

Environmental equity in Myanmar

Sustainable development in the context of conflict, inequality, and diversity

TIDE Seminar
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Aims

- Understand the concept of “environmental justice” and its potential applications to Myanmar
- Understand how the causes and effects of environmental problems are distributed according class, ethnicity, and gender, with special consideration for conflict-affected communities
- Apply a critical lens to the Sustainable Development Goals
- Appreciate qualitative approaches to environmental issues

You are encouraged to voice your opinions!

PART I

UNDERSTANDING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

DISCUSSION

What is **sustainability**?

How do we achieve **sustainability**?

Who benefits from **sustainability**?

Sustainability



‘Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (*Brundtland Report, 1987*)

- Recognises balance between economic growth, environmental impacts, and social impacts
- Conceptualised by international actors
 - E.g. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by individual UN member states

Introducing environmental justice

Environmental justice is 'the right of everyone to enjoy and benefit from a safe and healthy environment, regardless of race, class, or ethnicity' (*Dictionary of Human Geography*, 2009)

This includes:

- Exposure to hazards
- Control of natural resources
- Access to decision-making processes

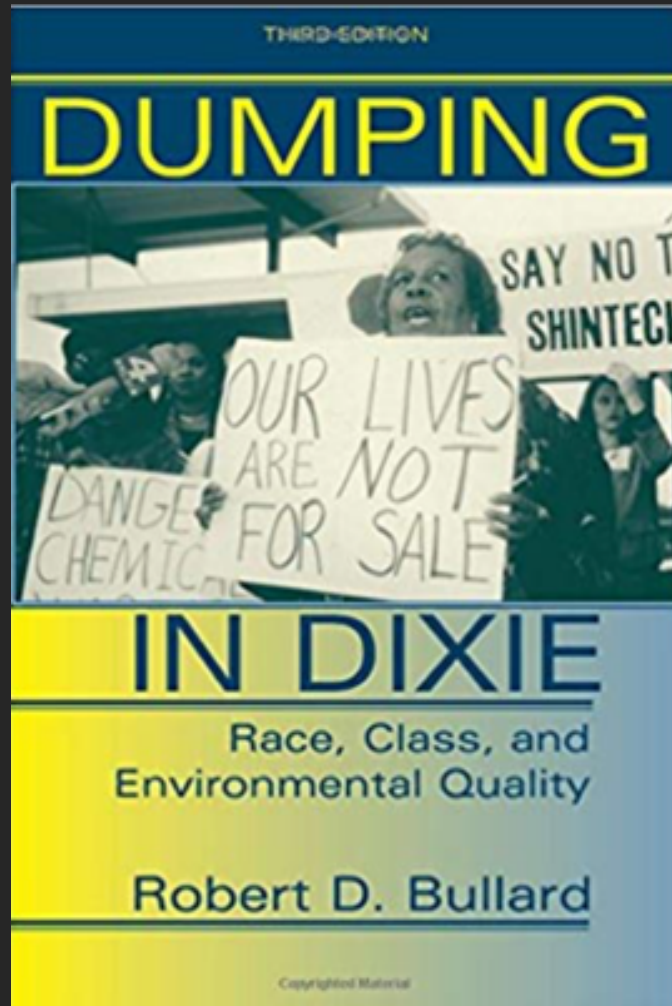
In contrast, **environmental injustice** is when communities have to deal with more environmental problems because of their ethnicity, class, gender, or social status.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Projects and policies that alter the **natural environment** can contribute to existing **social inequalities**

- Existing social inequalities include ethnicity, income, and gender, depending on the context
- Even when these projects and policies are considered “sustainable”

