

# **Empowering young women to resist Sombo Hydropower project in defence of their land and livelihoods**

## **Introduction**

Cambodian Volunteers for Society (CVS) led a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) on rural women's rights to land and natural resources (Land FPAR) between September 2018 and June 2020 in five villages in two communes in Sambo district, Kratie Province. CVS works to empower youth groups through building their capacity to defend rights, natural and community resources as well as to become active agents in making decisions regarding the development process in their communities. Through the initiatives of this Land FPAR, CVS organised and formed a Sombo young women's group to campaign against the Sombo Hydropower project, which will submerge their land under water and destroy their livelihoods.

## **Background**

The Sombo Dam is a large hydropower project that has been proposed by China to strengthen the cooperation between the two countries, China and Cambodia. The Sombo hydropower project proposes to build an 18km concrete dam across the Mekong River, which can generate up to 2,600 megawatts of energy. The building of the Sombo dam will submerge the land on the bank of the Mekong River, including the Boeung Char Commune and the Kompong Cham Commune, displacing the communities living there. The Sombo hydropower project poses a serious threat to the lives and livelihoods of communities living in the Mekong Delta region.



## FPAR process

At the inception stage, the CVS Land FPAR team facilitated a pre-research consultation with the 23 community members (17 women, five men) to discuss their concerns regarding the potential impact of the hydropower project as well as plan the activities for the FPAR. Following the consultation, the CVS Land FPAR team conducted a series of training to build the capacity of the Sombo young women to undertake the Land FPAR. These included training on alternative energy, social media and participatory research tools for data gathering. Led by the Sombo young woman researcher, the four community co-researchers gathered data using social and resource mapping and focus group discussions with 27 households from five different villages (Domre, Koh Dombong, Kompong Rotes in Boeung Char Commune, and Ompeltik and Kompong Krobei in Kompong Cham Commune). As a result of the Land FPAR, a group consisting of 15 young women from the five villages was formed who have been actively engaging in raising awareness on the potential impacts of the hydropower project and campaigning for alternative energy solutions.

## FPAR findings

### Kouy Indigenous peoples' land and culture under threat

Over 3,150 people are living in the five villages covered under this Land FPAR. Two of the five villages are inhabited by the Kouy indigenous group. The Kouy peoples' cultural identity is tied to their ancestral land, and they heavily rely on their land and natural resources for their livelihoods. Even though national legislation, policies, executive regulations and international instruments are in place in Cambodia to protect the human rights of indigenous peoples, including their right to land, territories and natural resources, most people living in the villages covered by the Land FPAR indicated they did not have ownership of the land. Destroying the Kouy peoples' traditional land to make way for the Sambo hydropower dam would erode their forest spirits and ancestral graveyards, which are built in their villages, thus violating their cultural rights.

### Threats to the community livelihoods

Most of the people living in the five villages rely on the Mekong River for fishing and irrigating agriculture crops, which are their main sources





of food and income. If the hydropower dam is built, the villages will be submerged, and the community will have to relocate to a new area that may not have access to the Mekong River. The dam will also block the flow of the Tonlé Sap river to the Mekong River, which is likely to impact the availability of fish in the Mekong River and subsequent ecosystem. Therefore, the villagers who depend on the fisheries will be severely affected.



### Potential gendered impacts of displacement

The women in the community anticipate relocating to a new place would force the men to migrate to cities in search of work and increase women's burden and insecurity, as their reproductive social work heavily relies on access to natural resources. For example, they would have to walk farther to collect forest products or water.

Among the respondents from 27 households, 81.5 per cent firmly rejected the mega-dam project along the Mekong River, and the remaining said the project is permissible if it were on a small scale and did not affect their lives and livelihoods.

Through the Land FPAR process, CVS worked to empower Sombo young women in the villages to build their capacity to engage with the local authorities, speak about their issues and voice their recommendations. A group of 15 young women was formed who are now playing an active role in the community by regularly attending meetings with the community council. With the support of CVS, the young women produced two videos related to their perception of the hydropower project. The Land FPAR report was also submitted to the Cambodian Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Mine and Energy to inform them of the realities of the villagers. They are now working to develop an advocacy plan to seek support from other groups such as NGOs and media, change the mindset of the decision-makers of the hydropower project and consider other alternative sources of energy production.





## Recommendations

- The Cambodian government shall consider cancelling the planned Sambo Hydropower dam project in close consultation with concerned communities, including women and indigenous peoples.
- The Ministry of Women's Affairs of Cambodia shall develop policy frameworks and programmes to support the women's movement in Cambodia, especially indigenous women living in the country.
- The Ministry of Land shall promote and facilitate the registration process of community land titles.
- Relevant parties such as the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries shall work together with the Cambodia Indigenous Youth Association to promote women's human rights and gender equality in sustainable community development, particularly in indigenous communities.
- Electricite du Cambodge (EDC), Ministry of Mines and Energy and Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports shall conduct research on renewable energy such as solar, wind, biomass digester and new technology as well as ensure such alternative energies are accessible to women, families and communities.
- The National Assembly of Cambodia shall promote, recognise and provide land titles to indigenous communities living on public state property.



### **About Cambodian Volunteers for Society (CVS)**

CVS is a non-profit and non-political organisation established in 2005. Its mission is to mobilise and empower youth to be agents of social change with a voluntarism spirit for society. It envisions a peaceful and democratic society, well-governed and driven by its vibrant youth.

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### **About APWLD**

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region's leading network of feminist organisations and individual activists. For 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women's human rights and Development Justice.

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