

# **Tipping the Scales of Justice: investigating how power and debt influence notions of justice in the Mekong Basin hydropower debate**

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“environmental degradation and social injustice are  
two sides of the same coin” (CSE 1982)

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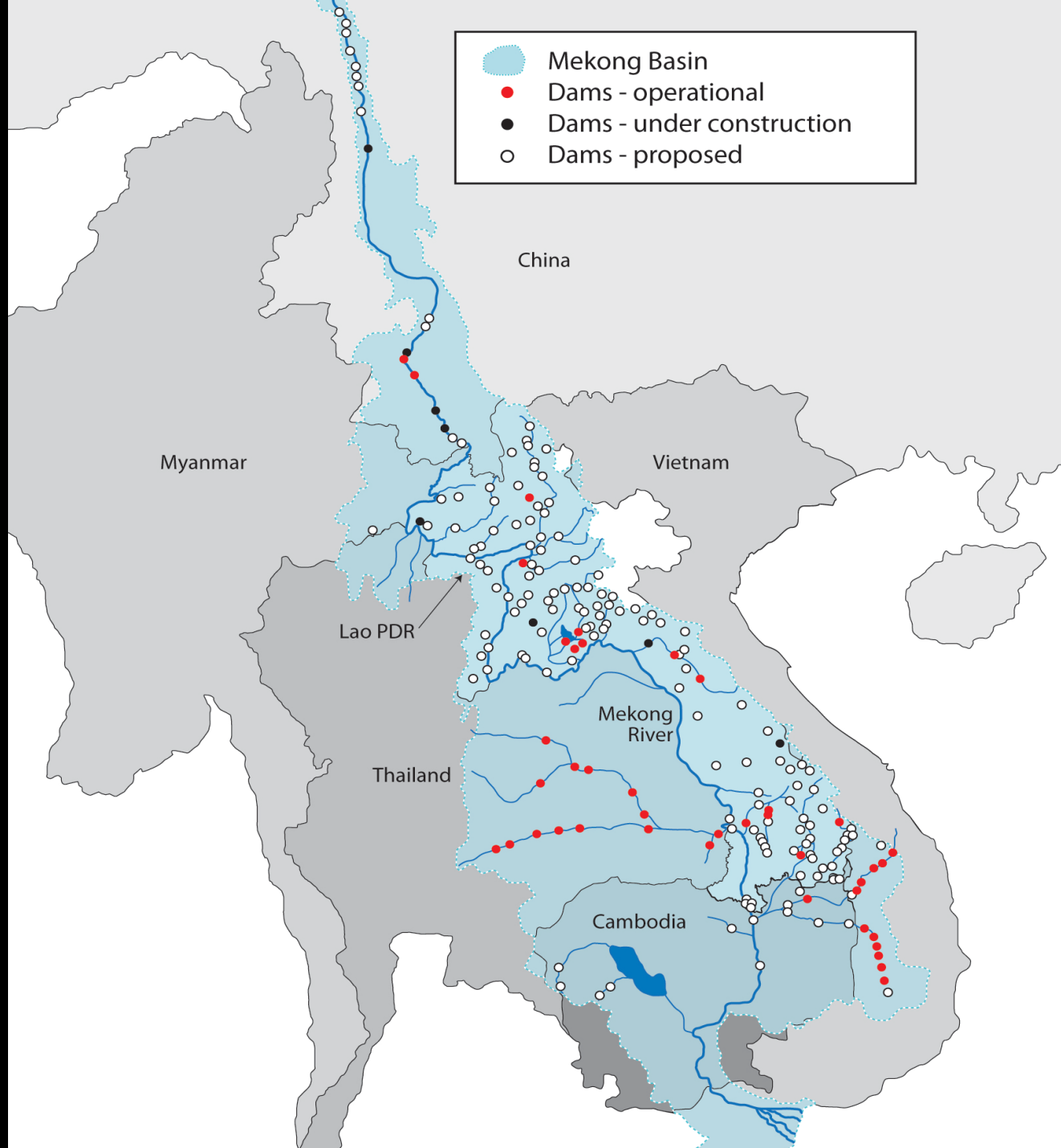
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# Structure

- Brief background of the basin and the hydropower situation
- Different notions of justice in Mekong basin hydropower
- Justice in hydropower? Benefits and debt
- Mechanisms that create injustice
- Moving forward



# HYDROPOWER



# Different notions of justice in Mekong Hydropower

- Justice is part of the human construct – how we understand it relates to its reality.
- Actors construct notions of justice around varying scales to support their agendas.

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# Utilitarian Hydropower Narratives

Utilitarian narratives surrounding hydropower focus on macro benefits.

- *"If Laos wants to escape least developed country status by 2020 this is our only choice."* (Vientiane Times)
- *"Thailand is helping its neighbour make the best use of its water resources."* (World Bank)
- *"The Lao government has already conducted studies that show there would be no impact on the environment and fisheries."* (Lao Foreign Minister on Xayaburi dam)

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# Egalitarian Hydropower Narratives

Egalitarian hydropower narratives focus on micro/meso scales around livelihood and environmental impacts.

- *“The lives of 60 million people will be wrecked and catastrophically destroyed. It is an act of sabotage to the Mekong River which is the nature's treasure.”* (Thai Senator)
- *“Mekong River dam threatens livelihoods and ecosystems.”* (CNN)
- *“Three Megafish Species Imperilled by Lao’s Mekong river Dam.”* (National Geographic)

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# Is Mekong hydropower just?

- Almost all forms of large scale developments create benefits as well as ecological and social debt.
- An indicator of socially and/or environmental just hydropower is how and why benefits and debts are distributed and measured (Mechanisms).
- In the Mekong basin, evidence suggests that powerful actors reap benefits and debt is borne by the poor.

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# Tipping the scales

Mechanisms impede justice and often reinforce or are expressions of power.

These include:

- Lack of transparency (Participation)
- Weak enforcement of laws (Procedural)
- Corruption (Distribution)
- Poor representation / dismissive of cultural norms and lifestyles (Recognition)

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# These mechanisms result in:

- Short-term gains prioritised over long-term costs
- No basin-wide planning
- Poor EIAs/SIAs
- Serious environmental and social impacts

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# Pak Mun Dam Example

## Utilitarian Promises

- Cost \$135 m
- Dry Season HEP: 136 MW
- Irrigation 29,500 ha
- Displaced families 241 hhs
- Reservoir fisheries 100kg/ha/yr
- Natural fisheries: fish ladder, first for a Mekong dam

## Egalitarian injustices (Reality)

- Cost \$233 m
- Dry season HEP: 40 MW
- Irrigation None
- Displaced families: 1700 hhs
- Reservoir fisheries 10kg/ha/yr
- Wild fish 169 of 265 species upstream of the dam disappeared

# Moving Forward

- Justice can be understood as a balance of numerous interlinked elements of distribution, recognition, participation and capability. (Schlosberg 2007)
- Empathic capacity and ethics are important requirements.
- “While justice must be concerned with classic issues of distribution, it must also address the process that construct maldistribution.” (Young et al.)

Questions?

