PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

Lower Sesan 2 Hydropower Dam, Cambodia

Ruptured Worlds

A Photo Essay on the Lower Sesan 2 Dam, Cambodia

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Infrastructure is often introduced using basic facts. For instance, the Lower Sesan 2 Dam is Cambodia's largest dam, located on the Sesan River, which is a major tributary of the Mekong. Other key pieces of information are that the project was approved in 2012, became operational in 2018, and has since directly displaced some 5,000 local villagers from their homelands and flooded more than 30,000 hectares. The 400-megawatt facility is now owned by a Chinese, Cambodian, and Vietnamese joint venture and, although plans for the project long pre-date the existence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is now labelled a BRI project (Mahanty 2021).

Yet, the numbers we use to describe a dam's impact—hectares under water, number of people displaced, tonnes of fish lost—are often inadequate or 'flat' (Sousanis 2015). Numbers cannot convey the enormity and complexity of transformation that is wrought by megaprojects such as the Lower Sesan 2 Dam. Nor can they convey how contestation continues over this dam, in relation to indigenous resettlement, livelihoods, resources, human rights violations, and cumulative environmental impacts (HRW 2021). Take, for instance, the terrifying failure of the Tonle Sap flood pulse in recent years (Fawthrop 2020). This floodplain lake is Asia's largest freshwater fishery, and it depends on monsoonal inflows from rivers like the Sesan and Mekong. The Lower Sesan 2 Dam has contributed to this emerging crisis.

Dry-season aerial view of Lower Sesan 2 Dam, where reduced downstream flows are changing aquatic systems and squeezing livelihoods. Photo taken on 6 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

Two workers survey the dam wall. Of the 150 technical staff on site, about half are Cambodian; the rest are Chinese (Asia Vision Institute 2020). Photo taken on 6 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

So, if ‘the numbers’ are insufficient, how can we understand Cambodia’s Lower Sesan 2 Dam and the magnitude of its impacts? As Emily Raboteau suggests (2021), in discussing the climate crisis, perhaps art can provide a soft pathway into this dark subject.

Art does provide a powerful medium for interpreting what is confronting or unfathomable. It can therefore apply to the Lower Sesan 2 Dam, which showcases how mega-infrastructure projects can send ripple effects across time and space, often in ways that are beyond ordinary human perception. Given this, mega-infrastructure projects may be classified as what Timothy Morton (2013) termed ‘hyperobjects’—entities, like climate change or plastic pollution, which cannot easily be grasped because of their vast spatial and temporal dimensions. This notion resonates with our research on ‘rupture’ (Mahanty and Milne 2020), which shows how dams can create ‘open moments’ (Lund 2016) when society and nature are reworked in unpredictable ways. Traditional impact studies cannot capture the gravity of such processes.

Nick Sousanis’ (2015) work on ‘unflattening’ is helpful here: he proposes the use of multiple visual viewpoints to produce new forms of knowledge. Unflattening is therefore a kind of visual reasoning, which can powerfully counteract overly narrow or bounded viewpoints. Sousanis argues that this approach can give rise to new modes of understanding, beyond what we normally perceive—a potentially vital tool for apprehending hyperobjects or ruptures.

The work of photographer Thomas Cristofolletti conveys the power of ‘unflattening’ in the case of the Lower Sesan 2 Dam and its devastating impacts. Cristofolletti initially went to the dam site in 2015 to document indigenous resistance to the project. Since then, his multiple visits have produced remarkable images of human life and landscapes after the dam’s construction, as depicted in this photo essay.

The images play with our perceptions of space and time. For example, using drones, Cristofolletti captures expansive aerial views of the dam site that take us far beyond what we might see from the ground. Juxtaposed with this are intimate portraits of people’s daily lives around the dam, which convey the human dimensions of this tragedy. For these closer shots, Cristofolletti insists on using a 35-millimetre lens. ‘It’s like the human eye, there is no zoom, it forces you to get up close to people,’ he says.

The combination of granular detail, expansive scale, and temporal range in this photo essay provides a visual archaeology of the infrastructure and its effects. While there is a temptation to see beauty in the vast expanses of water and in the skeletal remains of dead forests, Cristofolletti’s intention is clear. This work is about bearing witness or drawing attention to the very real grassroots struggles and human–ecological tragedies that lie beneath sweeping narratives about infrastructure as progress and development.

A man untangles his fishing line below the dam gates. After the dam was built, fishermen from the downstream village of Phluk reported a dramatic fall in their catch. Photo taken on 5 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofletti/Ruom.

[Previous Page, Top] Srae Kor village, submerged by the reservoir since 2017. Villagers who remained on customary lands nearby pass this ghostly sight every time they catch the local ferry. Photo taken on 8 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Previous Page, Bottom] Still grieving his lost home, a former Srae Kor resident recalls his community's struggle against the dam. Photo taken on 7 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Top] Rejecting the dam resettlement package, 72 ethnic Lao families rebuilt their homes on customary lands at the edge of the reservoir. Photo taken on 7 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Bottom] With a span of 800 metres, this bridge was made by ethnic Lao villagers to connect two parts of their new settlement, after they relocated from the now inundated Srae Kor village. Photo taken on 7 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Top] An ethnic Lao woman and her son harvest cashew fruits on their small farm near the reservoir. They were among the families who refused the government's relocation package. Photo taken on 7 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Bottom] Ghostly remnants of trees near the Srae Kor resettlement village. During the dam construction period, timber extraction was extensive and new settlers came in search of land and resources. Photo taken on 7 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Next Page, Top] Upstream from the dam, Lao and Khmer families from Ksach Thmey village lost 30 per cent of their farmlands to the reservoir, and their remaining land is now prone to flooding. No compensation was provided to them. Photo taken on 10 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Next Page, Bottom] Cattle roam across land that is now uncultivable due to periodic water infiltration and flooding, near Ksach Thmey village. Photo taken on 10 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

Signs of protest in Kbal Romeas village, before it was flooded. Here, 52 indigenous Bunong families refused the resettlement package and remained nearby on their customary lands after losing their village. Photo taken on 17 August 2016. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Top] One-third of the Kbal Romeas resettlement village consists of empty houses, because 52 families refused to take the resettlement package. The process caused rifts within families and across the community. Photo taken on 11 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Bottom] When the dam gates closed, a fish boom occurred in the reservoir. Invasive species of fish and shellfish also began to appear. Ethnic Cham settlers from Kampong Cham Province, many of whom were landless or land-poor, moved in to take advantage of the fishery (depicted here), causing conflict with Bunong families from Kbal Romeas. Photo taken on 11 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Next Page, Top] Settlers from Kampong Cham near New Kbal Romeas cut fish to prepare *prahok*—a kind of fermented fish—for sale. Photo taken on 11 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Next Page, Bottom] A young man steers his ferry through stormy waters, transporting goods and people across the new reservoir. Photo taken on 27 April 2018. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

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