากมูล โครงการสร้างของปัญหา กลุ่มทางสังคมต่างๆ ที่มีส่วนเกี่ยวข้องของปัญหา และนำเสนอวิธีการแก้ไขปัญหา เชิงนโยบาย รวมทั้งการถอดบทเรียนเรื่องการมีส่วนร่วมของภาคประชาชนในกระบวนการการกำหนดนโยบายของรัฐและโครงการพัฒนาต่างๆ และการ

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Introduction

As one living in Isan (northeast of Thailand), I have heard about Pak Mun Dam story quiet for a long while ago like a legend of the region, but I have never had firsthand experience visiting there, up until one day I had an exciting chance to join in a field study with Australian research team working on water management. They wanted to examine several aspects related to water after Pak Mun Dam e.g. water quality, water management, women role and water, hygienic and water, and so on. The research site is Don Samran village, one of affected villages from Pak Mun Dam construction. The village is situated alongside with Mun River, upstream the Pak Mun Dam, Ubon Ratchathani province. The team and I homestayed with villager's families in order to learn from them as well as to learn their livelihood by observing their daily life basis related to water i.e. living, cultural practices, beliefs and so on. As interpreter in the project, I have elicited information as much as the team did through many different interview topics with different groups of locals. I came to understand Pak Mun Dam story in-depth from the local views about their hardships and problems the community needs to cope with the dam, what are conflicts and how they were formed, including the opinions and feeling the locals have ward this government project of development as they perceived it as a top-down practice from the policy makers of the country, and the reasons that leads to the establishment of the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) in which is one of the powerful and longest social movement in Thailand. To me, the fighting of those indigenous people is very strong and touching, at the same time it is a heartbreak moment, thus, this is the point of departure which profoundly motivated me to write this article, to share their long journey of fighting and at least what lessons can we can learn from the locals' perspectives on a shade of development.

The team and I had homestayed for two weeks in 2016, November with a family located in, 105, Don Samran village, Moo 9, Kudchompoo sub-district, Phiboonmangahan district, Ubon Ratchathani province. The idea to homestay with the locals is one of the key ways to elicit authentic information, their way of life and thinking. We ate with them almost three times a day- their food which cooked in their

own way. Dinner time was a prime communal time to exchange conversations with each other, they also wanted to know what we have learnt and done in each day. Conversations in a natural setting are such an appropriate time and space to discuss on sensitive issues with them such as Pak Mun Dam, the conflicts and their fighting. I can remember well the way they proudly told the story of their fighting of Pak Mun Dam. At that moment, I really felt it was genuine conversations between human beings- genuine and touching. Conversation is always a good method to reflect and exchange perspectives as well as collecting targeted information we aim to know. Although the homestay was not a long period of time, it is such an impacted anthropological method-put yourself to be in a real environment and context, spend time with them, cook and eat together, join some activities and laugh with them as well as sharing experiences and perspectives. Thus, homestaying has established a sense of trust and sincerity between the informants and researchers and has created an access to the in-depth information.



