



Op-Ed Series

Cambodia Should Pay More Attention Towards the Mekong River: A Youth Perspective

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In the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Mekong is the longest and largest river, dominating the country's hydrology, economic value, and the livelihood of people across the country with its ecological diversity. The timeless flow of the Mekong has afforded many people in the region their basic needs for millenniums. A large part of mainland Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, depends on this river for food and water security, where fish and rice are the main sources of protein consumed in the region's households. According to the Mekong River Commission ([MRC](#)), it is the second only to the Amazon River in terms of biodiversity importance, and the most productive inland fishery. In essence, the Mekong River has been called "[Mother of the Water](#)". As a Mekong Riparian, Cambodia should continue tirelessly to protect the river in accordance to its natural form as the Mekong's importance has grown in Cambodia within many sectors.

To begin with, the Mekong River is an invaluable asset to Cambodia. It contributes enormously to the livelihoods, peace and stability and well-being of the people. The Lower Mekong Basin has played many significant roles to support food security in Cambodia. The Basin contributes [89% of fishery production](#) to the Kingdom, while Tonlé Sap Lake is the biggest fresh water lake in Southeast Asia. Apart from this, its complex tributaries provide sources for Cambodia's agriculture. In this regard, [84% of Cambodian rice production](#) has been possible due to the Mekong.

Furthermore, this mighty river creates income through energy generation as well as tourism. There are a few dams across the Mekong Tributary River, for which Cambodia was projected to earn around [USD 189 million](#) in 2015. Likewise, it is estimated that the Kingdom's tourism sector generated around [USD 2 billion](#) from the Mekong in 2017.

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River Cruise along the Mekong River in Phnom Penh. Source: https://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g293940-i272711025-Phnom_Penh.html

Besides, it is worth noting that the Mekong river is also embedded within Cambodia's culture. Thousand years of Cambodian civilization had been prosperous and intimately tied to the river. In fact, the Royal Water Festival is a celebration that marks the migration of fish from Tonle Sap to the Mekong in which boat races, fish harvests celebrations and other activities have been conducted annually. Moreover, Cambodia's vigorous culture, folklore, and numerous rituals, which are parts of local identities, have been found alongside the river and its tributaries.

As the Mekong subregion is becoming more modernized, the condition and the well-being of this river are being severely threatened. Therefore, it is pivotal to draw the attention toward the Mekong river as it is grievously harmed, and can negatively impact to Cambodia. In recent years, [scientific data](#) has depicted the water level across the downstream of the Mekong River as below average in the wet season. Cambodia has also faced delay of the reversed flow of the River to the [Tonlé Sap Lake](#) for the last two years. This critical situation has led to concern about the decline of [fish supply](#) in the Kingdom. Additionally, some Cambodian provinces have experienced a [drop in rice yields](#) in recent months due to these twin disasters.

There are various causes weakening the Mekong's condition, including climate change, and various unsustainable developments such as hydropower construction. [Climate change](#) has hindered the river's condition, and the fate of millions of people has been jeopardized. Natural disasters caused by climate change such as drought and flooding can diminish agricultural productivity, causing food scarcity, unemployment, and poverty.

[Hydropower dam](#) constructions critically threaten the biodiversity in the Mekong, in which a large number of migrating fish as well as a substantial amount of sediment are blocked by hydropower development. This is also thought to have reduced water flow and increased the risk of drought.

Human security and sustainable development are intimately connected to the Mekong river throughout the region, with Cambodia being no exception. If the Greater Mekong is disrupted, the livelihoods of people as well as the peace and stability of the riparian states could also be jeopardized. Key lessons can be drawn from the social unrest caused by water scarcity elsewhere. Take [Iraq](#) as an example, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are running dry due to the aforementioned reasons. This led to discontent between the government and its population.

In hindsight, Cambodia has to preserve the Mekong at any cost for the sake of the current and future existence of its people. As mentioned earlier, the Mekong offers economic benefits and livelihood support through food stock for many Cambodian people. To preserve and sustain the river, Cambodia should pay attention to two factors.

First, the Mekong River should be one of Cambodia's prioritized agendas in her own foreign policy. Due to the fact that the river is shared by five other states, the Kingdom could not encounter the confronting challenges alongside the river alone. Unless the political willingness from each adjacent government, issues would be overlooked and ignored from time to time. Therefore, the Kingdom should keep using her voice in the existed water governance mechanisms such as the Mekong River Commission and the Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Center, to prevent any unsustainable development activities that harm the river.

Second Cambodia should expand its dependence on renewable energy. [Environmental experts](#) view the cost of hydropower as being higher than renewable energy such as wind or solar energy. Dam constructions not only degrade the natural environment, but affect people living in the surrounding areas. Currently, Cambodia has only three solar energy plants in operation, and another 10 planned projects according to the [Mekong Infrastructure Tracker](#).

The Kingdom has postponed plans to construct two [new hydropower dams](#) in the mainstream of the Mekong, including Sambor and Stung Treng in March this year for one decade. These two dams have been tipped as among the [largest and the most destructive dams](#) in the Basin. This move is appreciated by various stakeholders as it indicates the Kingdom's commitment and willingness to sustain the river's health for future generations. On the other hand, it remains unclear for the next ten years.

Therefore, policy makers need to be aware of the consequences created by dams as they are a part of the Mekong river community. Any decision making should be attentively made in accordance with the river's health and possible impacts on food security. Any infrastructural projects should be designed to support sustainable development in a way that maintains natural capital, and nation's productivity that interconnect with ecological system, especially the river.

The Mekong River is indispensable for Cambodia. The river has given a lot to the Kingdom in the past, from the food stock to invaluable economic storage. In the era of advanced development, Cambodia should try her utmost best to preserve this majestic river.

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CICP is an independent, neutral, and non-partisan research institute based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. We aspire to become a leading institution in Cambodia and we are dedicated to the study of social, political and economic trends in both Cambodia and the region of Southeast Asia as a whole. Our mission is to cultivate broader interests concerning the development of Cambodia and promote wider attention among a community of scholars to engage in research within the fields of political science, international relations, history, peace building, and socio-economics studies in order to better understand the current and future prospects of the country and the region.

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