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### Hydroelectric Dams: The Lao Government's Luxury Trap

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# **HYDROELECTRIC DAMS**

## **THE LAO GOVERNMENT'S LUXURY TRAP**

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By M.K. Laurel

## Abstract

Hydroelectric dams can cause more destruction to the land more than it can bring economic stability to a country. Project costs can range from hundreds of millions to billions of dollars, leading to the stripping of the environment around the river and displacement of people who live along it. Particularly in Laos, these hydroelectric dam projects have been growing amongst the network of rivers, branching off of the Mekong River. Although the Lao economy has increased its earnings, the process of creating these renewable energy sources causes socio-environmental damage. These damages are familiar to many dams around the world; however, the Lao government is doing its best to hide the facts locally and globally.

In my findings, it was discovered that the Lao government continually alters documents about the hydroelectric dams to skew the perception of their project. They understand the damages to the rivers and its inhabitants. They also understand the displacement of their people, robbing them of their livelihoods in order for the Lao government to gain economically. Their knowledge with their lack of responsibility is exposed, but needs to be addressed.

My research of the Lao government, its hydroelectric dams, and its responses to its project was done through an environmental justice lens. It is an interdisciplinary research that explores the political corruption, the role of media, and the environment in order to frame the Lao government's unjust activities. The goal of my research is to spark a conversation about the interconnected issues of hydroelectric dams in Laos, such as human and environmental rights.

## The Human Condition

While exploring the issue of environmental injustice, I encountered three different yet influential people around the world: Timothy Morton, a professor at Rice University, Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church, and Yuval Noah Harari, an Israeli professor. Respectively, they explained how humans should think about the environment, what will happen to the environment, and why we as humans are so destructive to the environment and, in turn, self-destructive. The issue of environmental injustice is more interconnected than most humans think.

Interconnectivity is the idea Morton brings up in his book, *The Ecological Thought*. Environmental injustice is not just the idea of "Nature." Unfortunately, humans labeled the environment as "Nature" as if it is separate from the human experience. That is not the case. Humans, and all of their issues, are embedded into the environment.<sup>1</sup> Human problems are the Earth's problems. However, what humans fail to realize is the reciprocation of it being that the Earth's problems are also human problems. When labeling the environment as "Nature" and viewing it as something separate from humans, humans do not view the environment as their responsibility or something that coexists with humans.

The social inequality issues and human-enamored economies, created by humans, directly affect the environment we live in. For example, poverty leads to unequal control of power, which leads to the governments handling, or mishandling, of waste management and the economy. This then leads to pollution and destruction in poorer areas due to the unattractiveness and insignificance of the area to the country. The reason for particular areas being targeted for mishandling of its environment and money is in order for the country to improve aesthetically and earn economic gains.

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<sup>1</sup> Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, explained how human activities have destroyed the world we live in. He stated, "[The] cost of damage caused by selfish lack of concern is much greater than economic benefits."<sup>2</sup> The human condition is for us is that we want to live a good life, which is often paired with the idea of money. Humans want more money. Humans want a better life because of obtaining more money. But is our affluenza for money more important than the damage to the environment because of it? What is this luxury trap that humans are stuck in? Why can we not fathom the idea of the environment being more of a priority?

Harari explains the idea of the "luxury trap" in his book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. A luxury trap is when a luxury becomes taken for granted. People become dependent on the luxuries and begin to believe that they cannot live without it.<sup>3</sup> For example, phones were deemed as a luxury. However, as humans became more dependent on it, it soon became a necessity and an obligation to purchase and use. Now every household in the United States and other developed countries has a phone. In developing countries, many businesses and government offices will have phones as well. The idea of luxury traps is universal, even when it comes to our need for resources and the ability to utilize it in order to earn money.

### **The Lao Government**

The country's formal name is Lao People's Democratic Republic. However, Laos is far from a "democratic republic."<sup>4</sup> After its civil war and the Vietnam War, the Royal government weakened and became subjected to the control of the communist party, which was influenced by the Vietnam and the Soviet bloc. Laos then became a single-party socialist country or, for a more blunt term, communist. Laos is only one out of the seven countries in the world to remain a communist country, as well as one of the poorest countries in Asia and in the world.

Still a communist government, the country became a part of the free market economy system in 1986.<sup>5</sup> Being a landlocked country, it is easier for them to become long-term economic partners with their neighboring communist countries, China and Vietnam. Under the Laotian government, most land opportunities are given to Chinese and Vietnamese companies to utilize through a contract, allowing Laotian land to be ruled by these companies. The country is also able to trade with Thailand—whose culture, and even some words in its language, are similar to that of Laos. However, compared to Laos, Thailand is definitely more modern and liberal in its government.