Figure 1: Don Samran village and Pak Mun Museum



Figure 1: Homestaying at Don Samran village, one of the Mun River's communities

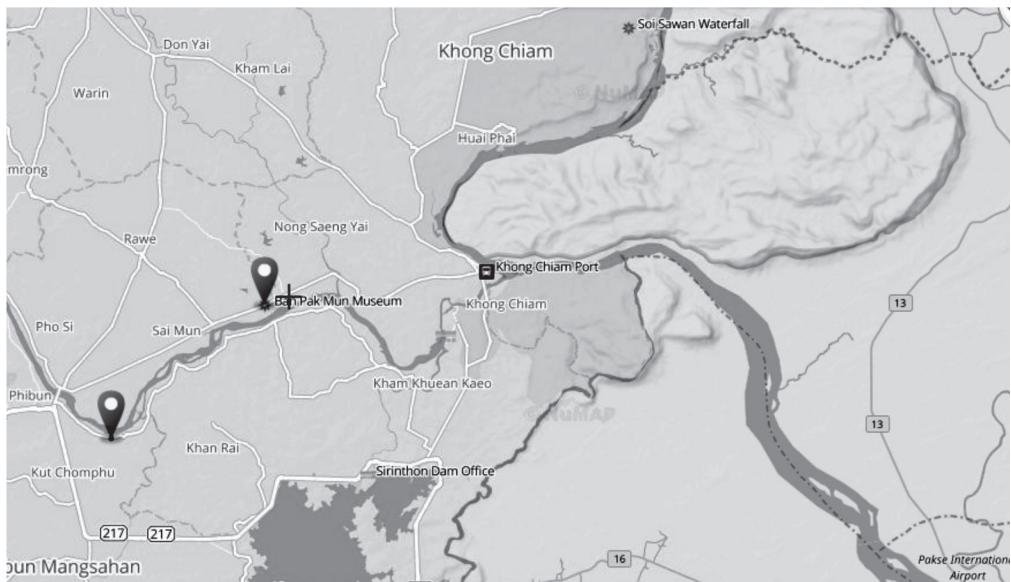


Figure 2: Don Samran village and Pak Mun Museum

Source: www.google.co.th

The Mun River and Its Significance to the Region

The Mun River is one of the vital bloodlines in Isan (the Northeast of Thailand), its origin is from Khao-Yai National Park, the area of Sankamphaeng Range, Nakorn Ratchasima province. The river is shared by many provinces, it flows 750 kilometers east through the Khorat Plateau in southern Isan - Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket provinces, and then joins the Mekong River at Khong Chiam district as a confluence area in Ubon Ratchathani province (www.sac.or.th, 2012). The “Pak Mun” literally means the river’s estuary or river mouth. Mun is the name of a river, meaning “inheritance” from the ancestors. The Mun River is very ecologically rich area with significant natural resources for thousand livelihoods of the communities along the river. Obviously the Pak Mun River’s communities have fish culture by nature, for them, the river and fishing mean not only their main income and living, it is their way of life which has been passing on their unique local identity, belief and knowledge from generations to generations. The fact from the Fishbio.com refers that the Mun/Chi River is a large catchment area of 117,000 km², and is one of the most fish diversity area in Thailand. The Mun River ecosystem possesses many complex aquatic features such as rapids, deep pools, seasonal floodplains, swamps, canals, and isolated ponds (www.fishbio.com, 2014). Undeniable, the Mun River is a rich natural resource for many communities along the river.

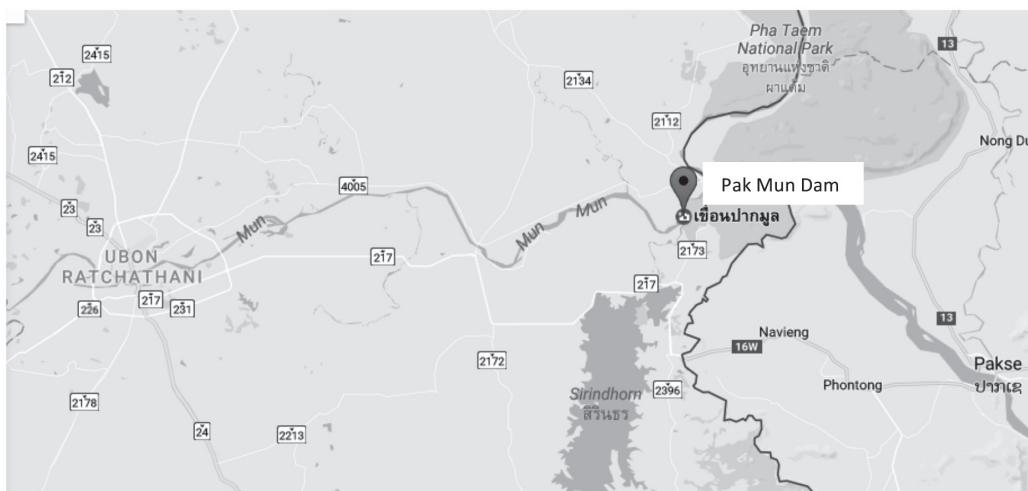


Figure 3: the Mun River and Pak Mun Dam

Source: www.google.co.th

Socio-cultural Context of Don Sam Ran village

Don Samran is one from five districts: Khong Chiam, Piboonmangsaan, Sirinthon, Sawang Wirawong and Tan Sum) which is affected from Pak Mun Dam. The Mun River is regarded as major blood line for southern Isan area, the river and its tributaries flow through 11 provinces of Northeastern Thailand, supporting livelihood of 10 million people (www.internationalriver.org, 2008). Since the Pak Mun Dam was built in Ubon Ratchathani province, many communities living along the river are affected by the negative impacts of the dam. “For Don Samran village, Mun River is more than a river but it has meaning to them, it is their way of life”, told by one of the key persons in the village, he is the village’s leader (not officially appointed by government but by his community role and participation), he is the second generation protesters of Pak Mun Dam. He was asked to brief the research team about the community information in general. He told, “the village was established for more than a hundred years with approximately 800-1000 inhabitants, its north faces the Mun River. Many generations live on fishery- main food, major income to building house and support family’s member education. The Mun River has profound influence on our socio-cultural and socio-economy as a life cycle in a year- fishery cycle, to rice cycle, and cultural and festival cycle” (Pinthong, 2016). Fishery has its own cycle of fish migration in certain months and depending on the river flow. Rice cycle relies on the Mun River and local irrigation- there are two times of rice paddy cultivation in a year- in-season and off-season or wet and dry seasons. The in-season rice is cultivated during rainy season from May to August, the farming depends upon the water from the natural rainfall. The off-season rice is started from November to January, the plantation relies on the local irrigation management which is from the Mun River. Cultural and festive cycle is also concordant with other cycle such as boat racing will be hold after the harvest season done. The arrival of Pak Mun Dam crucially impacted the sociocultural cycles of our community at large in several aspects (Pinthong, 2016).

Ecology of the Mun River: its relation to Mekong River and the community

Geologically, Pak Mun Dam is situated at the estuary of the Mun before it flows to meet the Mekong at the confluence area. With the fact that the two rivers have very close impact to each other- the Mun River is one of tributaries of the Mekong, and they do share the aquatic system which means the fish species, fish number and biodiversity. Before the homestaying in the village, the research team and I attended the lecture from professor on fishing from Ubon Ratchathani University, he kindly presented information on Mun River and Mekong River ecology. The lecture helped to clarify the close relationship between the two rivers in locally and internationally level- the Mun River and the Mekong River and the Mekong and the region. The route of the Mekong is shown as the following illustration.

