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Reflections on a Livelihood Study of Sesan Riverine
Communities in Cambodia and the Challenges of
Transdisciplinary Research in the Global South

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*Reflections on a Livelihood Study of Sesan Riverine
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Abstract:

This paper contends that a state's political-economic dynamics can have a key influence over the primary aims and rationale of conducting transdisciplinary projects in the Global South (TPGS). By reflecting on fieldwork experiences in the study of dam-induced problems in northeast Cambodia, it problematises a tendency to overstate the impact of methodological challenges such as language barriers, internet access or unexpected funding expenses on project efficacy. Instead, the paper employs a social-conflict lens to detail the political-economic agency of actors and the preponderant influence this can bring to bear on the aims of a transdisciplinary project. In doing so, it foregrounds often-inimical and asymmetrical relationships that form among various non-academic stakeholders during a TPGS to significantly shape project outcomes.

Keywords: transdisciplinarity, knowledge co-production, contestation; non-academic stakeholders, livelihoods, hydropower dam; social conflict theory; politics of scale

Reflections on a Livelihood Study of Sesan Riverine Communities in Cambodia and the Challenges of Transdisciplinary Research in the Global South

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Introduction

Transdisciplinarity gained purchase as a research paradigm in the early 1990s in response to narrow views on what constituted acceptable and authoritative ‘knowledge’ sources - universities being the most privileged site of scientific knowledge production (Bernstein, 2015; Nicolescu, 2014). As renowned physicist Basarab Nicolescu (2014: 186) lamented “the death of the subject is the price we pay for objective knowledge.” In theory and often in practice, scientific knowledge production - which privileges rigorous, objective methods - is used as the ‘legitimate’ evidentiary knowledge base from which to address complex socio-political, economic or environmental problems. Invariably, this comes at the expense of normative or subjective experiential thinking on such concerns despite their ability to enhance the human and social dimensions of the contributory knowledge used to address issues (Simpson et al., 2015: 352; Bernstein, 2015). In an attempt to retrieve subjective knowledge production for understanding and addressing complex societal problems, transdisciplinarity draws our attention to the knowledge contributions made by non-academic stakeholders. The latter being those people who possess dynamic local knowledge “built from experience of living in a place over an extended period of time.” (Bracken et al., 2015: 1293)

This distinguishing feature of transdisciplinarity is often frowned upon in more scientifically-minded academic circles. Yet, an unintended consequence of the latter indifference is that diverse local stakeholders often become discounted from the formulation and synthesis of the evidentiary knowledge base employed and applied to the purported solutions for the very problems-issues they face in a particular setting. By acknowledging the relevance and value of these stakeholders, transdisciplinarity promotes the integration of their heterogeneous knowledge (Gibbon et al., 1994). As Godemann (2008: 627–628) notes, research questions and objectives in such projects are

geared not toward academia but toward real life. Participants are always called ‘stakeholders’ to emphasise the view that different forms of knowledge enjoy a degree of equality and that knowledge contributors can, to an extent, “have a mutual understanding and shared vision concerning some activity or interest” (Simpson et al., 2015: 353). According to Pohl (2005: 1161), cooperative interactions can enhance mutual learning. A putative benefit of such a process is the potential it holds for generating “socially robust knowledge” (Schmidt & Pröpper, 2017: 365). In short, it is meant to provide an auxiliary problem-solving paradigm. Of course, as Schmidt & Pröpper (2017: 366) note, “the realisation of this ideal [knowledge co-production] proves more difficult than expected—and often, more difficult than is admitted in the literature.” This paper will further detail how maintaining the fidelity of such a rationale and achieving its laudable intent is far from straightforward. Having said that, it is an approach that differentiates transdisciplinarity from both interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary: in the former, academic cooperation across disciplines “is integrating, interacting, linking, and focusing”; in the latter, the cooperation is “encyclopaedic, additive juxtaposition or, at most, some kind of coordination” (Alvargonzalez, 2011: 388).

Recently, various scholars have conducted transdisciplinary projects in the Global South (TPGS). The collaborations have usually dealt with problems such as environmental degradation, natural-resource management, and climate change. In conducting these projects, several identified key challenges such as language barriers, internet access and unexpected funding expenses (Siew et al., 2016: 821, 825; Schmidt & Pröpper, 2017: 371, 376; Djenontin & Meadow, 2018: 890, 893). Tuck Fatt Siew et al. (2016) reviewed four projects in China, Philippines, and Vietnam. The research teams encountered language barriers: foreign academic stakeholders and local non-academic stakeholders had little or no command of the local language and English respectively, and compounding this problem was a perceived ‘unprofessionalism’ of hired translators (Siew et al., 2016: 821, 825). Moreover, the teams found that local Vietnamese and Chinese stakeholders needed financial compensation for their participation in the projects. These unanticipated expenses, coupled with an equally unanticipated turnover of academic personnel, exacerbated already arduous projects (Siew et al., 2016: 820). If we consider the project undertaken by Laura Schmidt and Michael Pröpper (2017: 376), who examined sustainable land management in southern Africa, they found that interactions between German and African stakeholders “reproduced North–South power asymmetries and dependencies” involving funding allocation and knowledge

contribution. In their review of nine transdisciplinary projects, Djenontin and Meadow (2018: 890) identified various challenges, with poor internet access singled out as particularly aggravating.

Whilst not wanting to trivialise such tangible difficulties, they are not insurmountable. Overcoming them can make our scholarly endeavours laborious and frustrating but as this paper shows, we should exercise caution in assigning primacy to them. There is little empirical evidence to suggest that they are fatal to a project. Indeed, the experiences described above constitute good lessons for transdisciplinarians conducting TPGS. Lesson 1: Take care to hire professional interpreters who are familiar with relevant issues. Lesson 2: Take care to conduct preliminary fieldwork to better appreciate local political cultures. Lesson 3: Take care in estimating approximate expenses. Siew et al. (2016: 826) also emphasise the importance of establishing trust with local stakeholders “through extended periods or recurrent visits”.