A history of environmental justice

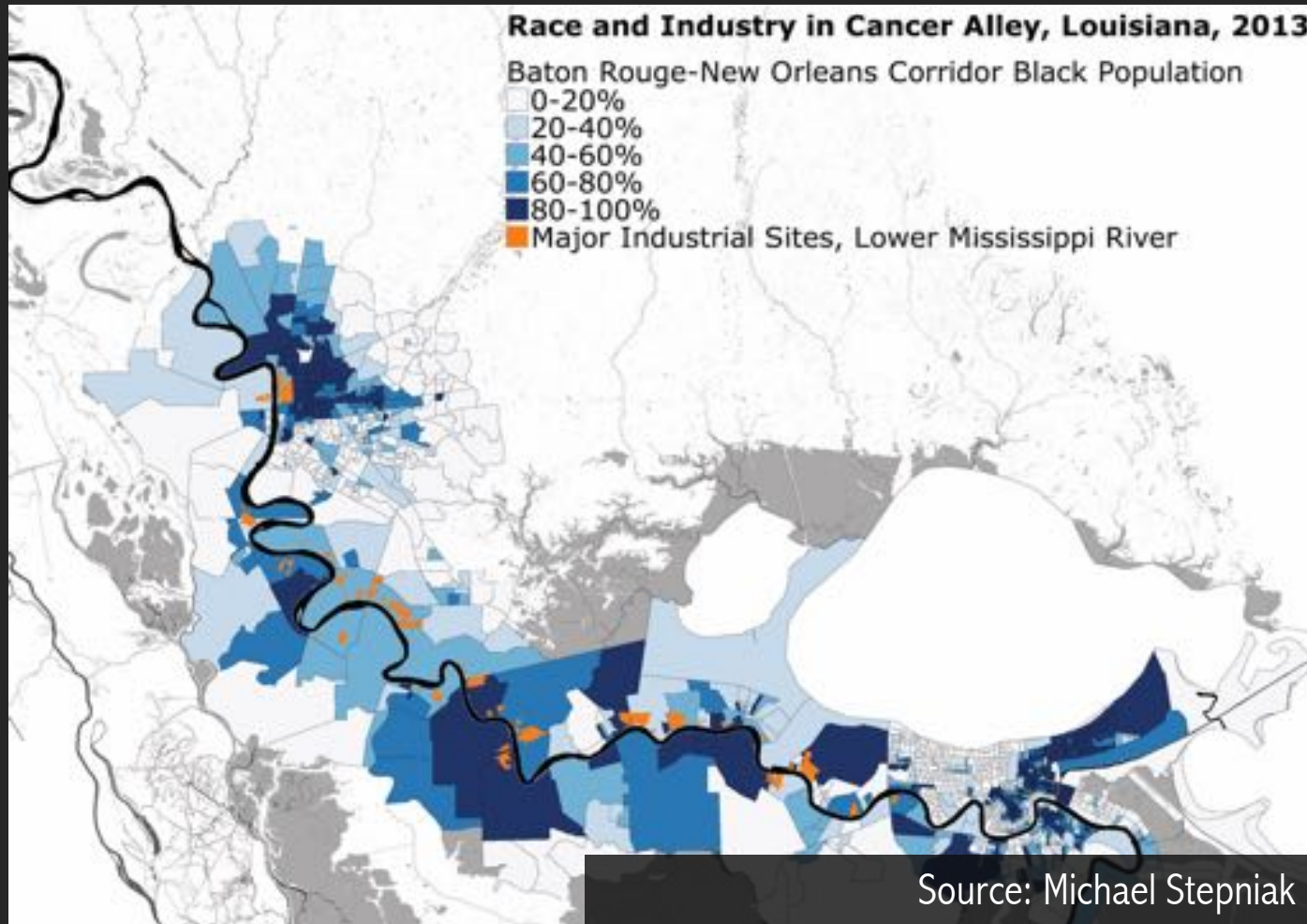


- Originated in the US
- Academic research
 - *Dumping in Dixie* (Bullard 1990) showed how environmentally harmful projects in the US were sold to poorer communities as bringing jobs and addressing social injustices
 - Disproportionate environmental impacts on African-American and indigenous communities
- Civil society and social movements
 - The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in Washington in 1991
 - Delegates adopted 17 principles of EJ

7 principles of environmental justice:

<https://www.ewg.org/enviroblog/2007/10/17-principles-environmental-justice>

E.g. “Cancer Alley”, Louisiana



Breathing While Black

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZB8CbDG7gpk>

Is ‘Cancer Alley’ an example of environmental injustice? Why?

Debating environmental justice

Criticisms of environmental justice

Victims gain employment opportunities and the benefits of cheap housing

Project planners motivated by other factors (feasibility, profits, low population density); did not intentionally harm poor, minority communities

Data in the larger area shows that average environmental impacts are low

Arguments for environmental justice

Regardless of the cost-benefit balance, communities themselves do not want these sites near them

Discrimination exists regardless of whether it was intended

Need to consider localized impacts, particularly when the community in question is already disadvantaged

Research about environmental justice

How do we measure **environmental impacts**?

- Methods: qualitative and/or quantitative?
- What area do we measure impacts in?
- Who are the research participants? How do their opinions matter?

Besides linking social justice with the environment, *'the environmental justice movement also sought to redefine knowledge, by emphasizing how grassroots communities express their experiences and the knowledge they have to share... This contrasts with environmental reports that rely heavily on scientific and economic data.'* (Pezzullo and Sandler 2007, 11)

Environmental equity

- Closely related to environmental justice
- **Decisions** about the environment are usually made using **economic cost-benefit analyses**
- However, **environmental equity** means that decisions about the environment must be about more than just the economic value of the environment
 - They should consider culture, livelihoods, and ecology
 - Projects that affect the environment should not aggravate existing inequalities
- This means that **decision-making processes** must be carefully designed
 - Decision-making processes should include all affected interests
 - Decision-making processes should be fair, open, and transparent

DISCUSSION

What are the **similarities** and **differences** between sustainability and environmental equity?