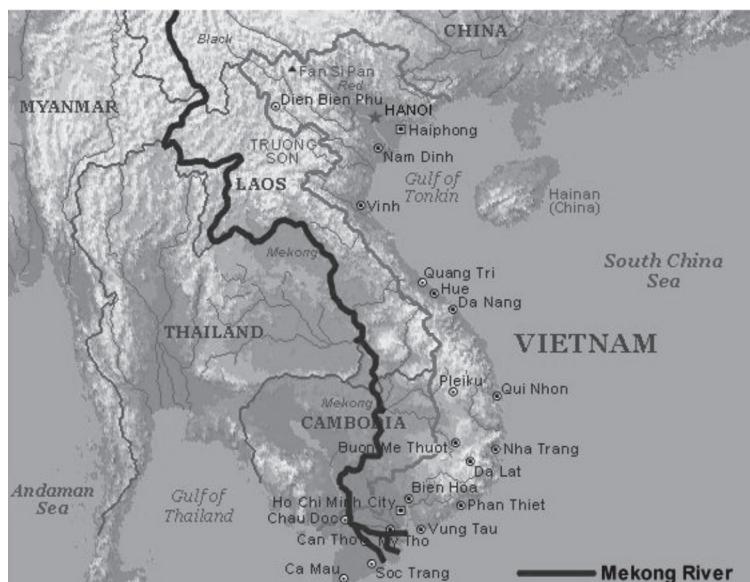


Figure 4: Route of the Mekong River

Source: <https://images.search.yahoo.com>

The dialectical relationship between the Mun River and the Mekong River

- 1) Mekong is the world second greatest fresh water fish species diversity area (the first one is Amazon, the greatest river in South America in Brazil).
- 2) The number of fish species is related to the hydrological pattern (river flow).
- 3) Hydropower dam blocks the river flow which influences to the fish migration.
- 4) The fish migration is relevant to the number of fish species and fish life cycle.
- 5) Fish production has less investment in comparison with different kinds of animal production, and it considered as environmental friendly food.
- 6) Flowing water is vital to life cycle of fish, still water reduces the number of fish migration (Juthakat, 2016).

Pak Mun Dam Project

Pak Mu Dam was first mentioned in the 1988 as Power Development plan and presented to the Cabinet of Minister as a multipurpose project (World Commission on Dams Final Report, 2000), the project was approved by the Cabinet in 1989 and it was included in the EGAT (Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand) Electricity Development Project under the 6th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1987-1997) (EGAT). The dam cost Bt 6.507 billion and was funded by the Thai government and the World Bank. The World Bank approved a Bt 1.4 billion load for the third Power System Project that included Pak Mun Dam. (www.internationalrivers.org, 2008). Finally, in 1991, EGAT started the construction on the Pak Mun Dam by blasting rapids with dynamites, the was built over the Mun River which is 82.5 kms away from the town and 6 kms from the confluence between the Mun and the Mekong Rivers, in the area of Ban Hua Hew, Khong Chiam district, Ubon Ratchathani province. The dam is 17 meters high and 300 meter long and with the large catchment area of 117,000 km². The crest is 6 meters wide and the maximum storage level is 111 meters above the mean sea level (MSL). The water discharge building is of reinforced concrete with 8 curve steel gate of 22.5 meters wide and 14.75 meters high. The maximum water discharge rate is 18,500 MCM per second. The hydropower Plant has

three generators, each of which is 43 MW installed capacity. The total installed capacity is 136 MW. With the annual energy production is 280 million units. The construction commenced in June 1990 and was completed in November 1994.



Figure 5: Pak Mun Dam

EGAT, the state enterprise who is major investor of Pak Mun Dam claims that Pak Mun Dam has numerous benefits to the region. It was such a rare occasion that Egat will be confronted with non-government sectors and was required to answer sensitive questions. By some connections, the research team and I had an excited and exclusive visit to EGAT in 2016 at Sirindhorn Dam office where is not that far from Pak Mun Dam, (this EGAT office is in charge of both dams: Sirindhorn Dam and Pak Mun Dam). EGAT officers kindly briefed the operation and the significance of the two dams for us. They claimed that two dams are operated to serve several public benefits: 1) irrigation- supplies water to the 150 km long upstream of the Mun River for agriculture purpose, 2) fishery- provides fish ladder and fish breeding center to promote fishery in the upstream area, 3) support Khong-Shi- Mun project- under the project, the water from the Mekong River is pumped to the agricultural area in the Shi River and Mun River in upper Isan and the excess water will be discharged to Pak Mun Dam for electricity production, 4) transportation- the dam crest can be

used as a route connecting Khong Chiam district and Sirindhorn district, 5) power generation- the hydropower plant helps stabilize the electricity supply in the northeast, and 6) minimize environmental impact- reduce effect from the environment by decrease the size of the project, the location of the dam was moved to 1.5 km upstream at Ban Hua Heo and the water storage level was reduced to + 108 m. The power generation capacity was reduced from 300 MW to 136 MW. The modification of the project has eliminated entire effect which caused by the dam construction on the two famous cataracts called Kaeng Tana and Kaeng Sapue as well as Don That temple. Additionally, they added that the dam has strengthen and stability of the power system, and it contributes to flood mitigation, water insufficiency in agriculture, fish breeding sources and tourist attractions in Ubon Ratchathani province (EGAT, 2016).

