



## BOOK REVIEW

**Dead in the Water. Global Lessons from the World Bank's Model Hydropower Project in Laos** Bruce Shoemaker and William Robichaud (eds). University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, USA, 2018, pp. xxvi +352 (ISBN 978-0-2993-1790-4)(hbk)

In 2024, Laos PDR ('Laos') is set to move beyond 'least developed country' status. This, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, is a significant accomplishment. The Rapporteur, however, also notes that 'behind this apparent success story lies a more complicated and problematic reality' (Alston, 2019: 1).

Enter *Dead in the Water*, a book that is part of a long-standing effort into comprehending key facets of this 'problematic reality'.<sup>1</sup> The route taken is via one of the highest profile poverty alleviation projects in Laos, and indeed, of the World Bank: the Nam Theun 2 (NT2) hydropower dam. The project, built on the Nakai Plateau in central Laos, was set to bring Laos the 'Forgotten country' (*The New Yorker*, 1990) out of poverty, but instead, resettled thousands, consolidated power and wealth, and is referred to as the World Bank's 'final disappointment' in the hydropower sector (p. 54). The high profile of the project is not only visible for its failures, but—because the project carried some of the greatest hopes and promises for Laos, via a project not only framed as a poverty alleviation tool—also as a model, a 'kinder, gentler megaproject' that would make 'the Bank more accountable to the locals' (*Newsweek*, 2011)<sup>2</sup> and thus, 'legitimize the World Bank's re-entry into hydropower' (p. 272). As such, this project was a high stakes endeavour for a country and for those institutions who staked their reputations on such a project.

As the book's editors, Bruce Shoemaker and William Robichaud, state in the conclusion, 'The reality is that such a megaproject was mismatched to Laos's current state of development, and the country's own political priorities' (p. 297). With insufficient recognition not only of this mismatch, but also of the myriad impacts of implementing such a project on the country's social, political, environmental and economic institutions, the project struggled at every stage, and essentially is part of a longer history of 'internationalized infrastructure projects whose proponents make big claims and whose public and private financiers and regulators continue to shift risks away from investors and onto the people and environments most affected' (p. 312).

The book, overall, is a tremendous accomplishment by the editors to bring together a range of contributors, many working on this issue for decades, to understand the broader impacts of international aid, development, and poverty alleviation in Laos via the NT2 hydropower project.

The text—because essentially that is what this edited volume represents, a textbook of Laos and development histories—is more than the words on the page; it also builds a coalition of sorts, of scholars and activists, funders and experts. Structured in three parts, the book includes perspectives of some who once championed projects like or including the project at the centre of focus and critique in this book, as well as activists who have been publicly critical for the past two and half decades. I would suggest that the introductory chapter be required reading for scholars, new and long-standing,

following Laos and its development. I would also incorporate this text in political ecology and development studies syllabi (perhaps alongside Goldman's *Imperial Nature*) as one of the most in-depth investigations, from multiple angles and disciplinary perspectives, of any single megaproject.

I want to highlight some key points and chapters where *Dead in the Water* moves beyond a chronology of events or narrow retelling of another bad dam, moments when the contributors shed light onto the broader transformations linked to flows of money and expertise in a country that is simultaneously dependent on those flows. This includes, for instance, 'Part One: World Bank Promotes a New Model of Hydropower', comprised of three chapters underlining the significance and implications of a project not only for the people and environment, but the broader financial and political machinations linked to development aid. Hubbel and Shoemaker explain in Chapter 2 that the connections venture back decades, to the late 1990s, at the time the panel of experts was being formed and was making their adjudication on whether or not the project should be built with support of the World Bank. Hubbel and Shoemaker explain that some of the current narratives about the project are anachronistic. In particular, 'the concern that if the World Bank didn't see to the building of the dam, the Chinese would have, obscures that fact that at the time NT2 was conceived there was no structure in place in Laos for large-scale private investment' (p. 49). Instead, they illustrate that NT2 itself enabled particular forms of private sector hydropower that failed to hold up to environmental and social scrutiny. Part One also provides a brief history and timeline of the project, starting well before construction, to provide an encompassing assessment of what kinds of political will was required to move such a megadam forward.