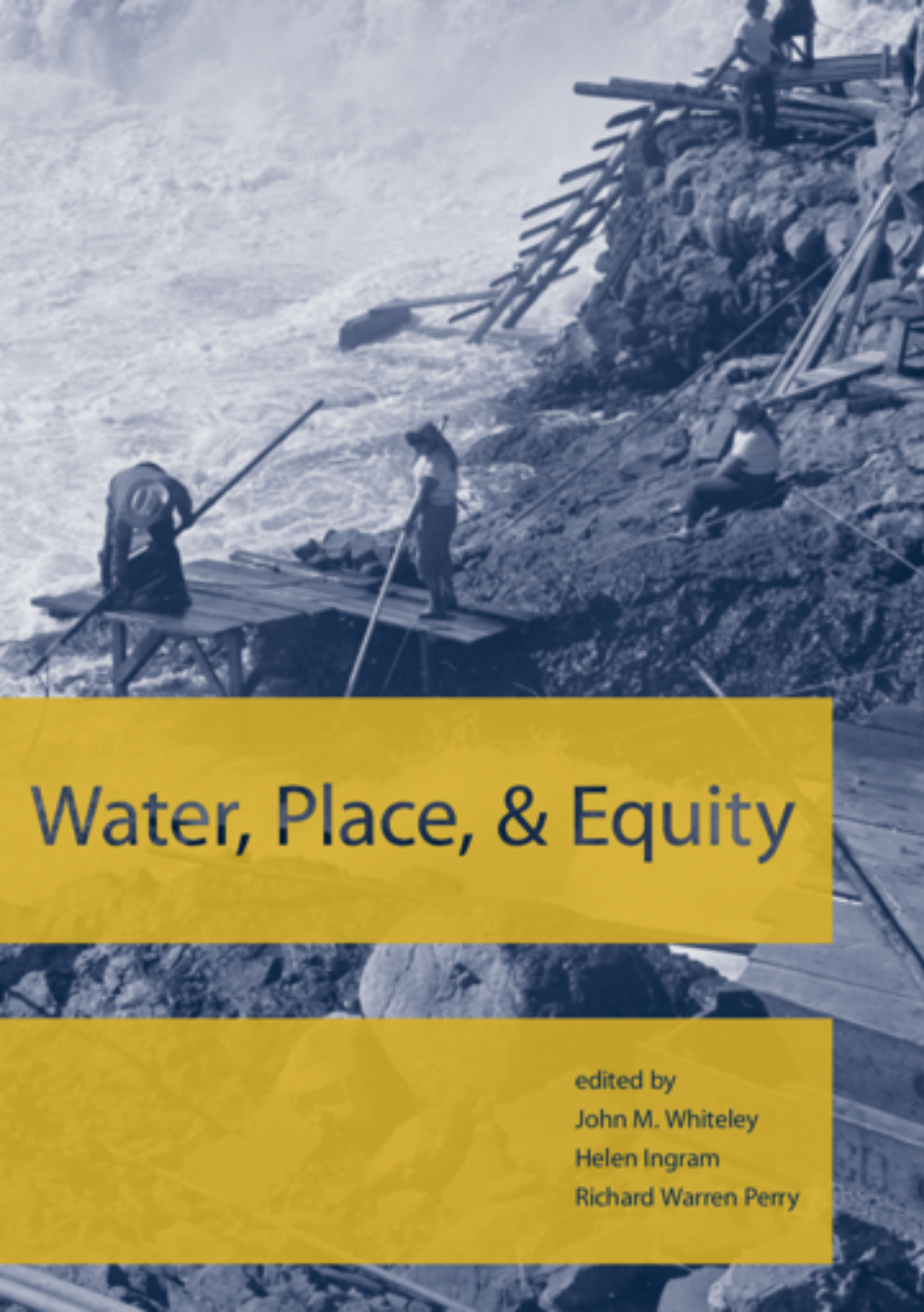
Why consider environmental justice in Myanmar?



- As Myanmar integrates into the international community, how will it contribute to global commitments like the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals?
- How can it balance international contributions with its internal political transition?
- In other words, how can sustainability be pursued in a way that is sensitive to the concerns of conflict-affected, non-Bamar groups?