Life Before Pak Mun Dam

According to several interviews with the locals, their testimonials reveal that life before Pak Mun Dam was quite decent and sufficient, they can access to natural resources for food and income i.e. fishery. For the community, fishery is more than a livelihood being, it is their social world which has established their social reality. The community crucially relies on the resources provided by the river- major food and income are from fishing, water for agriculture (rice plantation and vegetable plantation), domestic water used in household, recreation activities, belief and festival related to the river and so on. The testimonial from the village leader also pointed that before the dam came, the community was living in close alliance- “we were more helpful, sharing and generous, resources are for all, we felt sufficient, we were happier, we were not fighting to each other, but now everything is changing”, said Pinthong, (Pinthong, 2016). For the community, the Mun River and fishery is their way of life. They live, learn, and pass on indigenous knowledge on fishing and fishing gears from generations to generations- there are 64 fishing methods and 72 types of fishing gears are found from the research conducted from Thai Ban researchers (the gathering of 200 locals of the Mun River communities who are the member of the Assembly of the Poor, (www.sarakadee.com, 2000).

Profound Impact of Pak Mun Dam

The village leader pointed several problems after the arrival of the dam, so I divided into two layers: physical environmental social problem and social group's conflict. The first problems involve with three aspects; 1) aquatic system of the river and fishery, 2) food and income and 3) domestic water quality and management. Another problem is dealing with the social group's conflicts- the conflict between the communities and government sectors, and the conflict within the communities. Firstly, I will address the physical environmental social problem; fish life cycle, an aquatic system, ecology of the communities along the Mun River and the Mekong River. The two rivers have close relationship in terms of fish species and fish ecology and biodiversity- fish from the Mekong will migrate to lay eggs in the Mun River by swimming against the river flow before going back to the Mekong. The fish lay their eggs along the rapids area but if the rapids in the Mun River are destroyed, it means the fish migration and their eggs laying are completely disturbed. Due to the fish's habit, they live in flowing water not still water, but the arrival of the dam has changed the natural flow of the river, the river became still water. When the dam's gate opens, the river flow is stronger and it erodes the river bank, and the fish and their eggs go with the strong flow of the river. At this point, the dam does change the river flow- the natural flow of the river became still water due to the blockage of the dam. Moreover, still water causes polluted water because it influences the increasing of unwanted water weeds, and polluted water causes diseases in fish. According to these consequences, the number of fish species and fish catch are continuing declined.

The following portion I want to point how the dam has destroyed the access to food, income and livelihood of the communities after the dam came;

1. The locals need to shift from their living of fishery to agriculture, cattle farming, organic farm in which they are not happy because it not their way of life.

2. The fish ladder built by EGAT cannot solve problem on fish migration from the Mekong to the Mun River because the Mekong fish are too big to use this ladder, it works only with the small fish.
3. The problem of nutrition was found along the Mun-Mekong community due to the decrease of fishery. The price of the fish is also increasing due to more difficulty in fishery.

The dam has made big blockage between the Mun River and the Mekong which changed the aquatic system of the Mun River- it blocked the natural flow of the river, the water had less flow and became more still, this disturbed the fish migration which tremendously affected to the number of fish species around the area. The government's policy of closing the dam gate for eight months of the year for electricity production, has made the change of the aquatic system of the Mun River, it leads to the decrease of fish catch of the whole community, and the decline in the number of fish catch has a strong hit to their access to food and income.

The dam also affected environmental problem- the insufficient water and water pollution. Water consumption of the community comes from the Mun River, but after the Pak Mun Dam was built, and the policy to close the dam's gate in a uncertain period of time is the key problem to the water quality and quantity- the quantity of the water is unpredictable, while the water quality is clearly declined because there are too much sediment to be consumed. Nowadays, the community cannot rely on main sources of water i.e. the Mun River and natural rain fall (they believe the natural rain fall today is full of chemical substance). For many years, they needed to spend a lot to buy drinking water from outside. Since the Mun River can no longer be a main resource for the community's living in terms of fishing and domestic use in house whole, thus the locals need to rely on the underground water and later on the water supply system provided by municipality. However, the community attempts to be self-reliant by having its own water tank to store water and installed the drinking water station. The community is wise enough to utilize solar power to operate filter machine to improve the

quality of water stored in water tank before distribute it to the households for domestic usage. After spending a lot to buy drinking water, the community agreed to produce their own drinking water by installing filter machine to improve water quality to reach the hygienic level which clean enough for drinking. Self-reliance may probably be the best way to survive and develop not waiting for the development regime from outside. Their choice to use alternative energy like solar cell power also reflects their perspective of sustainable energy development. Pak Mun Dam also affects domestic water used in the rice cycle. There are two time of rice growing: 1) rice grown from natural rain fall in rainy season (in-season) and 2) rice grown in dry season (off-season) from irrigation water 50 percent of villagers benefit water from irrigation which is preserved in Sirindhorn Dam. At this point, their way of life and identity has totally changed due to the impact of the dam, the number of fish is tremendously decreasing in a huge number, so that they needed to shift to do agriculture, cattle farming and labor instead. Nowadays, only 10 to 20percentage of fishery can be seen in the community.