Of course, these concerns are not unique to transdisciplinarity but the blurring of the boundaries between what constitutes interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary projects certainly tend to downplay the latter’s emphasis on the value of non-academic knowledge and the attendant difficulties of incorporating that into projects. A more pressing issue identified in our paper is a lack of appreciation for the overarching challenges facing TPGS from a state’s political-economic dynamics and the agency of its associated actors.

For instance, the target state in the specific project under consideration in this paper is Cambodia, where Prime Minister Hun Sen, his inner governmental circle, members of his extended family, and oligarchic capitalists form a powerful ruling coalition. The Hun Sen government has granted sundry land and forest concessions to such figures. Many of which have led to the expropriation of large tracts of customary land and deforestation that plunged rural subsistence communities into precarious situations. Ruling coalition interests have subsequently clashed with emerging opposition groups over various contentious resource-and-development matters, no more so than dam-building projects (Baird 2011; 2016). Hun Sen’s ruling coalition and opposition groups constitute the local non-academic stakeholders of the project under consideration, whose positionality and mutual antagonism is largely a product of the country’s political-economic dynamics. As our paper will show, it is a dialectic that produces contestation and a struggle for legitimacy over who has the authority to speak and act on such matters. Our paper reflects on and details how antagonism, in turn, triggers contestation over what

was and is to be deemed relevant and/or ‘authoritative’ contributory knowledge for a project and the implications for its intent and aims.

Having problematised apparent methodological challenges in the introduction, our paper is divided into three sections. The first section employs a social-conflict lens to detail and underscore the ways political-economic dynamics can affect projects. Doing so, demonstrates its conceptual import for gaining insight on how a state’s political-economy is configured and why its endogenous character present major challenges for TPGS. Our paper focuses specifically on Cambodia as it is the site of the first author’s project: a *Study of Sesan Riverine Communities’ Livelihood* (SSRCL). The study investigates the livelihood difficulties stemming from the Lower Sesan II Dam (LS2) project. The second and third sections focus on the latter case study. Specifically, they outline and consider the ways in which Cambodia’s political-economic dynamics condition antagonistic relations between the case study’s local non-academic stakeholders. The third section further details arising knowledge contestation between the local non-academic stakeholders involved in the project and the limited utility of methodical attempts to minimise such dynamics. Although the latter contestation has received limited attention in published transdisciplinary research, our contention is that it can significantly influence project aims and outcomes. This is especially so in cases where functionaries of ruling coalition interests engage *mala fides* in a project with the purpose of co-opting and subverting the process of knowledge co-production unduly in favour of the partisan agendas and policies they represent. Our paper’s primary contribution is to give greater clarity on the underlying reasons behind the often-antagonistic relationships that form among non-academic stakeholders during such projects and their implications for the aims of transdisciplinarity.

Methodology

The primary data for this paper came from three sources. The first source was the preliminary fieldwork that the first author (TWC) conducted at the LS2’s resettlement sites in June and December 2017 and July, October, and November 2018. The purpose of the fieldwork was to get a sense of the dam-affected villagers’ resettled lives and invite the related stakeholders to join the SSRCL. The second primary-data source was on-site paperwork from the project. Much of this consisted of observational notes that he and his research assistants took while documenting observations of stakeholder interactions in the two preparatory meetings and four one-day workshops. Additional paperwork

consisted of the flipchart papers contributed by the workshop stakeholders. The third primary-data source was the post-workshop fieldwork, which took place January 26–28, 2019 and June 22, 2019, and involved interviews with village stakeholders regarding the quality of the previous workshops. Discussions were recorded with permission from interviewees. For those who objected to the latter, note-taking was used instead. Due to limited proficiency in the Khmer language, TWC relied on research assistants to act as interpreters in the workshops and fieldwork. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms are used for all stakeholders in this paper.

In order to grasp more fully the overarching challenges specific to TPGS and the influence of political-economic dynamics on local non-academic stakeholders and project efficacy, the following sections consider the utility of a social-conflict lens for decoding these dynamics and how they influence project aims and outcomes before making specific reference to Cambodia.

Social-Conflict, Political-Economic Dynamics and Transdisciplinarity

Social conflict is a key explanatory concept prevalent in the work of the ‘Murdoch School’ - and its primary focus on comparative politics and political economy in Southeast Asia - that emerged out of the Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University in the 1990s (Hameiri & Jones, 2014: 3). In brief, underlying a social conflict perspective is that “different social forces naturally struggle against one another to establish state forms that will privilege their interests at the expense of others” (Jones, 2012: 25). The forces can be “classes, class fractions, [and] ethnic and religious groups” (Jones, 2010b: 551). Contestation between such social forces reflect what Bob Jessop (2008) terms as something akin to a zero-sum game. As Jones (2011: 411) notes, “states are never neutral apparatuses...rather, they exhibit an inherent ‘strategic selectivity’, marginalising some interests while advancing others.” Furthermore, due to the fact that contestation between social forces involves competition over power and resources, the resultant struggles can be diverse and brutal (Jones, 2013; Carnegie et al., 2021). Given this context, “the state is best understood not as an institutional ensemble but as a ‘field of power’ or a ‘social relation’.” (Jones, 2010b: 551) This field of forces and interests significantly underpin and condition aspects of societal configurations.