PART II

CASE STUDY: DAMMING THE SALWEEN (THANLWIN) RIVER



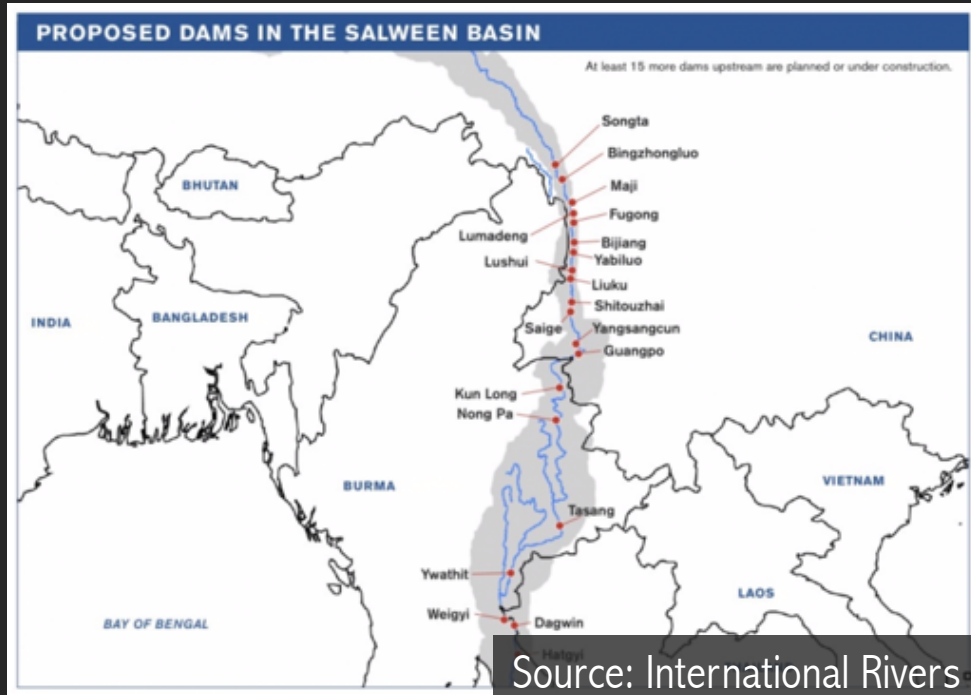
Water and environmental justice

- Water often governed according to principles of economic efficiency
 - Water can be bought and sold at price that reflects its value
- However water is not just an economic (or energy) resource
 - Water is integral to livelihoods, cultures, ecology, and history
 - Different actors can attach different values to water

Water, Place, & Equity

edited by
John M. Whiteley
Helen Ingram
Richard Warren Perry

Water and environmental justice

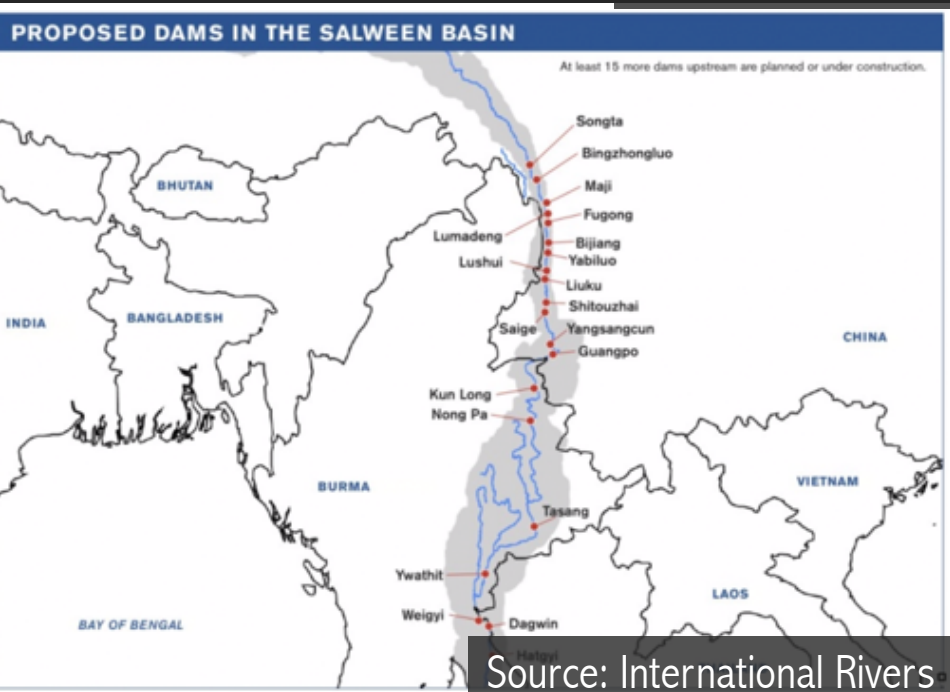


- Water is a transboundary resource
 - Changes in one part of the basin have upstream and downstream effects
 - River basins and watersheds cross boundaries
 - Political boundaries between countries
 - Social boundaries between ethnic groups

Can we achieve **environmental justice** across political boundaries? What challenges are there?



Source: Reuters



CASE STUDY

Thanlwin (Salween) River

- Asia's last free-flowing river, flowing through China, Myanmar, and Thailand
- Central to the livelihoods and cultures of 10 million ethnic peoples
- 15 planned hydropower dams on the mainstream, including 8 in Myanmar, in Shan, Kayah (Karenni), and Kayin (Karen) State