Secondly, I want to illustrate on social group's conflict which appears in two dimensions: 1) conflicts between the affected group of the dam (AOP) and government sectors, and 2) the conflicts within the community due to the dam. The conflicts between the affected group of the dam (AOP) and government sectors are mainly from the decreasing number of fishery which crucially affects to their food and income, they pointed that the dam is the threat to their livelihood. Due to several protests for many years, many governments (different periods of time) just listened to their requests and promised to solve problems but it never been solved seriously and properly, the AOP strong feels that their problems are ignored and their human beings are marginalized. The above mention is the first dimension of conflict- the direct conflict between the AOP and government together with EGAT. This conflicts leads to another conflict between the locals and government sectors i.e. 1) the affected community and the staff from department of fishery who keeps eyes on the locals not to use illegal fishing gears (the villagers needed to use special fish's gears due to more difficulty in fish catch after the dam came), 2) the affected community and the staff from EGAT, and 3) the affected community and the

government staff in different sectors who are mediums to communicate and negotiate with the affected communities. Until today the protests of the AOP are continuing for more than 26 years.

Another dimension of conflict is the one within the community. Pak Mun Dam impact does bring conflict among locals in the same community which is the most painful conflict for the community, the testimonial from the locals. The arrival of Pak Mun Dam as government development project in terms of energy security and water irrigation does generate conflict among locals in the community. This conflict has polarized the community into three different groups based on their conflict of opinion and conflict of interest toward the dam; 1) Anti-dam, the majority of locals are in this group, they have opposed Pak Mun Dam and they joined the AOP in the protests, 2) Pro-dam, they think they would benefit from dam and the compensation payment from EGAT, and 3) Neutral (no opinion), this group doesn't have much opinion on the issue and tries to avoid conflicts. Before the dam came, they used to live like a big family; they were ready to help each other and shared natural resources. The situation of Pak Mun Dam in which destroyed their livelihood in fishery, and natural resources became insufficient for everyone. The conflict due to Pak Mun Dam has generated disagreement and argument among groups within the community- the conflict broke down unity and trust of people in the community, they became doubtful in each other, less trust in each other, and selfish. In this manner, Pak Mun Dam has made the situation when the individual interests have displaced the mutual interest.

The compensation, is it a help or a trap?

In 1995, the cabinet approved compensation payment to affected households from the dam for their loss of income in fishery for three years during the dam construction- the government is responsible for one year and EGAT (a state enterprise who is the investor of the dam) is responsible for two years compensation payment. There are criteria of compensation payment: land lost, assess lost, occupation lost, infrastructure lost, fisherman, and fishery. In sum, 63 villages were compensated for farmland affected, 31 villages were compensated for

diminished fishery income, 30 villages were compensated for land and properties flooded and 16 villages were compensated for damages to homes (Thailand Development Research Institute Report, World Commission on Dam, 2000). On the one hand, the household affected from the dam argued that the way of the evaluation and the compensation were unfair because it was based on the three years loss of fishery and income during the dam construction, but in fact the lost of their fishery, income and livelihood is forever since the dam was built. Moreover, the affected group claimed the compensation was low, unfair and not covered the affected households. Besides, the compensation payment was set in such a complicated and suspicious method (Silaluk, 2016);

- 1) the compensation was paid through the Cooperative Saving Operation and the criteria was set by government and EGAT.
- 2) to receive the compensation, villagers needed to sign contract to borrow the money (their compensation) from the Cooperative Saving Operation, and when they borrow money, they needed to pay interest. In this sense, the process made they borrowed their own money with interest and they needed to pay it back.
- 3) By loan contract, the villagers needed to pay back the money they borrowed (their compensation) with its interest back to the Cooperative Saving Operation, and if they cannot pay back, they will be sued in a court.
- 4) The compensation is paid through the saving union which established for this purpose. Most villagers points that the payment process is too complicated and unfair, and among of payment is less than what the cabinet has approved.



Figure 6: Fish ladder

According to many years of protests against Pak Mun Dam of the AOP, their major request is to open the dam's gate for a longer period of time for the fish migration in the Mun River, but government and EGAT could not respond to their request. Instead EGAT decided to build a fish ladder claiming that the fish passage could effectively support the fish migration. After Pak Mun Dam construction completed, EGAT installed the fish ladder in 1994 with the budget of 2 million Baht on the purpose of supporting upstream fish migration. Until now the fish ladder was proven useless because the majority of fish downstream from the Mekong is too big to use the ladder for their migration to the Mun River, only small fish can go upstream by the ladder. EGAT had an attempt to present social responsibility by offering some CSR projects for the communities e.g. distributed fingerlings to school and communities, enhanced career training, offered education funding and etc. However, those CSR projects offered by EGAT in order to present social responsibility in the case of Pak Mun Dam cannot make the situation better because those projects seemed never touch on the real problems and conflicts to reach the solution of Pak Mun Dam impact.

