

research snapshot

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Damming Rivers: Lessons learned from the northwest uplands of Vietnam

What is this research about?

Energy demand has grown dramatically as Vietnam's economy expands. Since the 1990s, hundreds of dams have been built to use the country's hydropower potential. But these projects have not benefitted everyone equally. The highland regions are an ideal location for dams. This is also where minority groups live and depend on subsistence agriculture. As dam projects move in, governments often move minority groups out. While they are often promised that relocation will bring "modernization" and improve living standards, they are not always better off. Relocation often results in inequality with uneven development and power relations between highland and lowland communities.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher studied laws and policies related to dam construction in Vietnam. She also completed fieldwork in the Northwestern region of Vietnam from 2005 to 2010. The researcher interviewed and surveyed government officials, resettlement officers, and local villagers

What you need to know:

Hydro-power generation in Northwestern Vietnam has caused many social and ecological problems. Highland minority communities that relocated because of the dams had fewer livelihood choices and faced new types of inequality. Project planning did not take into account the true costs of dam construction, especially for displaced people.

about:

- river basin management
- dam construction
- dam-related social, environmental and economic problems

The researcher focused on the impact of the region's two largest dams: Hòa Bình and Sơn La. She interviewed 94% of the households in two villages of the Thái and La Ha people in Sơn La, to address their experience in being resettled.



What did the researcher find?

While dam planning and the compensation for villagers had improved over the last 30 years, there were still notable problems. Many laws were not enforced. For example, decisions about the dams often ignored concerns for the environment and local communities. Project costs were routinely underestimated. The dams caused floods downstream and created conflict over the resettlement of villagers. The economic, social and environmental costs of the dams were unevenly felt. Investors and downstream farmers gained the most, while displaced minority people paid the highest price.

The researcher suggested that:

- Studies on the social, economic, and environmental impacts of these projects should be properly done before they are approved.
- These studies should include all the costs of hydro dams.
- The practices, rules, and concerns of local communities should be included in highland resource management.

How can you use this research?

Public policy-makers and NGOs dealing with rural industrial development and community resettlement may find the research useful. It may assist them in finding ways to reduce the social,

economic, and environmental costs of dams. It also sheds insight on managing relations between the different communities involved, for example, like the highland and lowland communities of Vietnam.

About the researcher

Nga Dao is a PhD candidate in Geography at York University in Toronto, ON. This Research Snapshot is from her study “Damming Rivers in Vietnam: A Lesson Learned in the Tây Bắc Region”, featured in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol.6, No. 2, (2011), 106-140. ndao2503@gmail.com

Keywords

Hydroelectric power, the politics of dams, resettlement, highlands, Tây Bắc region, Vietnam.

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