During this past summer, I spent nearly ten weeks researching the politics of hydropower development in Cambodia with the support of a Scott-Kloeck Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Fellowship. I wanted to focus principally on northeastern Cambodia, where communities along the Sesan and Srepok Rivers face challenges to their way of life because of hydropower development. Along these rivers, Chinese and domestic investors have begun constructing the Lower Sesan 2 hydroelectric dam that is predicted to displace 5,000 families and impact tens of thousands of people both upstream and downstream of the future dam’s reservoir. When I set out to do my pre-dissertation research this summer, I also wanted to examine how the impact of this dam project will be compounded by the loss of villagers’ land to foreign and domestic companies that are cutting down forest in order to plant rubber plantations. Although I made significant in-roads into this research topic, overall I spent more time learning about the politics of hydropower advocacy in Cambodia today.

The government of Cambodia has declared hydropower development a necessary strategy for meeting the country’s growing energy needs and fueling its economic growth. Nearly 70% of the Cambodian population, primarily in rural areas, do not have permanent access to electricity. The country relies almost entirely on diesel generators and energy imports from Thailand and Vietnam. Given the high costs of diesel electricity generation and the desire for energy independence, the Cambodian government plans to construct nearly 20 large-scale hydroelectric dams throughout the country. Most of the government’s proposed dam locations are in the Cardamom Mountains in the southwest or in the Sesan, Srepok, and Sekong River basins in the northeast. However, the Cambodian government does not have the financial or technical resources to construct large-scale dams and so it has largely turned to its development patron China to meet its hydropower goals.

Despite the potential energy production of its hydropower sector, Cambodia’s energy plans ignore over half a century of global research into the negative impacts and inefficiencies of large-scale hydroelectric dams. Local, regional, and international opponents to hydropower have thus voiced a range of critiques against Cambodia’s hydropower plans. By far the largest concern of activists is the loss of wild-fisheries caused by future dams, because many rural Cambodians rely upon fish for up to 80% of their daily protein and the natural migrations of fisheries in the Mekong River and its tributaries will be blocked by many of Cambodia’s dams. The Lower Sesan 2 dam, for instance, will reduce fish stocks by up to 9.1% throughout the Lower Mekong Basin region (consisting of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam). This loss of both food supply and biodiversity is a major concern for environmental and human rights activists, as well as people whose livelihoods and subsistence rely upon the productivity of Cambodia’s free flowing rivers. Reservoirs will also flood large areas of the few remaining stands of primary forest in the country. Villagers living within these reservoir areas will be forced to relocate, and in a country with a poor governance and transparency record, the risk that people’s needs and desires will not be accounted for during resettlement is very high. Even from an economic perspective, few feasibility studies have been conducted to determine the actual cost-benefit of
producing energy through hydroelectricity. Without mountainous terrain, most of the proposed reservoirs will be massive in order to produce only mid-levels of energy. Finally, Cambodia does not yet have a centralized power grid to distribute electricity from the remote areas where dams would be located. Little discussion within the government has been devoted to planning for who will pay to build the necessary infrastructure for energy distribution.

The range of communities, activists, NGOs, government ministries, and international investors involved in hydropower development in Cambodia makes the politics of hydropower difficult to navigate both practically and intellectually. For nearly four weeks I conducted research into this complex web of politics in the capital city of Phnom Penh. My primary research methods were qualitative interviews and participant observation. I relied upon contacts from my Master’s research to begin networking within the NGO community involved in hydropower issues. Through interviews, NGO workshops, and advocacy meetings I began to map the politics of power within the advocacy world, as well as its interface with the government of Cambodia and local villagers. Simply put, hydropower advocacy in Cambodia takes a reformist approach to hydropower, utilizing the language of sustainable hydropower as a way to temper critiques of the government’s energy development strategy. Within the advocacy world in Phnom Penh, few people overtly opposed to dams are given the time or space to voice their dissenting opinions within meetings or workshops.