Employing the concept of social-conflict, Jones (2010a: 485–487; 2012: 39–91; 2013) identified various mixtures of sovereignty, intervention, and social order in Cold War Southeast Asia. During that period, capitalist oriented socio-political forces ruled the

founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. These members adopted the principle of non-interference embodied in three agreements: the Bangkok Declaration (1967); the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (1971); and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (1976) (Jones, 2010a: 485). Internally, the principle helped the members set aside intra-ASEAN conflict such as the Philippines-Malaysia dispute over Sabah “to foster the stability necessary for the economic growth required to undercut the appeal of communism.” (Jones, 2010a: 485). As Jones (2010a: 485) notes, “externally, non-interference sought to insulate ASEAN societies from ‘subversive’ external influences to help stabilise capitalist social order.” However, the principle did not prevent ASEAN members from cooperating with each other against left-wing movements. For example, when in 1975, Indonesia annexed East Timor, where the left-wing movement *Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente* (FRETILIN) agitated ‘for a radical post-independence state’, Malaysia backed the Indonesian government, supplying it with military personnel and arms (Jones, 2010b: 553; 2012: 68). The fighting led to heavy casualties and a severe refugee crisis (Lawless, 1976).

In the mid-2010s, Lee Jones in collaboration with Shahid Hameiri, (2013; 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2017) and drawing on the work of political geographers such as Swyngedouw (1997) and Brenner (2001), further conceptualised social conflict according to the politics of scale. According to Hameiri & Jones (2017: 60), “scales may reflect existing political tiers within a state - a village, a province, or the ‘nation’ - or cut across them, like ‘bio-regions’, ‘transgovernmental networks’ or ‘the global’.” They argue that the question of “whether a political issue is defined as urban, local, provincial, national, regional, global and so on is not neutral but, because each scale involves different configurations of actors, resources and political opportunity structures, always privileges certain societal interests and values over others.” (Hameiri & Jones, 2015b: 450). In short, this pattern of societal contestation involves an expanding or contracting back-and-forth struggle between antagonistic forces: in the struggle, one coalition of socio-political forces favours itself by treating a particular issue as an international, national, or sub-national matter; in response, other actors resist the coalition’s actions by ‘re-scaling’ the issue in the opposite direction, be it in a national, sub-national, or international direction. It is a phenomenon known as ‘scale jumping’ - “shifting political contestation to a different scale to bring in new actors and resources.” (Hameiri & Jones, 2013: 466). As such, the politics of scale extends our theoretical thinking on social-conflict beyond

national boundaries, by linking and attributing to international actors a prominent role in localised social conflicts (Hameiri & Jones 2013; 2015a; 2015b; 2017).

Hameiri and Jones adopted their ‘social conflict 2.0’ to investigate three non-traditional security issues pertaining to governance in Southeast Asia: money laundering in Myanmar; and the H5N1 avian flu and haze in Indonesia (2013; 2015a; 2015b). In these cases, international actors, rather than treat issues on a national or sub-national scale, treated them on international scales by helping relevant state agencies align their domestic political governance with “international-standard regulatory practices” (Hameiri & Jones 2013; 2015a: 154–155; 2015b: 454–456). However, these international actors clashed with domestic regime-affiliated actors: the Myanmar military junta (money laundering), the powerful poultry industry in Indonesia (the avian flu), and political and agro-business interests in Indonesia (haze). In these three cases, the countering moves came not from international actors but from national and sub-national actors who struggled to rescale ‘hot-button’ issues to national and sub-national levels, where the actors could avoid external pressures to meet international standards. In all three cases, the measures designed by international actors to address the problems were ineffective, precisely because the domestic actors, fronted by oligarchic capitalists, selectively and strategically embraced measures largely in the protection of their own self-interest rather than for their overall effectiveness (Hameiri & Jones, 2013; 2015a: 156; 2015b: 456). For Hameiri and Jones, the politics of scale is a dynamic process that can play out in various directions, pitting various types of actors against one another. What their work reveals is that many domestic struggles are shaped by politics, economics, and “broader social power relations” (2015: 446).

Cambodia: A Situational Context

Applying the aforementioned social-conflict lens to Cambodia can assist in gaining purchase on underlying political-economic dynamics and their implications for TPGS. Both Hun Sen and his Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) gained predominance in Cambodia’s politics after his successful coup d’état against First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh in 1997. After the coup, Hun Sen and his followers took control of state apparatus and its ability to exert influence across Cambodia via patron-client relations. To elaborate, the CPP government was able to issue land and logging concessions to tycoons and associated business ‘cronies’, some of whom reciprocated by donating considerable sums of money to government-run rural development projects,

which in turn garnered votes from poor rural populations (Un, 2005; Hughes, 2006). Significantly, the extended Hun Sen family and its wealthy allies have dominated lucrative business sectors including ones associated with special economic zones (SEZ), infrastructure (Hughes, 2011), urban renewal (Willem, 2012), media, and international trade (Global Witness, 2016). Domestically, some of these powerful actors have been driving forces behind the plunder of natural resources such as timber (Global Witness, 2007) and sand (Global Witness, 2010). In this way, Hun Sen, his extended family, the CPP, and privileged acolytes have been able to consolidate an immensely influential ruling coalition; a state-capital-developmental nexus.