The Assembly of the Poor (AOP)

AOP is a social movement by grassroot people, the group is formed by affected communities from the dam's impact from many parts of Thailand. The group performs protests to raise their problems from the impact of Pak Mun Dam project. Before Pak Mun Dam construction was completed in 1994, the protestors seized equipment at construction site; youth and women coved rapids to prevent them from blasting, in the end, Pak Mun Dam completed and commissioned. In 1995, the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) was formed, their members increased to 20,000 people (6,000 of which represent villagers affected by dam), they had stage 99 days protest in front of Government House in Bangkok. The government's policy on closing the dam for electricity production made the decrease number of fish in the Mun River, this severely attacked the communities livelihood in fishery which is the major living of the communities. Thus, the locals affected from the dam are active members to form the Assembly of the Poor (AOP). In 2001, Prime Minister Thaksin approved to open Pak Mun Dam gate for one year in order to study the effect of the dam. The research on effects of the dam on the ecosystem, economy and society was conducted by the cooperation of Ubon Ratchathani University and Thai Baan Research Center. The research shown that opening of the dam gates can return of over 152 fish species to the Mun River; the National Human Rights Commission criticized the government for not involving affected communities in the decision to close the gates as required by the constitution. Under advice of Ubon Ratchathani University, Prime Minister Thaksin ordered to open the dam gates longer- May to August (before the gates open between July to September) to allow more fish migration. Later on, under the military government, 20,000 signatures were submitted to the Thai Cabinet to require the gates closed permanently, but many signatures subsequently to have been falsified.

After the dam was built, the communities have shown attempts to raise their voices on several problems and conflicts emerged from Pak Mun Dam in which oppressed them, those problems were reflected to the government several times, but in the end, their problems have never been solved sincerely by the government who was a policy maker of the dam project. The AOP perceived that the government

seemed not taking their problems into account, their voices seemed to be ignored from policy maker who were in charge of the dam project (government and EGAT), and it seemed like the communities along the Mun River are invisible and marginalized. On the contrary, government approved to close the dam's gate due to the need of EGAT for electricity production. When the dam's gate was closed for long period of time, it tremendously affected the livelihood of the communities at large. Therefore, the problems of the AOP due to Pak Mun seemed to be unsolved until nowadays, the mentioned consequences have become the main reason why the AOP has been negotiated and performed protests for more than 26 years up until today (Pinthong, 2016).



Figure 7: Pak Mun Museum

The research team was introduced to the Pak Mun Museum situated not far from Don Samran village in Sai Mun village where the Mun River also runs passes by. The museum symbolizes the existence of the AOP and the fighting of the poor. Visiting Pak Mun Museum truly ensured me the empirical evidences of Pak Mun people, their struggles and fighting to protect their valuable resources which their ancestor has passed on to them i.e. the river, resources for living (food and income), indigenous knowledge, and the most important is their identity being. The museum was built in 1999 and opened for the public in 2003. The key persons who run the museum are NGO activists and the community's committees. Most supports are from outside i.e. academic group, middle class people, and CSR programs.

The museum displays the geographical data of the area, the Mun River ecology and the fishing culture of the Mun River's communities. The gathering items such as local fishing gears, the collection of diverse fishes and plants species inhabited for decades in the Mun River. Local people in the communities helped to donate fishing gears which were simply made from local bamboo. The display of the collection of diverse fish and plant species found in the Mun River, some were found before the dam was constructed and they later disappeared after the dam came. Information on beliefs and traditional practices related the river and fishing are also presented. The highlight of the museum is the display of drawings, pictures and news which best tells stories of the grassroot movements against Pak Mun Dam. The museum also provides a zone for discussion, seminars, trainings and activities related to Pak Mun. Another focus of the museum is to provide knowledge on conservation activities in the communities i.e. fish reservation and solar cell energy. The museum also owns radio station and community saving union. The radio channel acts as a tool to communicate with the community while the community saving union helps to support loan to the people in the community. In this light, Pak Mun Museum is a representation of the significance of the Mun River not only in terms of rich aquatic system and natural resources but also "something" which profoundly constructs Pak Mun people's identity- their livelihood, career, way of life, belief, and especially their identity being (who they are). Undoubtedly, they posses strong sense of belonging to the Mun River which they love, respect and preserved. Moreover,

AOP is symbolic representation of the grassroot movement fighting against the oppression generated from government policy on development.

Social Actors Interplayed in Pak Mun Dam Case

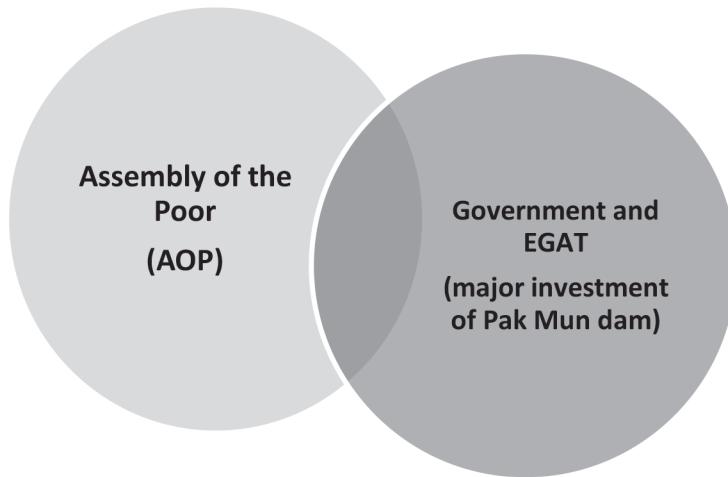


Figure 8: Social actors interplayed in Pak Mun Dam Case
The number 3,4 and 5 represent social actors in the case