In the second part of the book, 'Social and Environmental Context and Outcomes', six chapters further elaborate on the impacts and outcomes of the project, from resettlement to conservation and land and water use change on indigenous, ethnic ways of life. In Chapter 5, Glenn Hunt *et al.* describe the impacts of the project, from livestock to fisheries and off-farm labour, to agriculture. I found the impacts portrayed in one early 2008 pilot project, in a village that ended up 'the poorest of the resettled villages', revealing for the ways that the poor results were catalogued and recorded, but root causes of poverty were overlooked and essentially, maintained (p. 122). Astounding was also the lack of recognition that the new land for agriculture resettlement would require amounts of fertilizers so large that 'just how much would be required was tucked away in the obscure footnotes and annexes' (p. 123). These illustrations of early moments of the project indicated that the myriad efforts at poverty alleviation seem simultaneously well-documented, and yet, poorly piloted and thought out; overall, perhaps contributing more harm than good, as in this case, resettlement also removed people from cultural and religious connections to land and water on the Plateau.

In 'Nam Theun 2's Wider Legacy', the third part of the volume, contributors explore transformations beyond the above impacts, as in Chapter 10's efforts to understand how civil society has been increasingly limited and, in fact, less able to deal with 'hot' issues like hydropower. Chapters 11 and 12 examine the broader impacts geographically, for other river systems and Thailand's electricity market. In Chapter 13, Carl Middleton explores the discourses of 'sustainable hydropower'. These discourses, he argues, may have been brought to life via NT2 but continue to circulate, globally, and also in Myanmar. Here, the World Bank's IFC is currently undertaking a country wide strategic assessment of the hydropower sector.

At one level, then, this book is definitive in that it covers so many aspects, revealing at many points, in detail, the limited successes and more obvious failures of NT2 schemes, from poverty alleviation to conservation and good governance. At another level, this book also serves as a statement of sorts when all the lessons are brought to bear on one another. Yet, in the words of Philip Hirsch, in his ‘bookend’ to the edited volume, while ‘the myth of NT2’s success persists’ (p. 304) the Bank has yet to ‘accept and acknowledge the disappointing results of NT2’ (p. 305). What good are these lessons if those responsible refuse to accept and acknowledge them?

Having acknowledged the breadth and depth of this work, I must also acknowledge lingering questions and omissions. In general, the methods used and the timelines for research, in individual chapters or of the text overall, were not evident. *How was the research for this book or each chapter conducted and over what time periods?* Also, the role of China is alluded to at multiple points but not discussed in detail. Such an assessment would bring the book into wider contemporary conversations about hydropower and investment. For instance: *What is the increasing role of China in Laos, in hydropower, or in relation to contemporary development aid?*

Perhaps more importantly, where are the *people* and their voices?<sup>3</sup> Where are the authors from Laos? In 2018, the year of publication, there do exist limitations for Laos scholars and activists, particularly to contribute to a text that is so squarely a critique, but the lack of authors from the country on which it reads as such a definitive text is hard to overlook. More pointedly: *What does a text that critiques the homogeneity of expertise* (p. 56 ‘what counts as an expert’), *the ‘circulation of expertise’* (p. 283), *and reflects on past positioning of the authors* (p. 67), *but does not appear to be able to relinquish or address such critiques, accomplish?*

Moreover, Chamberlain’s comments in Chapter 4, are also worthy of further consideration. He notes that, ‘Ideally, a more comprehensive history of central Laos and Vietnam would be written in future, in which NT2 will no longer be the disproportionate center of attention it is at the moment but rather a medium-sized footnote to the history of these countries’ (p. 99). I wonder, beyond this text, what kinds of texts might better do this? What are the limits to understanding the lives of a people through a lens of failure of a project, or via the work of INGOs and activists who acted as resistance or advocates for others, particularly in a book titled ‘*Dead in the water*’?

Overall, if this edited volume is a coalition formed around concerns for Laos and NT2 over the past decades, it has accomplished so much, and at the same time, as the authors themselves note, there is indeed much work to do. That seems to be obvious and essential for a country, and indeed a region, where academic, political, and media freedoms are increasingly limited (Freedom House, 2019). From the abduction of Sombath Somphone in 2012, to the most recent loss of three Thai activists on Laos soil this year (*Human Rights Watch*, 2019), there is still so much coalition building, support, and attention for those in Laos who continue to live in the water.

## Endnotes

- 1 In addition to my continued research as an academic in Southeast Asia, I have worked in the region, specifically at TERRA, from 2006–2008. During this time and since, I have met, crossed paths with, or indirectly had contact with one of the editors and multiple contributors to this book.
- 2 This quote is directly from Jonathan Kent’s article in *Newsweek* (*Newsweek*, 2011) but is also noted at several points in the book.

- 3 The only quotations or directly quoted concerns from people in Laos, excluding NGOs and INGOs, seem to be in the Chapters by Ian Baird *et al.* (based on previously published articles) and in Philip Hirsch's bookending when he recounts the villager who he met in his two visits, decades apart.

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Accepted: 15 April 2019

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