Many of the above-mentioned business activities have taken the form of state-led development projects (SDP) under the legitimising pretext of national economic development and the raising of people's living standards. However, it is fairly indisputable, that a host of these projects have actually harmed communities, caused environmental degradation and triggered protests and clashes with project-affected villagers who, in turn, receive support from domestic and international NGOs (Sokphea, 2016; Chu, 2017). Together, these protestors and their supporters have formed a series of loosely knit collective of opposition groups. Opposition activities have 'scaled' the problem of SDPs to the international level by using methods such as social-media reporting and official filings with the European Union and other regional organisations (Sokphea, 2016: 602-603; Chu, 2016: 1107). The CPP government responded to this opposition strategy by passing the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations No. 0415/010 (LANGO 2015), which has severely curtailed NGO operations in Cambodia (Curley, 2018). Moreover, arrests and even extra-judicial killings of democratic and environmental activists have been on the rise in Cambodia, with the CPP government widely suspected of orchestrating the abuses (Blake, 2019: 72). Struggles between the Hun Sen-led ruling coalition and opposition groups over development projects reflects a 'politics of scale' in the shaping of these adversarial relationships.

This brings us to a set of important questions for this paper. Given that a core principle in any transdisciplinary project is "everyone who has something to say about a particular problem and is willing to participate can play a role" (Augsburg 2014: 263), how and in what ways do political-economic dynamics play out in a TPGS? And how do those dynamics affect the rationale of *bona fides* knowledge co-production? What sort of strains does this core inclusionary principle come under in Global South contexts? These

are pertinent considerations due to the fact that many of the issues engaged are often either directly or indirectly linked to SDPs (Siew et al., 2016; Bréthaut et al., 2019). If that pits local non-academic anti-SDP stakeholders against entrenched oligarchic pro-SDP forces, then it is not a stretch to appreciate that the resulting tensions and, in some instances, outright hostilities can easily extend to a given project irrespective of whether it is focussed directly or indirectly on the SDP in question. Given such contexts, it is fairly unsurprising that knowledge contestation can arise quickly in TPGS, between the perceptions of local non-academic stakeholders and those of entrenched pro-establishment stakeholders. The subsequent antagonism can express itself through mutual distrust, visible dislike, and fractious disagreement. In other words, a project can run a high risk of becoming embroiled in the situational political-economic context of its locale. This can lead to a tendency where the project intent of facilitating *bona fides* knowledge co-production for potential solutions to specific problems is arrogated and politicised. If that unfolds in an untrammelled manner, a project then faces significant hurdles in trying to achieve the former.

For example, researchers who conduct fieldwork in an authoritarian state context on sensitive political and economic issues can expect to come under surveillance of varying degrees by government officials and experience obstacles or certain restrictions on their ability to collect data. In order to manage such challenges, Morgenbesser and Weiss (2018) suggest that researchers thoroughly familiarise themselves with a target state's local political-economic dynamics before heading on site and seek to establish contact and relations with local partners such as NGO workers and academic institutes. In this sense, it is the political-economic dynamics of a target state that constitute the main exogenous challenge not only to data collection but to a scholar's safety. Again, because stakeholders represent a range of actors, the agents of oligarchic capitalism end up becoming intrinsic participants in a TPGS. Although Bréthaut et al. (2019: 160), claim that their "participatory and transdisciplinary" research "led to some disruption of established power dynamics", researchers should not assume that this means entrenched state-affiliated actors refrain from trying to dominate the exercise in knowledge co-production.

The ubiquity of these actors and their tendency to dominate proceedings is evident in the project under consideration and those of other researchers (e.g., Siew et al., 2016). Moreover, matters are often compounded by the timeframes of transdisciplinary projects. Many projects extend for three to four years, during which time the researchers struggle

to accomplish their research objectives, let alone resolve the tensions of sometimes highly antagonistic local relationships. In short, the priority transdisciplinarity places on inclusivity means that political-economic dynamics are the endogenous challenge they cannot avoid but often downplay. The scholarly concern for certain methodological challenges often diverts our attention away from the significance of this contextual factor. Having said that, a small but growing body of work has begun to map the ways in which politico-economic forces and power-dynamics shape peoples' exposure to and understandings of their own precariousness (Baird 2016; van Voorst 2016; Rosario and Rigg 2019; Carnegie et al. 2016 and 2019).

Deciphering Interactions: Local Non-Academic Stakeholders and the LS2 Project

Before moving on to consider the effect of Cambodia's political-economic dynamics on the SSRCL case-study, it is important to understand how they condition relationships among local Cambodian non-academic stakeholders over the LS2 project. Doing so assists us in highlighting the links between micro-subjective experiences and wider state-capital-developmental practices and how they play out at the level of individuals and communities. In the 1990s, Cambodia lacked sufficient electricity production which necessitated importing it from Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. As a result, Cambodian electricity prices rose to some of the highest in the world (Heng, 2015: 406). From the CPP government's perspective, "the high cost of electricity affects all productive sectors and hinders industrial investments and competitiveness." (RGC, 2006: 24) Meanwhile, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) initiated the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), focusing on infrastructure creation, with an emphasis on the energy industry (Dosch & Hensengerth, 2005). These set of circumstances eventually occasioned the CPP government's decision to generate electricity by damming the Mekong River. From the government's perspective, it is viewed as an economic resource capable of facilitating the industrialisation and modernisation of the state.

The LS2 stems from the convergence of two prominent factors: Cambodia's state-led developmentalist policy and the emergence of sub-regionalism in the country. As Baird (2016: 263) notes, the origins of the LS2 trace back to "a 1999 study of hydropower dam potential in the Nam Theun, Sekong and Sesan River basins in Laos"; however, the engineering consultancy company Halcrow and Partners did not take further action owing to the proposed dams' "marginal financial viability" and the environmental and social harm of the dams. In 2007, the state-owned company Electricity of Vietnam (EVN)

became the LS2's main investor, with the EVN subsidiary - the EVN International Joint Stock Company (EVNI) - taking 51 percent of the LS2's shares. At the same time, the Cambodian Royal Group (CRG), under the directorship of Kith Meng, known for his close relations to Hun Sen took 49 percent of the shares (Blake, 2019: 80). The EVNI and CRG created a joint venture, known as the Hydropower Lower Sesan 2 Company (henceforth, the LS2 Company). The EVN shareholder Power Engineering Consulting Joint-Stock Company No. 1 (PECC1) oversaw the dam's feasibility study and conducted the dam's environmental impact assessment (EIA) alongside the Cambodian national consultancy company Key Consultants Cambodia (KCC). The EIA was completed in June 2010 without any input from dam-affected villagers (Hensengerth, 2017: 96; Grimsditch, 2012: 26).