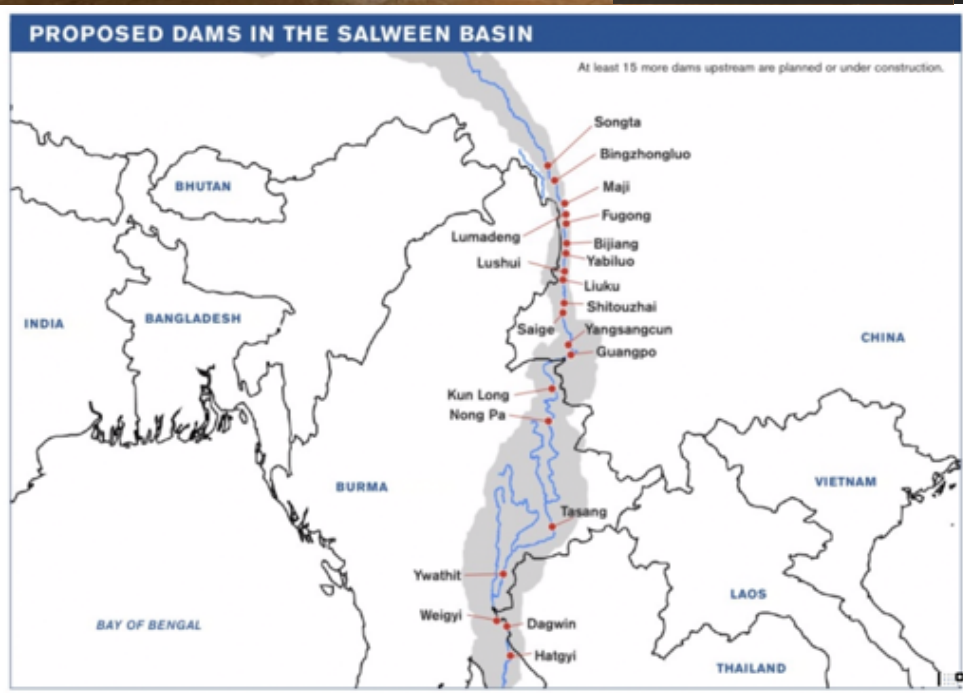
Source: Reuters

CASE STUDY

Thanlwin (Salween) River

Timeline (selected events)

- 1970s–1990s plans emerge for Salween dams but are stalled by conflict
- 1996 MoU between Thailand and Myanmar to purchase hydropower
- 2009 Tatmadaw attacks KNU near to proposed site
- 2012 KNU bilateral ceasefire
- 2013–present Community advocacy against Salween dams by e.g. Salween Watch, Karen Rivers Watch, Save The Salween Network
- 2014–2016 Clashes between Tatmadaw (with DKBA) and KNU near to project site, with particularly heavy fighting in 2016
- 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)
- 2016 NLD-led MONREC collaborates with the International Finance Corporation (IFC) for an SEA of the hydropower sector



Source: International Rivers

News

Karen Villagers Protest Hatgyi Dam, Other Projects on Salween River



The Hatgyi Dam

A Case of Thai Investment in Myanmar:

Adverse Impacts to Salween Communities & Key Recommendations

May 2018



CASE STUDY

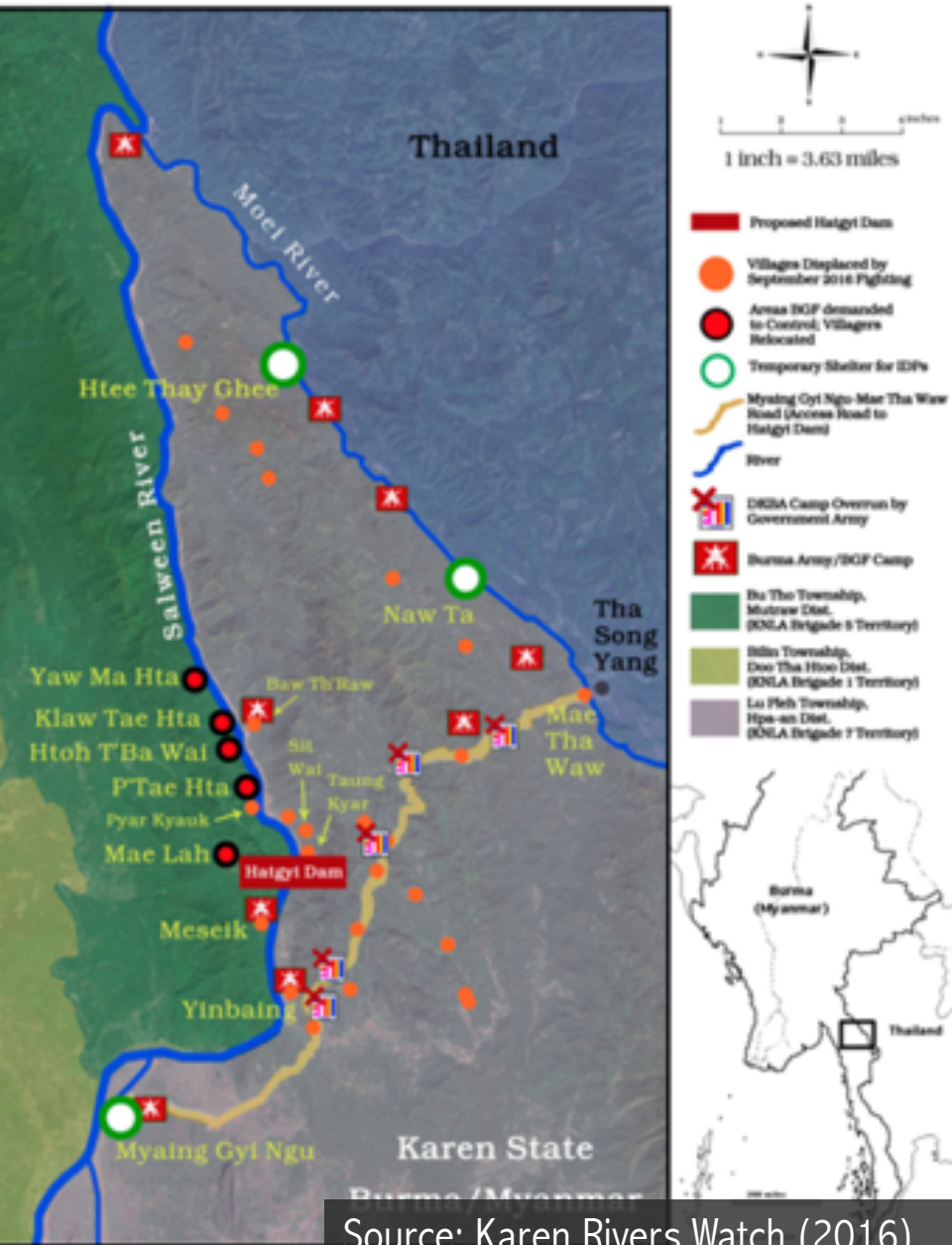
Thanlwin (Salween) River

Hatgyi dam in Karen State

- \$2.6 billion, 1.36MW planned project
- Investors: Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (Thailand), Sinohydro (China), Myanmar Ministry of Hydropower, IGE (Myanmar)
- 90% of electricity sold to Thailand

