

## Development options for Laos?

Ian Baird, executive director of [Global Association for People and the Environment](#) and recently chosen for inclusion in the 2008-2009 [Princeton Premier Registry](#), has launched a letter campaign against the Don Sahong Dam in southern Laos. The text of the letter is below. Those interested in signing can contact Ian at [ianbaird@shaw.ca](mailto:ianbaird@shaw.ca).

It's hard not sympathise with a campaign like this, and there is certainly a strong need for greatly improved social and environmental management of major infrastructure development in Laos. I encourage *New Mandala* readers who want to add their name to contact Ian.

But I am a little uncomfortable about a couple of things. First, the "independent scientific paper" referred to in the letter appears to be a self-published report by Ian himself. Given the rather technical nature of the fisheries issues involved, a peer reviewed paper would add much more strength to the campaign.

Second, the letter concludes by calling for approaches that would "prioritize alternative options for meeting Laos' development needs, options that would in fact increase people's food security and decrease poverty." I would like to see a little more detail on what those options might be.

[**UPDATE** 21 August 2009. See the comments below. This is a draft text. Ian Baird has advised NM that the final signed text will be released on 26 August.]

[**UPDATE** 27 August 2009. [Here](#) is a copy of the final signed letter.]

OPEN LETTER To Interested Persons:

We the undersigned scientists, fisheries specialists, nutritionists and development workers, are writing to express our concern about plans to construct the Don Sahong Dam across the Hou Sahong channel in the Khone Falls area of Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos. We believe the project will have grave consequences for regional fisheries and the food security and livelihood of millions of people in the Mekong River Basin.

According to an independent scientific paper recently released, the Don Sahong project would block migrations of many important fish species that move up and down the Mekong River past the Khone Falls at various times of the year. Through fieldwork and a review of the available scientific literature, the paper reveals that many fish species migrate very long distances through the Hou Sahong Channel to upstream areas, where they form an important part of the diet of local people. The paper concludes that through blocking the migration of these fish, there is a "high risk that the dam could cause serious impacts to fisheries both far upstream and downstream from the Khone Falls, in Laos, Cambodia,

Thailand and Viet Nam, thus jeopardising the livelihoods of large numbers of people.”

According to the paper, the mitigation measures proposed in the project’s draft environmental impact assessment are unlikely to be effective. There is no known fish pass that could cope with the unique biological requirements of all the fish species that migrate past the Khone Falls each year. The proposal to widen the Hou Sadam is also likely to be ineffective because it would require major engineering works that would be extremely costly.

The paper concludes that fisheries losses in the region, and especially in Laos and Cambodia, could negatively impact the nutritional status of hundreds of thousands or even millions of people dependent on these fisheries, thus affecting the health of a large number of people. Figures indicate that in Stung Treng Province of Cambodia, almost 45% of children under five years old are underweight. As Cambodians depend on fisheries for the majority of their protein needs, losing a large quantity of wild-caught fish due to the Don Sahong Dam would further exacerbate the situation.

In Laos, recent research by the World Food Programme (WFP) has found that Laos’ rural population is experiencing serious nutritional problems, with 50% of all children being chronically malnourished. The Lao people are particularly lacking in meat, fish and edible oils, the exact food types that are threatened by the dam. If the dam causes even a 10% reduction in fisheries in central and southern Laos, the areas expected to be most seriously impacted by the Don Sahong Dam, this could have a serious impact on the nutritional status of people already living at the margins of food security.

For these reasons, we are concerned that the Don Sahong Dam would cause more problems than it would bring benefits to the Lao people, or other peoples in the region. If the dam goes forward, the corresponding drop in nutritional status for Lao and Cambodian citizens could result in setbacks in government and international donor efforts to alleviate poverty and meet various health-related United Nations Millennium Development goals. It could also negatively affect the nutritional status of people in Thailand and Viet Nam. This is a risk that we simply do not believe is worth taking.

We urge you to reconsider the development of the Don Sahong Dam and to prioritize alternative options for meeting Laos’ development needs, options that would in fact increase people’s food security and decrease poverty, rather than causing the opposite effect.