The internal politics of hydropower advocacy are most striking when comparing the three major hydropower campaigns that I learned about while in Cambodia. The first campaign I researched, organized by the newly formed NGO Mother Nature, is trying to stop the Stung Cheay Areng hydropower dam in Koh Kong Province in southwestern Cambodia. This organization has partnered with local villagers in the Areng Valley since March, 2013 to organize a road-block on the only path into the Areng Valley in order to keep out surveyors from Sinohydro Corporation. In mid-September, this protest was forcibly disbanded by the Cambodian military, which now controls the road into the Areng Valley. In late June I participated in an advocacy “study-tour” organized by the NGO Forum of Cambodia that brought 20 villagers from the northeast of the country who face displacement by the Lower Sesan 2 dam to visit with Mother Nature members and villagers in the Areng Valley. For three days the group met with communities in Koh Kong to discuss strategies to either oppose hydropower projects directly, or at the least to gain fair compensation and resettlement packages from the government. Overall the Lower Sesan 2 representatives felt like the Areng Valley villagers were better organized and more determined to prevent the Cheay Areng dam than communities in the northeast.

The Lower Sesan 2 villagers with whom I traveled to the Areng Valley were critical of advocacy of the Lower Sesan 2 dam because the campaign has been hampered by a dispersed civil society, feuding NGOs, and conflicting community opinions. Advocacy against this project has been underway since at least 2009 when villagers first announced their unanimous disagreement with the project. However, compared to the Areng Valley, the region where the Lower Sesan 2 dam will be constructed is much larger, more ethnically diverse, and represented
by several different NGOs. As such, competing advocacy strategies within NGOs, as well as misinformation and bribery pushed by the Lower Sesan 2 dam company, have all impeded effective community mobilization. Because of these reasons, the power dynamics within the Lower Sesan 2 advocacy network are much more complicated and divergent than in the Areng Valley.

The third campaign that I learned about was against the Don Sahong hydroelectric dam, which will be constructed on the Mekong River in Laos at the border of Cambodia. Both NGOs and the Cambodian government are opposed to this project because of its potential transboundary impact on regional fisheries. The Don Sahong dam will block one of the only year-round channels for fish migration in this section of the Mekong River. Importantly, because this project will be built in Laos, there is much more vocal opposition to the Don Sahong project than domestic projects. NGOs in Cambodia feel more empowered to critique this project than local projects. For example, the NGO leading the Don Sahong campaign, the World Wildlife Fund, holds two very different stances for the Don Sahong dam vis-à-vis the Lower Sesan 2 dam. They oppose the Don Sahong dam, but completely ignore the Lower Sesan 2 dam even though it will have much higher impacts on both wild-fisheries and local communities.

My preliminary research this summer about the politics of hydropower suggest several important insights that I plan to explore in future scholarship. First, the difference in campaign strategies between the Stung Cheay Areng and Lower Sesan 2 dams ought to be explored further. Specifically, I would like to examine how differences in geographic location of dams and the demographics of impacted villages affects community mobilization. The LS2 campaign also shows that certain community voices and desires are hindered by the politics of representation of NGOs. Mediating this politics of representation is access to knowledge and claims of expertise. Local villagers have been told repeatedly by NGO Forum and Oxfam Australia that they need expert legal advice and NGO support in order to oppose the LS2 dam. Given the risks of direct action (e.g. the violent suppression of Mother Nature’s road-block), NGO professionals are more inclined to pursue advocacy strategies that are reformist rather than oppositional. Finally, when comparing the Don Sahong project with the other two dams, it becomes clear that the scalar politics of advocacy must be taken into consideration when examining the politics of hydropower.

Although I hope to continue researching these issues in my future work, this summer also gave me the opportunity to begin exploring my options for different dissertation topics. In addition to researching hydropower politics, for two weeks I visited the communities with whom I worked while I was a Peace Corps volunteer from 2009-2011. In just five years since I first lived in Cambodia, the industrialization of the countryside, new farming techniques, and high-levels of predatory lending to small-scale farmers have transformed the rural landscape. I am now strongly considering re-visiting these areas in my future dissertation research. I am interested in how the increased integration of Cambodia’s rural economy into a global economic system is producing new social-property relations, agricultural practices, and alternative forms of development rooted in community solidarity and autonomy.