The LS2 is located at the Sesan River Basin, which is one of the largest tributaries of the Mekong River. The source of the Sesan River is in Vietnam's Central Highlands and flows to Ratanakiri and converges with the Sekong and Srepok Rivers in Stung Treng Province, west of Ratanakiri. Many people living along the Sesan River in Stung Treng are Khmer, Laotian, or members of indigenous groups. Prior to the dam's completion, these people eked out a living by fishing and collecting non-timber forest products (NTFPs). The indigenous groups, in particular, have a deep spiritual connection to the land and believe that the forests, mountains, rivers, and graveyards harbour powerful spirits. It was recognised early on, that construction of the LS2 would result in the relocation of about 1,000 households, many of which hailed from four villages: Sre Kor, Kbal Romeas, Sre Sronouk, and Krabei Chrun (Grimsditch, 2012: 28). Moreover, according to the EIA report, the LS2's reservoir would destroy 30,000 hectares of forest (Grimsditch, 2012: 29). According to Ziv et al. (2012: 5609), the LS2 would reduce fish stocks by an estimated 9.3 percent throughout the Lower Mekong River Basin. Concerns over worsening food security for locals and the erosion of traditional indigenous culture from forced relocation to new villages were also raised. Despite the warnings, it did little to deter Cambodia's ruling coalition from pressing forward. For their developmental agenda, the river has but one central function: economic.

Resistance from LS2-affected villagers to the CPP government's forceful river governance has been visible in local protests and communal elections in 2012 and 2017. In February 2012, with assistance from the domestic NGO 3S Rivers Protection Network (3SPN), dam-affected villagers planned to hold a public protest near the LS2's construction site. The plan raised "concerns" among district police that led to the

community leadership cancelling the protest (Baird, 2016: 269). Nevertheless, the villagers managed to hold a protest, at which one banner read, “We must preserve the river, which is the livelihood of the people!” (Baird, 2016: 269). Villagers who were critical of the dam emphasised the river’s multiple functions. It is interesting to note that rural areas, including Stung Treng, have been strongholds for Hun Sen’s CPP (Baird, 2016: 261). Yet, in the 2012 communal elections, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) - dissolved by the CPP government in 2017 - won a majority of seats in the Sre Kor commune. This commune had been strongly opposed to the LS2. Although the CPP won the commune election in Kbal Romeas, the opposition party’s vote dramatically increased. According to Mak Sithirith (2016: 70), widespread opposition to the LS2 spurred the high voter support for the CNRP. In 2017’s commune elections, the CNRP won again in the Sre Kor commune. The CPP government was encountering a significant local backlash.

Despite the resistance from locals, the National Assembly of Cambodia approved the LS2 in November 2012 without hesitation. The most interesting issue in the approval process was the decision by EVNI to partially withdraw from the LS2. Taking the place of EVNI was Hydrolancang International Energy Co. (HIE), a subsidiary of the China Huaneng Group - one of the top five state-owned electric-utility enterprises in China. Now, HIE held the largest share in LS2’s stocks, 51 percent whereas CRG’s share was 39 percent and EVNI’s was 10 percent. In February 2013, the National Assembly passed the Cambodian Government Guarantee of Payments to the LS2 Company Law. It established two basic conditions: (1) the government would cover the costs of power purchases in the event of non-payment by *Electricité du Cambodge*¹ and (2) the government would financially oversee the project if a crisis prevented the company from performing its duties (Kimkong et al., 2013: 50). The CPP government had essentially extended significant economic advantage to the HIE by helping it “avoid taking any significant risk when investing in the LS2 project” (Chu, 2017: 1105).

In January 2014, the LS2 Company released “The Compensation and Solution Policy.” Many dam-affected villagers disagreed with its provisos and submitted petitions articulating this disagreement to the relevant government agencies and the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh (Chu, 2017: 1107). The petitions emphasised the signatories’

¹ *Electricité du Cambodge* is Cambodia’s state power company.

rejection of the compensation policy and called for a cancellation of the dam project (Chu, 2017: 1107). Furthermore, in October 2014, eighteen NGOs including domestic and international ones issued a public statement calling for the government to “release details of proposed changes to the project’s design, mitigation measures, and their operation, to the public and affected communities” and conduct a new EIA (EarthRights, 2014). These developments indicated that dam-affected villagers and domestic and international NGOs were in the process of forging an anti-LS2 alliance in contradistinction to hegemonic state-capital-developmental plans of the ruling coalition.

The anti-LS2 alliance’s politics-of-scale strategy did not stop the CPP government from advancing “The Compensation and Solution Policy.” According to a report conducted by Mekong Watch, provincial government officials employed various methods to elicit support from the villagers for the policy. The Mekong Watch report asserted, for example, that a government official had asked an adult male villager for his thumbprint, claiming that it was part of a survey for villager compensation; later, however, the official used the thumbprint as proof that the villager had agreed to the compensation policy (Mekong Watch, 2015: 2). A female adult villager relayed a similar experience: “[Officials] said that this development [i.e., the LS2 project] would make poor people like us rich. They also said that if [my mother] protested, the government would not assume compensatory responsibility for my family” (Mekong Watch, 2015: 2). By using the term ‘development’, ‘poor people’, and ‘rich’, the officials again emphasised the river’s economic function. The LS2’s proponents - Hun Sen’s ruling coalition - seemed intent on rejecting the possibility of the river’s multiple functions.