Laos is also a developing country, with many of its inhabitants living in rural villages and limited amounts of resources to export. Due to their poor conditions, Laos is willing to make any kind of business as long as it is deemed successful. "Successful businesses" includes the exploitation of its land through lumber exportations, destruction of forests for the rubber material in trees, and creating new infrastructures on land once owned by farmers and villagers. A more

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<sup>2</sup> Francis. "Laudato Si' (24 May 2015) | Francis." *Laudato Si'* (24 May 2015) | Francis. Accessed May 02, 2016. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>3</sup> Harari, Yuval N. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> "East & Southeast Asia :: Laos." Central Intelligence Agency. February 25, 2016. Accessed April 06, 2016. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/la.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "U.S. Relations With Laos." U.S. Department of State. February 09, 2015. Accessed April 06, 2016. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2770.htm>.

recent example of this “success” is the building of dams, which are now in use to sell electricity to Thailand and Vietnam. It is a new and valuable source for Laos’s economy, where dams are now the country’s very own luxury trap. However, these dams cause more harm to the Lao people than doing any good.

In order to construct these dams, Laos needs to acquire the land. Any villages or people around the river must be moved out in order to start building. Being a communist country, these people receive little to no notice on the construction of dams, causing them to become displaced without a plan to move. Many of these villages depend on the land for their lives, including fresh water, food, and a source of income. Some of these villages have existed for centuries and depend on the rivers heavily. This is limited to them when the Lao government overrules their property rights and human rights.

### **What’s Out There Now?**

The Lao government has restricted the access of information on the development of hydroelectric dams on the Mekong River and has silenced those who have tried to speak up about the environmental damages. By doing so, the government is able to skew the public’s view for economic gains because it does not appear to have strong evidence against their hydroelectric dam projects. Their blocking of knowledge also makes it appear as if the hydroelectric dams are “successful.”

The development of dams has been an ongoing controversial subject in Laos since 2010. These dams would bring economic growth to Laos, who would then sell the hydroelectricity to Thailand. Although it would bring economic growth, it would also destroy the environments along and in the river. For the environment, the Mekong River is second in the world for fish biodiversity with at least 1,100 freshwater species. It is also home to 20,000 species of plants, 1,200 species of birds, 800 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 430 species of mammals.<sup>6</sup> Using hydroelectric dams controls and interrupts the natural flow of the river. This will disrupt the habitat for thousands of species that depend on the river just as much as the Lao people who live off the river as well. The controversy of destroying living environments in order to create revenue off of it had even reached American media as seen in the [New York Times](#) and [National Geographic](#). Although it has reached large outlets like this, the government continues to limit their people’s access to this information. So, those who live inside Laos do not know what is going on. The people living outside of Laos are also unable to help the people due to the way the Lao government is set up.

Instead of addressing the American media and allowing accessible information to its people, the Lao government has only addressed the environmental issue lightly and usually deviates from the problem by discussing the dams’ economic benefits. The Lao government claims to be taking action, or some sort of approach, towards the environmental issues caused by the dams. In a [2007 country report at the University of Sydney, Australia](#), it states that Laos has prepared sustainable plans. However, the legislations that they brought up dates back to the late 90s, such as the Environmental Action Plan in 1993, the Law on Water and Water Resources in 1996, and the Environmental Protection plan in 1996. How sustainable is it if they have not updated their plans in over 10 years?

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<sup>6</sup> "Mekong River." WorldWildlife.org. 2016. <http://www.worldwildlife.org/places/greater-mekong>.

In another document, The United Nations Poverty-Environment Initiative also has a bias in their factsheet on the [country's environmental footprints](#), naming many achievements in regards to economic development. However, instead of addressing the environmental issues, this document, with the country report at University of Sydney, seems to have a skewed view in the government's favor. Without framing the government, one might look at these documents and believe that Laos is doing well and improving its country.

In a [news release](#), the Water Resources and Environment Administration had issued a flood warning in regards to a hydropower plant releasing its water. It called for residents in the area to "move their possessions to higher ground." It concluded with, "Hydropower is the main source of electricity in Laos and a vital source of export earnings." It seems as though the government's interest is not in the safety of the people but the profits the government is able to gain from the dams. The last sentence of the news release is a constant reminder to the Lao people that their valuables and livelihoods are in danger due to the economic dependence of the Lao government. Also, the people in the affected areas are living in poverty. How can they access a news release or be aware of any flood warning? Even a month after accessing this news release, I no longer had access to the website and was blocked from going onto it. Coincidence? Overall, this news release seems problematic for the people living in the areas of hydroelectric dams and is a cover-up for the Lao government.

