

The Political Ecologies of Catastrophic
Disasters and Slow Violence:
Thinking about the Impacts of the
Xe Pian Xe Namnoy Hydropower Dam
in Southern Laos

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Xe Pian Xe Namnoy Dam

- 410 MW Capacity, \$1.02 billion
- “Build-Operate and Transfer” Project
- SK Engineering and Construction Co., Ltd (South Korea) (26%), Western Power (South Korea) (25%), Ratchaburi Power (Thailand) (25%) and the Lao PDR Government (24%)
- South Korean Overseas Development Aid support
- Electricity mainly being exported to Thailand

Dam Breaks

- On July 23, 2018 “saddle dam D” of Xe Pian Xe Namnoy dam broke.
- Almost 5 billion m³ of water released
- Six villages were wiped out
- Seven villages heavily impacted
- Over 16,0000 people impacted, 7,000 people displaced
- 71 people killed or missing
- Impacts down the Sekong River into Cambodia

Laos dam collapse



**Hundreds missing
as hydropower dam
collapsed July 23:
state media**





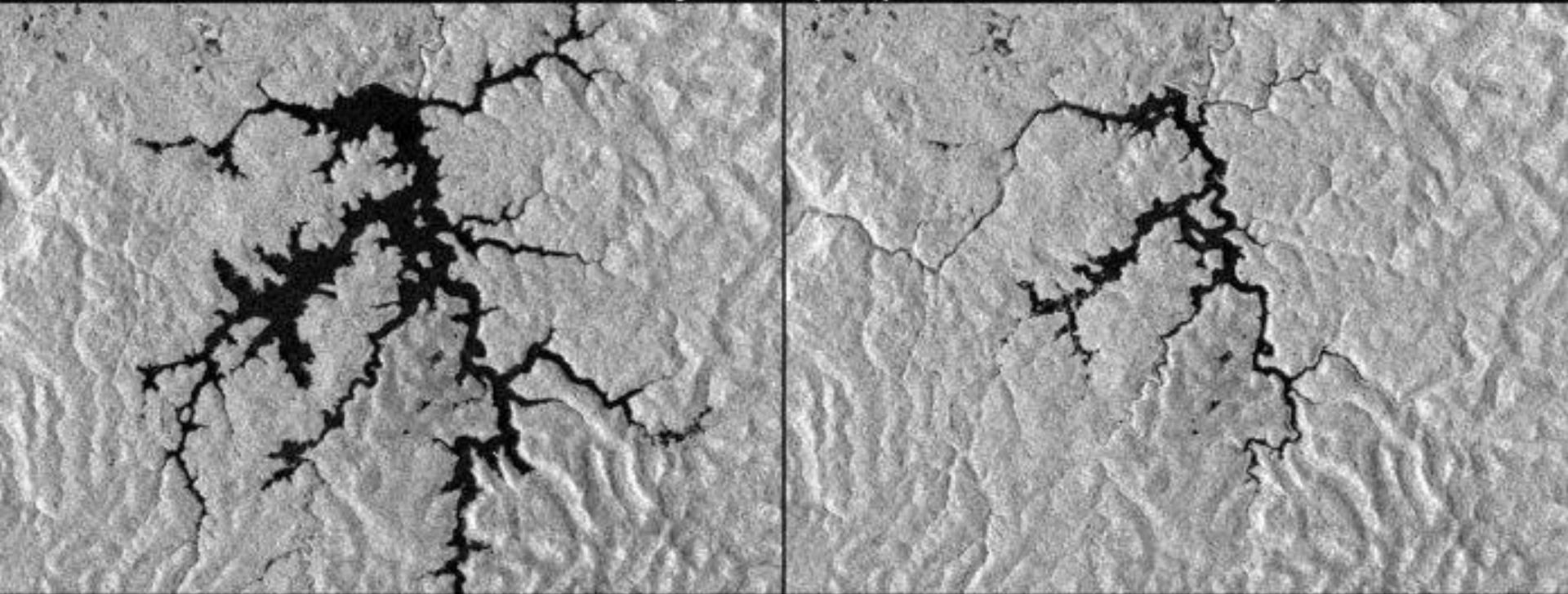
LAOS DAM CRISIS



any must take responsibility

July 13 to July 25, 2018

Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy lake (Copernicus Sentinel-1)



Before dam breach (2018-07-13)

After dam breach (2018-07-25)



“A Cliff of Water”

- “The water didn’t just flow into the village, it came down like a cliff of water.”
- There were no warnings provided regarding the impending disaster.
- The death and devastation that occurred undoubtedly traumatized many of those who survived the deluge.







Project ID: 100
 Scale: 1:50,000
 Date: 10/2010
 Prepared by: [unreadable]









Responses to catastrophic violence





ສູນພັກຊົ່ວຄາວ ຂອງຜູ້ປະສົບໄພນໍ້າຖ້ວມ
ຈຸດບ້ານ ຫາດຍາວ, ເມືອງ ສະໜາມໄຊ, ແຂວງ ອັດຕະປື

Temporary Residence for Affected Area Residents
at Hadyao Village, Sanamxay District, Attapeu Province



RATCH







Slow or Infrastructural Violence

- Slow Violence (Nixon 2011; Blake and Barney 2018) or Infrastructural Violence (Rogers and O'Neill 2012; Li 2017) are important concepts.
- Nixon's (2011) interpretation of slow violence is that it is linked to poverty-inducing policies that are often hidden from public view, or accumulate slowly over time.

Slow Violence on the Heuny (Nya Heun) in the Reservoir

- In 1996, thousands of Heuny (Nya Heun) Indigenous peoples in 10 villages were resettled from the reservoir area of the Xe Pian Xe Namnoy dam.
- The South Korean investor, Dong Ha Co., had serious economic problems during the 1997-98 Asian Economic Crisis and the dam was cancelled.
- But the people had already been moved before the dam was postponed and people were not allowed to return to their original villages.

Reservoir Area Resettlement





The Heuny (Nya Heun)

- Those resettled did not have sufficient agricultural or forest land.
- Therefore, many families unofficially moved back to their old villages, while some maintaining a partial presence in the resettlement villages.
- However, in 2012 the project was revived by a South Korean/Thai/Lao consortium, and plans to relocate people from the reservoir emerged for a second time.
- People have strongly objected to the conditions associated with resettlement. Little media or other attention.

Catastrophic Events

- Risks viewed as catastrophic, fatal and high impact, no matter how infrequent or rare, tend to be perceived as disproportionately risky relative to those hazards that are common and chronic (Robbins et al. 2014).
- People consider catastrophic events worthy of humanitarian aid.
- Catastrophic events attract attention.

The Slow Violence of the Xe Pian Xe Namnoy Dam

- The Xe Pian Xe Namnoy dam has been causing slow infrastructural violence for over 20 years (in the reservoir area) and will cause ecological and social impacts far into the future (in the reservoir and downstream areas).
- However, this slow violence has not attracted much media, government or public attention. These impacts are not defined as “disasters”.

From Catastrophic to Slow Violence

- Those living downstream from the dam along the Xe Pian River and displaced by the breaking of the Xe Pian Xe Namnoy dam lived in temporary houses and received just \$12/person/month to live on.
- It took four years before they could move into new houses or return to their villages.
- There are still problems with accessing agricultural lands.

Conclusions

- The Xe Pian Xe Namnoy dam has caused both catastrophic violence and slow violence. Both are types of infrastructure violence
- Slow violence in the reservoir area came first
- Catastrophic violence came later when the dam broke
- Now those affected by catastrophic violence are facing a different type of slow violence