The displaced villagers started moving into the government-designated relocation sites in about mid-2016. Two resettlement villages - Kbal Romeas and Sre Srenok - are located along National Road No. 78, which links Stung Treng and Ratanakiri Provinces. The villagers’ new surroundings are no improvement over their pre-dam settlements. For example, the relocation sites have tainted wells, poorly constructed and vermin-infested houses, missing land titles, a spotty home-ownership system, teacherless schools, and insufficient cultivatable land.² These resettlement problems go far in explaining why some villagers from Sre Kor and Kbal Romeas refused to set up homes in the new sites. The dam’s operations, slated to begin in December 2017, would flood the original Sre

² Observations and interviews in the preliminary fieldwork, conducted in resettled Kbal Romeas and Sre Srenok villages, June and December 2017

Kor and Kbal Romeas villages, so these residents had to move about three to five kilometres away. The new locations lacked educational infrastructure and sufficient cultivatable land.³

After the June 2017 commune elections, the Hun Sen regime kept the LS2's resettlement sites under surveillance. During my preliminary fieldwork in 2017, a local NGO worker suggested that TWC not visit the resettlement sites owing to regular patrols by local police.⁴ The 3SPN's director conveyed a similar concern, informing him that 3SPN might be on the government's blacklist.⁵ During the inauguration of the LS2, which was held in September 2017, Hun Sen made no reference to surveillance and intimidation. Instead, he continued emphasising the river's economic function: "The Lower Sesan II dam will impact the development of the whole country. It will supply [electricity to] households, as well as firms in the agricultural, industrial, and service sectors" (Khmer Times, 2018). Nevertheless, the on-the-ground impression is that surveillance and blacklisting were part of the CPP government's response to the anti-LS2 alliance's politics-of-scale strategy.

The SSRCL: Preparation and Challenges

In April 2018, TWC set up the SSRCL on the basis of transdisciplinary principles. As mentioned earlier, both the generally tense political atmosphere in Cambodia and the specifically sensitive nature of the LS2 prompted him to invite and consult with NGO stakeholders. In July 2018, he went to Stung Treng, Ratanakiri, and Phnom Penh, where he invited four NGOs to join the project: the 3SPN, the Cambodia Indigenous Youth Association (CIYA), the Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT), and My Village (MVi). All of them agreed to join the project. MVi suggested that participation in the project extend to the NGO Forum on Cambodia (NGOF), which had published two reports related to the LS2's resettlement and compensation (NGOF, 2012; 2015). One of the key criteria for choosing NGOs rests on their experience working on protection, conservation, fisheries, and riparian livelihood, all in relation to the Sesan River. The suggestion was approved, and NGOF became the fifth NGO to join.

³ Observations and interviews in the post-workshop fieldwork, conducted in new Sre Kor Village, June 22, 2019. As of writing, the provincial government is renovating the school.

⁴ Preliminary fieldwork, conducted in Stung Treng Town, December 20, 2017.

⁵ Interview in the preliminary fieldwork, conducted in Banlung, June 20, 2017.

In October 2018, the first preparatory meeting was held to discuss the project's research topic, research question, research objective, and potential village stakeholders. As Bergmann (2012) notes, workshops and seminars are often the most common places where stakeholders engage in knowledge sharing. For this reason, they agreed to hold at least four one-day workshops. In addition, a few NGO stakeholders suggested expanding the scope of the research site from the specific LS2 resettlement sites to the wider Sesan Riverine Basin in Stung Treng Province. Two concerns prompted this suggestion. First, because the LS2 has been controversial, expansion of the research sites could lessen any governmental suspicions of the project. Second, some Sesan Riverine villagers have been negatively impacted by two dams in Laos: Don Sahong (Champasak Province) and Xe-Pian Xe Namony (XPXN, La Attapu Province). The former has created food insecurities for villagers by reducing local fish populations (Baird, 2011); the latter collapsed in July 2018 (South China Morning Post, 2018), spreading concerns among dam-affected Cambodian villagers about the LS2's safety. The NGO stakeholders suggested that the project could include these villagers and benefit from their input. Finally, it was agreed that the project should invite villager-representatives from three locations: (1) the LS2-affected villages: Kbal Romeas, Sre Kor, and Sre Srenok; (2) the Don Sahong-affected village: Leu; and (3) the XPXN-affected village: O'Chay.

Bearing in mind the lessons drawn from previously mentioned projects, TWC conducted preparatory work. First, he conducted preliminary fieldwork and visited the resettled Kbal Romeas and Sre Sronok villages and interviewed some villagers and NGO workers. Second, to avoid potential interpreter problems, he hired a Cambodian graduate student, Sen, who had transdisciplinary training and high English proficiency, as a research assistant. He was to serve as the project interpreter and to organise its first preparatory meeting. Third, he secured a research grant for the project's expenses. However, despite solid preparations, methodological challenges arose. An NGO worker told him that in Cambodia, hosts of workshops, seminars, and the like are expected to financially reimburse participants for their related daily expenses, including those pertaining to travel and accommodations. However, the project's research grant was not enough to cover these expenses. In addition, Sen was unable to continue working in the project after the first preparatory meeting. As documented in many of the previously mentioned projects, it was also encountering its fair share of problems.

