

# **Social and Political Conflict Over Dam Development on the Irrawaddy River**

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## **ABSTRACT**

After decades of troubled economic, political, military and social history, Myanmar is currently engaged in seven China-backed dam building projects, that will permanently alter the the Irrawaddy River, the country's largest river. The Irrawaddy dominates the ecology of 61% of the total landmass, as well as the socioeconomic climate, given the fact that this landmass currently is home to nearly half of Myanmar's population of 55 million people.

Through sociopolitical analysis, this paper examines the effects of dam development along the Irrawaddy River and the corollary potential social, economic, and political repercussions anticipated throughout the region. Presenting the current status of the river as the spine of this small nation (slightly smaller than the state of Texas), the author provides data detailing manner and degree to which the dams will alter, irretrievably, the river's role as a means to livelihood, food supply (fish, herd animals and agriculture), and major transportation waterway, currently stretching 2,170 km (equal to the distance from Dallas, Texas to Washington, D.C.).

Both a detailed look at the relocation requirements and the impact on a broad range of resources are reviewed. The dams are anticipated to result in massive deforestation, unsustainable fishing practices, destruction of key habitats, cessation of mineral prospects, and changes in land at the margins of the river's altered course.

Myanmar seeks to establish hydroelectric power as its only power source by 2030. Yet, as the data clearly show, other aspects of the risk/reward ratios emerge in the project's evolution. Myanmar currently is one of the most impoverished and underdeveloped countries, with socioeconomic gaps among the widest in the world. The dam projects are certain to further exaggerate these disparities. The paper takes up a discussion of these issues, both from historical and future-oriented viewpoints

Antecedent to the scope of this paper, the author calls for further analyses using a range of robust socioeconomic models to assess future hydroelectric harvesting projects in underdeveloped countries which divert these hydroelectric resources to mega-power nations, with specific attention to the impact on resources, population relocation, and political/economic/social implications.



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