Map of Hatgyi Dam Fighting

September 2016



Source: Karen Rivers Watch (2016)

CASE STUDY

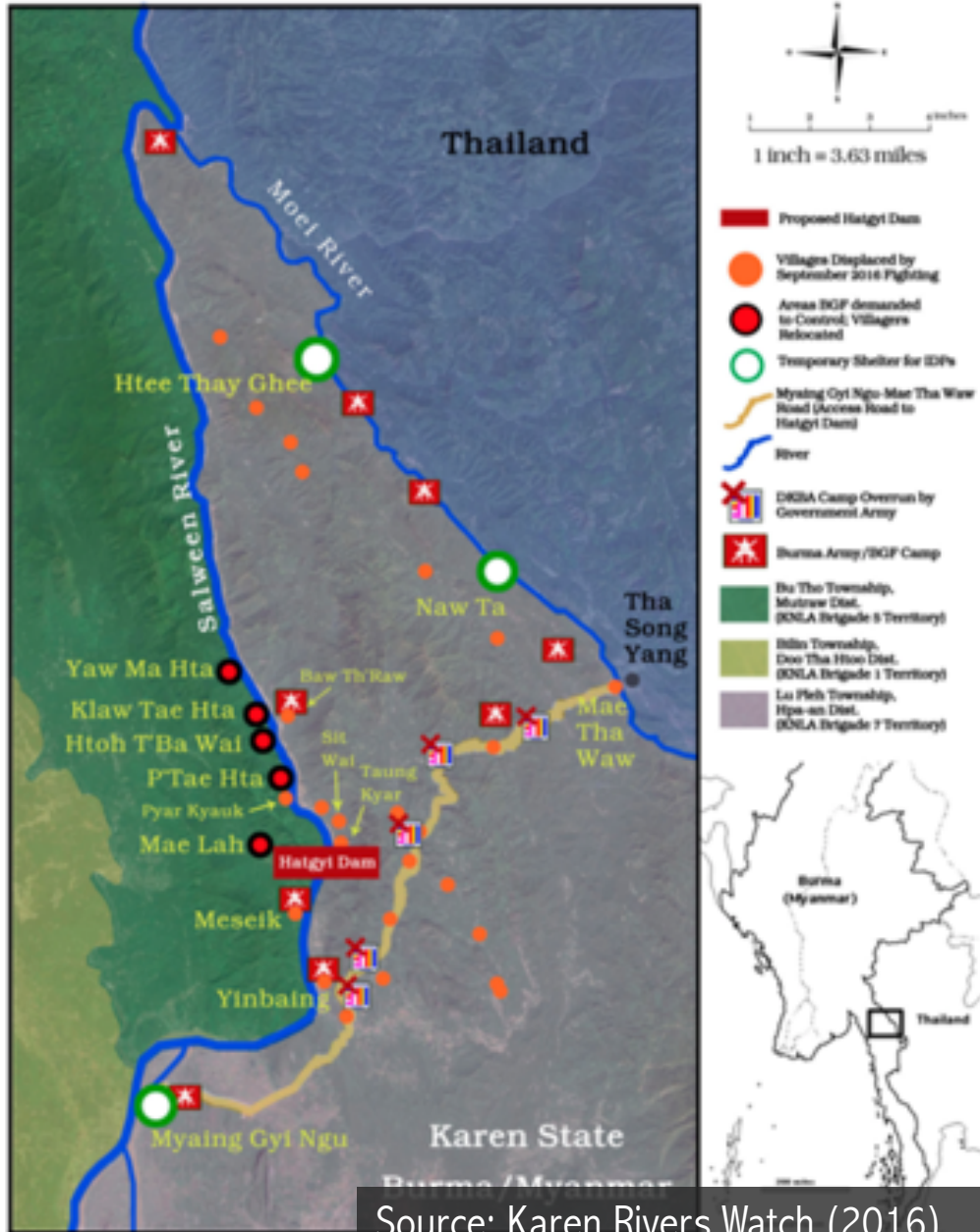
Thanlwin (Salween) River

Hatgyi dam in Karen State

- Key concerns:
 - Culture
 - Livelihoods
 - Displacement
 - Conflict
 - Decision-making processes

Map of Hatgyi Dam Fighting

September 2016



Source: Karen Rivers Watch (2016)

CASE STUDY

Thanlwin (Salween) River

Conflict and hydropower

- ‘Recognizing this **conflict-prone** and **politically fragile** condition as the main characteristics of Salween water governance is essential... as a political foundation for sustainable peace... No group will benefit from this conflict, as it is very unlikely that the Hatgyi dam development will be completed unless the Myanmar military is successful in gaining complete control of the area at the cost of the ongoing peace process.’ (Suhardiman et al. 2017, 350-352, 357-8)



**Strategic Environmental Assessment of
the Myanmar Hydropower Sector**

Final Report

CASE STUDY

Thanlwin (Salween) River

IFC (2016) SEA of the Myanmar hydropower sector

- Need for hydropower to meet growing domestic energy demand
- Proposes **sustainable hydropower**
 - ‘Based on integrated water, land, and ecosystem planning’ (ix)
 - Planning should include a Cumulative Impact Assessment (CIA) of the watershed, and an EIA for each hydropower project
- Based on 55 stakeholder engagement events... with who?