During my research, I could not find any social media posts in the English language regarding the issue of the dams itself, but I have found plenty of social media in regards to Sombath Somphone, [a community development worker who has disappeared](#). Somphone disappeared in December 2012 after the police pulled him over. The Lao police took him into custody a few days after his public protest on the construction of the dams and he has not been seen since. Although there is [clear surveillance footage of the abduction](#), the government still denies it and claims that they are actively searching for him. It is now 2016 that I am writing this and he is still yet to be found. This shows that freedom of speech, especially if criticizing or attacking the economic growth of the country, is not welcomed in Laos. Since his disappearance, the community who knows Somphone created the [Sombath Initiative](#) in order to seek justice for him and to live out his ideals. Laos continues to deny their involvement with the disappearance.

As Harari stated, "The story of the luxury trap comes with it an important lesson. Humanity's search for an easier life released immense forces of change that transformed the world in ways nobody envisioned or wanted" (88). Laos's luxury trap of hydroelectric dams will physically transform its part of the world in ways nobody and no being wanted it to be. The dams have caused the Lao government to become overprotective of their profits that they even go against their people. These dams have caused the Lao government to not even care for the environment. Those who are supportive of the dams are those who are making the profit and using the profit for themselves. The people of Laos and many outsiders are against the dams.

### **How To Think and What To Think**

Critically thinking about environmental justice is not limited to the change in environment itself. When thinking critically, one must not only focus on the specific subject being analyzed, but the interconnectivity of it with other subjects. Critical thinking requires thinking outside of the subject's simple element. Thinking about hydroelectric dams is not enough to explain the environmental damages being done. Hydroelectric dams in Laos are a part of a larger problem. The idea of interconnectivity underlying critical thinking is important in

order to understand environmental justice and injustice. However, we must first critically think ecologically.

In order to think ecologically, one must think in totality and be radically open.<sup>7</sup> This involves seeing subjects without their frames of reference and seeing how it connects with the rest of the world. Ecology does not only encompass our idea of nature, but the interconnectedness of nature. How we have manipulated nature to our benefits, how it has changed our society and our values, and whom or what our actions have affected, are all ecological thoughts. It is not just nature, but the sociological and anthropological aspects surrounding nature, including the toll environmental injustice has taken on a population. These tolls include affecting living conditions of those who are in poverty while those who are affluent do not have to witness these deteriorating conditions.

Ecological thought is necessary for environmental justice issues, like the construction of dams in Laos. The dams itself are an environmental injustice due to the damages it has caused directly to the Mekong River environment. However, that is not the only form the environmental injustice has taken. Looking at the issue in Laos, we cannot ignore how these dams are interconnected with government corruption. The dams have created depletion in fishes and have stolen the land of farmers who then have to relocate unexpectedly. The government has also created media barriers for the Lao people, silencing them and imprisoning them if they dare to know what is happening.

The environmental injustice taking place in Laos does not only require thinking about the physical damaging of the environment, but how it has been feeding the social injustices, how it has been benefiting the government, how it fills the peoples' lands with destruction, and how the topic creates a subject people cannot voice their thoughts on. Ecological thinking does not encompass only environmental injustice, such as the building of dams, but how the patterns of continued government negligence has created multiple problem areas around this issue.

### **Can there be any Direct Action?**

What confuses many is that the Laos's national religion is Buddhism. As a Buddhist, one must follow the right way. Karma is very prominent in the religion: whatever wrongs you do will come back in another form to seek revenge in this life or another life. As a Buddhist nation, Laos must understand that they are damaging the lives of not only people but animals as well. These animals, to them, are animals that have souls from humans of another life or have souls that will reincarnate into a human. By mistreating the land, with the animals and the humans, the Lao government goes against its Buddhist beliefs. In Buddhism, if the Lao government continues to use hydroelectric dams for gain economic benefits while destroying livelihoods, it will find itself in trouble.

Luckily, its future can already be foretold due to environmental damages. China has already utilized the upper Mekong River and has implanted dams. This has contributed to droughts in Laos, and the dams in the Laos will only heighten the possibilities for more droughts in its region. Laos will also see the extinction of species in its already diverse rivers. Laos will see the dying of its people as well, where many depend on the rivers for their life. By destroying the river for their gains, the Lao government will see a destruction of the beautiful country they govern.

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<sup>7</sup> Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

The actions taken towards solving the issues of government oppression and environmental justice can be found in the voices of the people outside of Laos. Although Sombath Somphone is a Lao citizen, he was able to receive his education in the United States, which allowed him to be aware of environmental issues and become a community advocate for his people. In 2012, he voiced his concerns about the environmental injustices caused by the dams to the Lao government and was unsuccessful, as he had disappeared.<sup>8</sup>

Protesting and voicing problems to the government while in the country is dangerous and will lead to the removal or disappearances of individuals or groups from the country. The Lao government has the right to ban you from the country and even imprison you if they find that you are going against them. In order to take action, people outside of Laos must work with outside forces, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, in order to make a difference in Laos—both environmentally and socially.