Fortunately, NGO stakeholders and TWC were able to minimise the problems that these challenges posed. First, he decided to partly self-fund the project. Meanwhile, some

NGO stakeholders, aware that the project's grant was limited, thus expressed to him their willingness to participate in the workshops without reimbursement. Particularly helpful in this regard was NGO F, which voluntarily sponsored the workshops. Second, he hired a new MA research assistant, Kem, who quickly integrated into the project owing to his previous experience in many other local research projects. However, Kem was unfamiliar with the LS2 issue, so, he hired a local researcher, Ben, who had been an NGO worker involved in the LS2 issue and who is, as of this writing, an instructor at a local university. Both Kem and Ben were workshop facilitators and assistants in the post-workshop fieldwork. Kem, Ben, and TWC were the project's core academic team. It is worth pointing out that the above-mentioned challenges required patience and fairly laborious 'fixes', but at no point did they pose an existential threat to the project.

Dealing with Cambodia's Political-Economic Dynamics: An Intransigent Reality

On the other hand, the challenges posed by Cambodia's political-economic dynamics were to prove far more daunting than those outlined in the previous section. In November 2018, NGO stakeholders and TWC held the second preparatory meeting. An NGO stakeholder suggested that because male villagers had dominated daily life in their communities, the research project should give more voice to marginalised females. This suggestion met with agreement from the meeting's participants. Subsequently, six of the nine village stakeholders were female. Moreover, TWC suggested recruiting local government officials who had been involved in the LS2 issue. He believed that the SSRCL needed a diverse range of stakeholders, which would have to include government officials, whose extensive knowledge of the Cambodian political bureaucracy was highly relevant for the aim of knowledge co-production. He somewhat naively assumed that collectively and collaboratively the stakeholders would generate socially robust knowledge. Eventually, three government officials were invited to participate in the SSRCL. They were from provincial, district, and commune levels respectively.

By insisting that the project open itself to the participation of government officials, he had inadvertently fostered a volatile context in which the village and government participants could easily slip into antagonistic patterns of interaction. On January 25, 2019, the MVi held the kick-off workshop. Its aim was to identify the Sesan Riverine villagers' livelihood difficulties. The academic team designed a discussion-and-debate model for group discussions. According to the model, same-attribute stakeholders should hold "inner discussions" before proceeding to "outer debates" involving all the

different-attribute stakeholders. The academic team divided stakeholders into three attribute-based groups: (1) villagers, (2) government officials, and (3) NGOs. Each group had one to two facilitators who would guide discussions. Inner discussions, as noted above, were followed by outer debates, and the stakeholder groups were required to record their thoughts on the offered flipchart papers and to present the ideas to one another. After the presentation, other stakeholder groups could ask questions and give feedback. Stakeholder groups presenting their ideas would also respond to questions and feedback. The purpose of the discussion-and-debate model was to avoid direct antagonism between the village and government stakeholders.

Despite efforts to minimise conflict, intense knowledge contestation marred the first workshop. The village stakeholders identified three main livelihood difficulties: (1) Crises - dams' risk of collapse and flooding; (2) Basic needs - resettlement sites' lack of potable water, healthcare services, and teachers; and (3) Land issues - missing property titles, uncultivable lands, and land provisions smaller than those stipulated in resettlement contracts.⁶ After a village stakeholder voiced personal experiences of livelihood difficulties, the provincial-government stakeholder, Aiso, declared, "You should not bring these issues to the table."⁷ The village stakeholder Dang responded to Aiso by raising the issue of thumbprints. Dang said that, from her perspective, the government had deceived her.⁸

What is more, the academic team noticed the reluctance of government stakeholders to discuss the LS2 and its compensation and resettlement problems. On their flipchart papers, the government stakeholders stated that villagers faced two main types of livelihood difficulties: illegal logging and illegal fishing by lawbreakers in neighbouring provinces.⁹ In other words, the government stakeholders sidestepped the issue of the LS2 by refusing to attribute any of the villagers' livelihood difficulties to the dam. From the outset, contestation over the relevance of perspectives, issues and meaning ('authoritative knowledge') between village and government stakeholders manifested itself in direct verbal exchanges and in personal written notes. It was clearly observable that the discussion-and-debate model would have to deal with substantial antagonism

⁶ Note-taking and flipchart papers created by the village, government, and NGO stakeholders, Stung Treng Town, January 25, 2019.

⁷ Research assistant note-taking, Stung Treng Town, January 25, 2019.

⁸ Note-taking, Stung Treng Town, January 25, 2019.

⁹ The flipchart papers created by the government stakeholders, Stung Treng Town, January 25, 2019.

between stakeholders. The intransigent reality of Cambodia's political-economic dynamics was conditioning their relative interactions with one another.

On June 21, 2019, 3SPN held the second workshop. Similarly, it followed the discussion-and-debate model. At the beginning of the workshop, it was emphasised that all the views expressed by stakeholders contribute to knowledge co-production and thus merit respect. Regrettably, this exhortation did little to ease stakeholders' antagonism toward one another, as detailed below.

The second workshop's objective was to identify possible solutions to the livelihood difficulties identified in the first workshop. During the workshop, village stakeholders mainly requested that the Cambodian government take responsibility for their LS2-based livelihood difficulties. The government stakeholders denied the existence of some difficulties. For example, Aiso said that resettled villagers' land-shortage problems had geographical causes: "when the water level goes up, the size of [villagers'] lands shrinks."¹⁰ Her comment subtly but undeniably decoupled the villagers' livelihood difficulties from the LS2. Knowledge contestation was emerging again.