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

**Australian
Aid** 



IFC International
Finance Corporation
WORLD BANK GROUP
Creating Markets. Creating Opportunities

CASE STUDY

Thanlwin (Salween) River



Dams: Development or Destruction? (Burmese)

Karen Environment and Social Action Network

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=freTDQhz7-8&t=197s>



Discussion

- Is this an example of sustainability? Why/why not?
- Is this an example of environmental justice? Why/why not?

DISCUSSION

Compare these views. Which do you agree/disagree with?

‘Myanmar has the unique opportunity to develop hydropower in an integrated and sustainable manner before significant impacts occur to river systems. Hydropower could potentially generate substantial renewable energy to drive the economy and improve livelihoods, but it should be balanced with the maintenance of river basin processes and functions, the livelihoods and economic sectors they support, as well as the retention of ecologically and culturally unique sites and values for current and future generations.’ (International Finance Corporation, 2018, 8)

‘The business people think of the Salween as a river that can be dammed, and that dams are a source of money. But for our Karen people, the Salween is always in our hearts... It cannot be defined in terms of money. It is our life, our culture, and our history.’ (Susanna Hla Hla Soe, NLD, 2016)

‘Current development projects will only benefit a few people—mainly governments and investors—but local people like us will face huge challenges, including permanent loss of our lands, displacement, hunger and severe flooding.’ (Naw Phyo Phyo, Karen Women’s Organisation, 2013)

‘The decision by the Naypyidaw government to push ahead with unpopular dams in ethnic conflict areas raises serious doubts about their sincerity towards the peace process. What is the point of the dialogue process, if the central government has already sold off all our natural resources?’ (Mi Ah Chai, Burma Rivers Network, 2018)

Energy and environmental justice

‘Historically, energy consumption has created environmental injustice between those who benefit most from energy generation – including the construction and energy companies who build and operate the projects... -- and those who pay the costs through the deterioration of their livelihoods and health... In *Dumping in Dixie*, Bullard (1990, p. 32) reveals how environmentally harmful projects in the US were sold to poorer communities as bringing jobs and redressing past social injustices. Analogously, it is **the communities at the comparative margins of mainland South-East Asia’s increasingly liberalised market economy who experience firsthand the negative social and environmental costs of the large energy projects** that are now spreading from Thailand into Myanmar and Laos, and to whom these projects are framed to bring development, modernisation, and poverty alleviation.’ (Middleton 2012, 310-311)

- Which communities in Myanmar?
- How does this affect other issues – e.g. democracy, federalism, conflict?



resource federalism

a roadmap for decentralised governance of Burma's natural heritage



Source: Burma Environmental Working Group (2017)

The 2008 constitution enshrines a centralised ownership and control of natural resources by the Union (central) government in Section 37:

"the Union is the ultimate owner of all lands and all natural resources above and below the ground, above and beneath the water and in the atmosphere."
Section 37 (a)

"the Union shall enact necessary law to supervise extraction and utilization of State owned natural resources by economic forces."
Section 37 (b)

DISCUSSION

What is the relationship between environmental justice and other issues facing Myanmar, such as federalism and peace?

Our Customary Lands

Community-Based Sustainable Natural Resource Management in Burma



A report by the Ethnic Community Development Forum

Source: ECDF(2016)

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Section 37 (a)

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Section 37 (b)

DISCUSSION

How do international commitments affect environmental justice in Myanmar?

PART III

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

- 17 goals adopted by UN member states to ‘promote prosperity while protecting the environment’
- Each goal has specific targets and indicators measured at the country level
- Progress measured yearly by UN member states, including Myanmar

GOAL 7

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 7

Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all



TARGETS

INDICATORS

7.1 By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services

7.1.1 Proportion of population with access to electricity

7.1.2 Proportion of population with primary reliance on clean fuels and technology

7.2 By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix

7.2.1 Renewable energy share in the total final energy consumption

7.3 By 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency

7.3.1 Energy intensity measured in terms of primary energy and GDP

7.A By 2030, enhance international cooperation to facilitate access to clean energy research and technology, including renewable energy, energy efficiency and advanced and cleaner fossil-fuel technology, and promote investment in energy infrastructure and clean energy technology

7.A.1 Mobilized amount of United States dollars per year starting in 2020 accountable towards the \$100 billion commitment

7.B By 2030, expand infrastructure and upgrade technology for supplying modern and sustainable energy services for all in developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States, and land-locked developing countries, in accordance with their respective programmes of support

7.B.1 Investments in energy efficiency as a percentage of GDP and the amount of foreign direct investment in financial transfer for infrastructure and technology to sustainable development services

DISCUSSION

Do global goals help Myanmar to achieve environmental justice? Why/why not?