The United Nations has allowed the Lao government to manipulate documents and reports for it to be in their favor. The country's factsheet shows economic growth, yet it lacks the addressing of environmental issues. Their focus is: "[To] ensure that the country's rapid economic growth and flow of foreign direct investments into the natural resource sectors generates sustainable and inclusive development."<sup>9</sup> The latter of their focus is ignored in this factsheet as the Lao government only focuses on the economic growth. In the achievements section, there is no mention of any sustainable development that they aimed to "ensure." This factsheet, overall, shows the manipulation of and the power that the Lao government possesses. It is skewed and has no actual evidence of their improvements. The writers of this factsheet are all members of the Lao government, as well, and are not officials from the United Nations.

The World Bank is another international, and powerful, figure that the Lao has seem to manipulate. The World Bank has allowed Laos to create dams along the Mekong River, although it has received much criticism and concern for it. The World Bank has supported Laos in becoming development partners, which allowed the Lao government to abuse natural resources with agro-ecological potential in order to build its economy.<sup>10</sup> The World Bank was able to help Laos create these luxury traps for them in order to grow its economy; however, it failed to acknowledge the environmental and social implications that may cost more to Laos in the future.

Direct action would include the protesting and voicing problems to international institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank in order to bring their attention to the environmental injustices caused by the Lao government's greed. Although it is to develop their economy, they are not being responsible for the harm that is being done to their land. If the land is their basis for the economy, then they must work sustainably and show proof of the improvements instead of stating it in reports and masking it through development partners. They must also take responsibility for the implications on its people, as many of them are poor and

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<sup>8</sup> Creak, Simon. "LAOS IN 2013." *Southeast Asian Affairs* (January 2014): 149-171. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 11, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> "Lao PDR - UN PEI." Lao PDR. 2015. Accessed March 18, 2016.

[http://www.unpei.org/sites/default/files/dmdocuments/PEI\\_Lao\\_PDR\\_fact\\_sheet\\_2012.pdf](http://www.unpei.org/sites/default/files/dmdocuments/PEI_Lao_PDR_fact_sheet_2012.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Lestrelin, Guillaume, Jean-Christophe Castella, and Jeremy Bourgoin. "Territorialising Sustainable Development: The Politics of Land-use Planning in Laos." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, no. 4 (2012): 581-602.



depend highly on the rivers. These people are stripped from their property and human rights due to these dams.

## Conclusion

It is important to understand that a communist country that is poor and depleted of resources will have a government that is desperate to find more sources of income. To outsiders, their actions are deemed as wrong. However, to the government, they are doing the right thing by building its economy on a new renewable source. The Lao government is unique in that it will physically remove people from the public eye when they are voicing the environmental damage of a project. Instead of listening, the Lao government turns to skewing documents in order to make it seem as though their hydroelectric dams are beneficial. Although they make money from selling the electricity, the process of constructing the dams and the dams itself are social and environmental injustices, which will cost more in the future. However, the Lao government will do what they can to cover up and will continue to prove their poor human rights rating.

What needs to be done is a continuing integrated discussion between the subjects of hydroelectric dams, the environment, social inequalities, and Laos. The Lao government will not listen to those inside their country because they have power over them. It is the outside powers that can only pressure Laos into doing the right thing. However, even that seems unpromising. In the end, it is ultimately up to the Lao government to determine right from wrong and follow their faith as a Buddhist nation.

As with any other issue, the first step to solving a problem is admitting that there is one. There is no doubt that Laos has fallen under a luxury trap with hydroelectric dams. It has become an essential to its growing economy. However, the problems do outweigh the costs. In the end, the money goes back to the communist government rather than the people itself; so, nothing is being fixed about the people in the poorer regions being affected by the dams. There is no real sustainable plan that is going into the hydroelectric dams and will cause the river to see a decrease in its biodiversity in and around it. Is the money earned currently worth the environmental and social damages that will threaten the future?

The problem is bigger and more integrated than presumably thought. Going into this research, I planned on just talking about hydroelectric dams and the environmental damages they cause that Laos failed to recognize. However, the problem is extensively branched. With corruption comes the corrupt use of media, such as the news release. It also comes with power to manipulate documents to showcase this idea of economic growth, like the United Nations documents. It comes with people being neglected by its own government and an entire ecosystem being destroyed through its temporary profitability.

What the Lao government does not realize is that this profit Laos is striving for is only temporary. Depleting its resources is its own way of destroying the country as a whole. As Harari says, the economy is an imagined order. An economy is only a structure that humans have created. Without humans, an economy is nothing. Human thought is what keeps the economy to be deemed as an actual system. However, the environment is what humans actually live in. It is something that we are embedded in and have no control over its structure. It is not something we imagine and that is interconnected with everything we do. So, with all this proof of corruption and environmental damages, how can a government continue to want to feed a system based on a resource that is failing their country?

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