According to homestaying and several interviews with the locals, Don Samran is one of rich areas of grassroot movement on the issue of Pak Mun Dam. Pak Mun Dam does generate conflicts with social actors interplayed in the event. There are four groups of social actors interacted in Pak Mun case: 1) Government and EGAT, 2) the Assembly of the Poor (AOP), 3) Non-governmental Organizations or NGOs, 4) Media, and 5) academics. According to several interviews and meeting with different groups, I realized that each group owns their sets of social reality: discourse and ideology for example. The first group is government and EGAT is a representation of development propaganda who determines national policy to make sure the country can be competed in the world system. EGAT is a state enterprise who is an agency between state authority and company who is a crucial influence to push forward policy in energy security to the level of national policy. EGAT is an investor

in Pak Mun Dam and several dams in Thailand with the claim of national energy security. Both government and EGAT sit on the mainstream discourses of modernization and development, thus they need to drive the nation policy on development as well as national energy security (Manorom, 2005). They see the need to develop rural and poor areas in Thailand, and Isan is one of them (northeast of Thailand).

The second group is the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) who is direct opponent of the first group (government and EGAT). AOP's protests demonstrate their problems facing from Pak Mun Dam, they require problem solving from the policy makers who approved the dam project. AOP symbolizes one of the most powerful social movements by grassroot people. The AOP own their set of reality- the discourse of the loss of the poor and discourse of poor's fighting against the oppression.

The third group is the NGOs, their stance is on the discourse of fighting against injustice practice in society, so they advocate the social movements of non- governmental group i.e. civil group. With the advanced communication and social networking today, NGOs at the same time own their channel of communication (media) e.g. website and newspaper, by this way, they can produce and distribute their own discourse. The forth group is the media who functions as watch dog of society, their role is to observe and report different sets of reality from different social groups.

The last group is academics who are lecturers and researchers. They function to reveal sets of reality produced by different groups. To me, I see the overlapping roles of NGOs, media and academic, they are also part of civil society and support the fight of people. They share a similar social function i.e. a watch dog, they reveal facts and falsify sets of social realities of different groups. They aim to meet mutual ways in problem solving, advocate people from suppression and attempt to balance equality in society. For Pak Mun case, it can be viewed that the AOP has strong support from the civil society i.e. NGOs, media and academics. Pak Mun case illuminates a confrontation between government and state agencies with the civil

society, there are power and negotiation interplayed as well as different discourses produced by various social groups.

Pak Mun Case as Failure of Government's Development Project

It is simple to answer why Pak Mun case is viewed as a failure of government's development project, the dam project has generated several profound problems more than contributing benefits to the local communities. The requests of the AOP are heard but they are never taking in account to a real practice, their problems are never been seriously and sincerely solved. The proof of this case is obvious- the long scenario of social movement by grassroot people for more than two decades, and it is still continuing until today. The problems and conflicts due to the impact of the dam can be summarized here again.

1. The locals more than 62 villages 6,000 households in the dam area needed to move out and relocated to the new area where there is no connection with their ways of life in terms of socio-economy and socio-cultural dimensions. At the end, many needed to leave their homes heading to the city working as cheap labor.
2. Compensation payment method from EGAT is set in complicated system and unfair manner.
3. The community's livelihood in fishery was attacked.
4. The fish cycle and aquatic system of the Mun River are destroyed.
5. The ecology of the Mun River which is a vital access to food and income of the community is under the threat.
6. Conflicts among social groups; government and EGAT vice versa AOP, and conflict among groups within the community.

Pak Mun Dam case is also recognized by the United Nation Development Program as one of the longest grassroot movement. The World Commission on Dam (WCD) made a conclusion of the failure of Pak Mun Dam (www.internationalrivers.org, 2008);

7. The capacity to produce electricity is less than what expected in the plan-from 150MW to 20.81MW (1995-1998).

8. The project is fail in terms of investment cost and benefits- the estimated budget for construction is 3,880 million baht but the real budget spent is 8,000 million baht.
9. The dam cannot only serve the real objective of energy, but also it creates social problems i.e. the decrease of fish number 50 %, demolish aquatic system and fish life cycle both in the Mun and the Mekong Rivers. More than 50 rapids which are the crucial for fish egg laying in the Mun River were under the water level of the dam.
10. Pak Mun Dam caused severe ecological damage affecting an estimated 20,000 people. Since the completion of the dam, no real irrigation benefits from the dam is made, and the number of fish catch upstream of the river has reduced.

Pak Mun Dam project as national energy security has become a social debatable issue at large in social sphere not only among the local communities who are affected from the project but the civil society i.e. academic members, social activists and media in how does the dam affect the communities along the Mun River. The concern puts emphasis on the impact of the dam to the communities' livelihood of fishery which means the major income and living of the communities, and their way of life. If the Pak Mun Dam project would provide enough space for mutual public participation in decision making process and have enough closed studies related to the impact of the dam in a variety of socio-cultural dimension, the endless protests against Pak Mun Dam would not be continued. This consequences have made problems and conflicts which lead to the communities gathering to yield their oppose Pak Mun Dam. After the dam was built, it profoundly threat the river ecology and the communities' livelihood in several ways, and still today the AOP requests have not been responded in an appropriate manner and their problems have not been solved seriously by many government, this made the key point of the protest against the Pak Mun dam by groups of villagers, social activists and Assembly of the poor (AOP).