Links to democracy and federalism



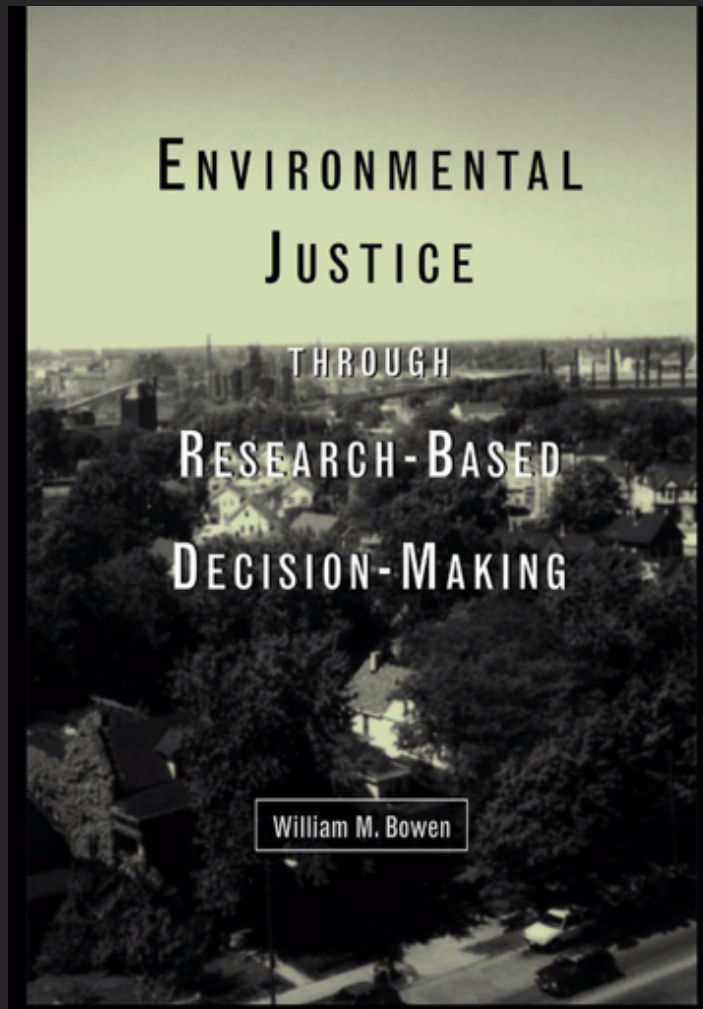
Environmental justice supports federalism

- Local policy-making promotes citizens' voices in environmental issues
- Prevents national and international goals from being pursued at the expense of citizens

Should we consider **'environmental federalism'**?
(Cory et al 2012)

Adapted from Shrader-Frechette (2002, 37-38) and
Cory et al (2012)

How do we do research?



- Who is included in the research?
- What area(s) is the research conducted in?
- What methods do we use for research?
- Who are the researchers?

Review

- **Concepts:** environmental justice, environmental equity, just sustainability
- **Myanmar context:** peace, democracy, and federalism
- **Case studies:**
 - Hydropower on the Salween river
 - The UN Sustainable Development Goals
- **Implications for**
 - Planning for projects and policies
 - Doing research on the environment

ANY QUESTIONS?

THANK YOU

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Resources on the Salween

- The International Finance Corporation's SEA on the hydropower sector
https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/industry_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/hydro+advisory/resources/sea+of+the+hydropower+sector+in+myanmar+resources+page
- "The plan to dam Asia's last, free-flowing international river" (*The Conversation*, 2016)
<http://theconversation.com/the-plan-to-dam-asias-last-free-flowing-international-river-66346>
- "Resource federalism: a roadmap for decentralized governance of Burma's natural heritage" (Burma Environmental Working Group, 2017)
https://www.bewg.org/sites/default/files/pdf_report_file/ResourceFederalismWEB_0.pdf
- "Karen State September 2016 conflict: the real motivations behind renewed war" (*Karen Rivers Watch*, 2016) <http://www.burmapartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/7056-karen-state-september-2016-conflict-the-real-motivations-behind-renewed-war.pdf>
- "Our customary lands: community-based sustainable natural resource management in Burma" (*Ethnic Community Development Forum*, 2016) https://www.tni.org/files/article-downloads/our_customary_land_-_eng.pdf
- Suhardiman, D., Rutherford, J. & Saw John Bright (2017) Putting violent armed conflict in the center of the Salween hydropower debates, *Critical Asian Studies*, 49(3), 349-364

Resources on environmental justice

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- Schrader-Frechette, K. (2002). *Environmental Justice: Creating Equality, Reclaiming Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Whiteley, J. M., Ingram, H., & Perry, R. W. (2008). *Water, Place & Equity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Westra, L. (2007). *Environmental Justice and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. London: Earthscan.

List of organisations

- Save the Salween Network
- Burma Environmental Working Group
- Karen Environmental and Social Action Network
- Salween Watch
- Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability