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Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

Sustainable development?

Kai Kensavaong will never again walk along the muddy lanes of Sop On, the village in southern Laos where she was born. Her old home now lies at the bottom of a reservoir of brown water created to feed a hydroelectric power plant, the first to be funded by the World Bank for over twenty years. ‘I’ll never forget that place,’ says the 41-year-old villager. ‘It was my home. I picked my first bamboo stalks there.’

The World Bank stopped financing hydroelectric dam projects in developing countries twenty years ago because of criticism that such projects were harming local communities and the environment. But Nam Theun 2 – a 39-metre high dam on the Mekong River that generates over 1,000 megawatts of electricity – is the showpiece for the bank’s new policy of supporting sustainable hydropower projects. For Laos it is part of a longer-term strategy to revitalise the economy and become the battery of South-East Asia.

The bank says that lessons have been learnt from the projects of the sixties and seventies when people were forced to resettle and whole areas of forest or agricultural land were flooded. When it comes to clean sources of energy, the bank thinks hydropower is the pick of the bunch, offering the best solution in a world where 1.5 billion people have no access to electricity.

In 2010 the dam brought $5.6 million in sales of electricity and it is estimated that during the next 25 years Nam Theun 2 will generate around $2 billion in revenue to Laos, one of Asia’s poorest countries, since most of the electricity will be exported to its power-hungry neighbour, Thailand. The government has promised that this money will be spent on reducing poverty and both renewing and improving the country’s infrastructure.

Seventeen villages in the flooded area have now been rebuilt and the 6,200 people – mostly farmers – who lived in them have been retrained to make a living from the reservoir.

The power company has promised to double their living standards within five years. According to the World Bank, 87 per cent of those resettled believe life is much better than before as they now have electricity, sanitation, clean water, new roads and greater access to schools and health care.

‘In the old village things just weren’t convenient,’ said Tiea, 25, one of the relocated villagers. ‘It wasn’t a pretty place, the houses weren’t very nice and we didn’t have power. In the new village we have electricity, we can see better.’

But the old criticisms have not gone away. Environmental and human rights groups warn that the dam will have a negative impact on water quality and fish and that the local people who were relocated after the area was flooded may not be able to support themselves economically in future.

‘People are happy with these new amenities, but the real problem is how to restore sustainable livelihoods for communities who used to rely on the natural resources – forests, fish and grazing lands for their animals – now that they’ve lost these,’ says Ikuko Matsumoto, programme director for the environmental group, International Rivers.

As well as the 6,200 villagers already rehoused, activists also point out that there are over 110,000 people in riverside villages downstream from the dam whose lives will have to change because of the new river ecosystem. They claim that these people will have to deal with issues like flooding, decline of the fish population and poor water quality. How quickly they will pick up new skills is uncertain.

But the World Bank says it is responsive to these problems. A 4,100-square kilometre protected area has been established around the dam to safeguard flora and fauna. It admits though that rebuilding the lives of the villagers is not a short-term process and everyone is trying to learn and readjust as they go along.

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