Apart from the negative impact of dam as mentioned, Pak Mun Dam is one of clear examples of failure of government's development project, the case has created oppositions among people from different sectors i.e. locals, state agencies, capital group and NGOs. Moreover, the project does generate severe conflict and tension between pro-dam and anti-dam groups within the same community. "It was the most painful wound of the community, the conflict has divided the community into many groups, this disagreement has break down community's unity and trust among people in the community, this government development project has polarized people in the community", said with a heartbreak voice and tone of the community's leader of Don Samran village (Pinthong, 2016).

Most importantly, the government's development project like the case of Pak Mun has unintentional ruined the Mun River ecology and the communities' way of life i.e. natural resources and unique indigenous identity in terms of fishery knowledge, in which they take generations to generations to be constructed. Unfortunately, these valuable inheritances cannot be reconstructed. Additionally, the salient point is the case has reflected the government policy which has marginalized the local voices from the national policy, and the way that the government policy has made their people as its opponent, and the way that government policy has generated conflicts which polarized people in the same community.

The Lesson Learnt from Pak Mun Dam Case

Pak Mun Dam and the Assembly of the Poor's movement is no longer a local case but this social movement is recognized by United Nations as a model of grassroot people's movements for sustainable development, and it is a case that most studied by academics and researchers from different parts of the world in diverse dimensions (www.internationalriver.org, 2008). The movement which has been continued for more than 26 years (up until now) has become issue of interest in terms of the powerful fighting of the poor against the state's policy which oppressed them. As one who is in the region (northeast of Thailand) and has researched in the field site on the issue, I was genuinely inspired to reflect a story through the

lenses of ethnographic study and authentic experience as participant observer.

According to the information and evidence mentioned on the previous portion, although Pak Mun Dam case represents the failure of government development project, what have we learn from problems and conflicts resulted from the case?

Lesson learnt: Do we admit we failed? Do we accept to learn?

- 1) Government's development project should pay attention to how development concept is defined. By all the stakeholders involved, government should provide access and space for public participation in interpreting the concept of development, its concept should be mutually agreed by diverse social groups who belong to the society.
- 2) The policy planning should be made based on the information gathered from the public hearing and the studies of EIA. The policy planning should emerge from the bottom-up perspective not the top-down one from the authority (government).
- 3) The EIA studies and other processes related to the project should transparent and can be questioned and falsified by civil society. In Pak Mun case, a flawed EIA was conducted (Chuenchom Sangarasri Greacen and Chris Greacen, 2012).
- 4) Government's development project should heavily study the calculation of investment cost and benefits before the decision is made because the project may end up wasting huge national budget. The policy planning should not have hidden agenda or takes side some group of society. In Pak Mun case, the electricity the dam can produce is much less than the expected number in the plan, it was a great loss of benefit and profit.
- 5) The problems and conflicts generated from government development's project should not be prolonged and overlooked. The problems should

be solved at the right points in straightforward manner. In Pak Mun case, the protests of the AOP have continued for 26 years up until today, it indicated the problems and conflicts have never been solved directly.

- 6) The decision making process should acknowledge participation from local voices and other voices in society. The process should provide accessibility to multi voices in a fair manner. Government should provide channel of communication for civil society in which they can voice their opinions and participation. In Pak Mun case, the public hearing was arranged in rush and short time, and local people have no enough access to join it. Additionally, the policy maker should not overlook local communities in terms of their voices, identity and indigenous wisdom in which they value and preserve. In Pak Mun case, the local identity and indigenous knowledge of fishery culture are overlooked, valuable knowledge on fishing gears and fishing methods was vanished by the impact of the dam. Government's development project should not marginalize groups of people and favors another.
- 7) Government's development project should not heavily interfere with natural resources in which take centuries to be constructed, and all humans still dependent on it. In Pak Mun case, there are several reports on the threat to ecology, aquatic system of the Mun and the Mekong, fish diversity and community livelihood. The impact of the dam has cut the community to their access to food and income in fishery.
- 8) Government should refrain from being an agent of conflicts among groups of people by introducing the project that is controversial. Pak Mun case has generated layers of conflicts among different groups- government and locals (AOP), locals with state agencies, locals with locals. Government's development project should not polarized people to be opponents to the state and to each other.

9) Government's development project should be based on the context of globally and locally concerns; the idea of keeping the balance between development and conservation in which the key to enhance sustainable development. Government's development project should put emphasis on process to establish sustainable development base on mutual agreement and participation.

Frequently, the government's development projects can turn out to be national disaster in terms of endless chained problems and conflicts of society if those observations above would never seriously take into account by the policy makers, in which this could imply that we do not admit that we failed and we have denied to learn the lessons from the past failure. On the contradictory, we should ultimately benefit from the lessons in the past practice although it was a failure one, development practice should be established based on the concerning of mutual benefit for all in a fair manner. Crucially, the practice should assist the society to improve a better practice in which enhancing mutual understanding and participation in our society. At this light, the lessons from Pak Mun Dam case can be beneficial to public practitioners in diverse areas of study i.e. social sciences, political sciences, fishery, environment and etc. The case can be a salient lesson learnt to policy makers in relation to concept of national development and public participation.

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