When responding to village stakeholders' concerns, the government stakeholders couched their comments in Cambodia's deeply entrenched hierarchical political culture and state-society relations. For example, regarding illegal fishing, poaching, and logging, the district-government stakeholder Diser asserted that the government is "educating local people about forest laws and land laws" and that the government tries "to meet the local people's needs, because it [the relationship between the government and the villagers] is like [the relationship between a father and his children]."¹¹ The paternalistic tone of Diser's comments reinforced and reasserted asymmetrical relations between the two parties by using phrases like "a father and his children" and "educating local people."

Although the discussion-and-debate model, serving as the basis for these interactions, gave village stakeholders a chance to voice their concerns, Diser's statement, coupled with Aiso's denial of the existence of villagers' livelihood difficulties, gave an indication of the attempts by government stakeholders to dominate the process of knowledge co-production. In contra to Bréthaut et al. (2019), it also brings into question the extent to which such exercises can disrupt established power dynamics.

¹⁰ Research assistant note-taking, Banlung, June 21, 2019.

¹¹ Note-taking, Banlung, June 21, 2019.

FACT held the third workshop on November 21, 2019. Due to the lack of knowledge co-production in the second workshop, the third workshop's objective remained unchanged: identify possible solutions to villagers' livelihood difficulties. This time, however, stakeholders were asked to discuss possible solutions in the context of two specific questions: (1) What can I do? (2) What support do I need? The third workshop did not give rise to strong knowledge contestation because some of the more combative village and government stakeholders were not in attendance. Aiso, for example, was not present but had assigned a colleague to join the proceedings. The surrogate government stakeholder, who happened to specialise in provincial finances, was almost completely unfamiliar with the project's details. Despite this setback, NGO and village stakeholders offered possible solutions to the livelihood difficulties. One solution was village stakeholders' proposal that local villagers, police officers, and NGO workers jointly patrol nearby forests and riverbanks in search of illegal fishing, poaching, and logging.¹² But the absence of substantial government-stakeholder contributions to the project's knowledge co-production meant that the proposal was left weak and fragmented.

After the third workshop, the SSRCL encountered a methodological challenge of unexpected proportions. The COVID-19 pandemic prevented most participants, including TWC, from travelling and meeting. NGOF, therefore, postponed the fourth workshop until late September 2020. At the eventual holding of the workshop, in which he participated via videocall, participants were required to wear masks and use sanitiser. Both the health-and-safety protocols and the use of virtual communication helped minimise the COVID-19 impact.

Nonetheless, Cambodia's political-economic dynamics remained a formidable reality in stifling credible knowledge co-production during the fourth workshop. One objective in this workshop was to generate policy suggestions for the government's handling of livelihood difficulties. To this end, NGOF invited additional government officials from provincial and national levels to participate in the workshop. One week before the event, NGOF distributed to each of these individuals the initial SSRCL report documenting the progress made from the first to three workshops. In the fourth workshop, a village stakeholder complained about many unresolved livelihood difficulties and suggested that the government had ulterior motives for collecting the thumbprints of

¹² Flipchart papers created by the village and NGO stakeholders, Stung Treng Town, November 21, 2019.

villagers on the resettlement-and-compensation contracts.¹³ A government stakeholder responded to this concern by trying to dispel any suspicions: “please be aware that, at the national level, the government is always present to solve problems in cooperation with the people, and the thumbprints are merely standard information on official documents.”¹⁴ Such an assertion again demonstrates the divergence of political-economic perspectives conditioning village and government stakeholder relations. Overall, in the four one-day workshops, NGO stakeholders and the academic team managed to overcome many challenges, but the political-economic reality remained largely intractable.

Conclusion

Somewhat differently to interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies, transdisciplinary studies consistently emphasise the value of non-academic knowledge in thinking through and contributing to solutions for complex socio-political and economic problems. As this paper has shown, however, eliciting and integrating such knowledge into project aims and outcomes is especially vulnerable to a state’s political-economic dynamics. Although other methodological challenges may be disruptive to TPGS, they are not insurmountable, they will rarely sink it. In contrast, by employing a social-conflict-cum-politics of scale lens, our paper deciphered the context of the often-antagonistic relationships that form among various non-academic stakeholders. This allowed it to foreground the influence of asymmetrical political-economic dynamics on a transdisciplinary project and the debilitating effects they can have on *bona fides* attempts at knowledge co-production for problem-solving when dominant ruling coalition actors gain ascendancy. In sum, any attempt to have a fuller understanding of the overarching challenges facing TPGS requires a grasp of the influence exerted by the target state’s political-economic dynamics and the associated agency of its actors.

In the SSRCL, the positionalities and struggles that emerged among local non-academic stakeholders over the Sesan River’s functions provided a microcosm of Cambodia’s political-economic dynamics and how the force and interests of the country’s state-capital-developmental nexus play out at the level of individuals and communities. The observations on the undercurrents at play in the four workshops gave a palpable sense

¹³ The final workshop’s minutes created by NGOF, Phnom Penh, September 30, 2020.

¹⁴ The final workshop’s minutes created by NGOF, Phnom Penh, September 30, 2020.

of power asymmetries, interest incompatibilities, and knowledge contestation at work, where dominant actors gain ascendancy over what is deemed relevant and/or authoritative contributory knowledge on an issue and unduly influence the *raison d'être* and efficacy of a project.

Of course, this paper is not without limitations. First, its focus is restricted to political-economic dynamics in Cambodia. Such dynamics will vary and play out somewhat differently from place to place and situation to situation. Although it is possible to identify fairly similar characteristics such as state-led developmentalism and entrenched patronage politics, there will be variation in stakeholder composition, research contexts, and knowledge co-production methods at different sites. Secondly, the role of academic stakeholders in knowledge contestation requires further investigation. From experience, it is difficult for them to contribute to workshops and other group discussions when local non-academic stakeholders are engaged in ardent knowledge contestation.

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