

Meet the activists risking life and limb to protect rivers (commentary)

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- *During one plenary session, a newly-minted Georgian activist shouted, “I’m just a grape farmer. I don’t know how to stop these projects. We need your help.”*
- *For these activists — and the other 85 participants from over 35 countries — the River Gathering in March was just the beginning.*
- *This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*

In late March of this year, an unusual group of activists gathered in Tbilisi, Georgia for a four-day conference to strategize around stopping destructive hydropower projects across the globe.

Hailing from countries as diverse as Chile, Congo, Albania, Mongolia, China, Thailand, and Colombia, they had been invited to Georgia because the former Soviet Republic is in the grip of a dam-building boom. Citizens there have been frustrated and overwhelmed by the hydropower onslaught, and are seeking international support for their struggle. During one plenary session, a newly-minted Georgian activist shouted, “I’m just a grape farmer. I don’t know how to stop these projects. We need your help.”

The participants also shared ongoing experiences with harassment and intimidation for their opposition to destructive hydropower projects. Meet four activists who are risking life and limb to keep rivers free.

Jiten Yumnam

When Indian police commandos showed up on Jiten Yumnam’s doorstep in October 2013, it was frightening – but it wasn’t a surprise. He’d had his first run-in with the authorities back in 2009, when he was arrested, tortured with electric shocks, and detained for four months.

His crime? He’d been an outspoken critic of flagrant human rights violations around development, especially hydropower development, in his home state of Manipur in Northeast India.

Back in the 1980s and ‘90s, Manipur, with the Indian government, initiated an aggressive program of dam-building on the state’s rivers. Locals initially welcomed the attention, and were eager for the promised economic development.

But the honeymoon period didn’t last long. “Most of these dams have created a lot of suffering and hardship for communities,” says Yumnam. Instead of providing water for irrigation, the Ithai Barrage, for instance, drowned over 50,000 acres of prime agricultural land, grazing grounds, and forests. Villagers rely heavily on their rivers and forests for collecting seasonal food, fishing, and agriculture; the economic losses for these families have been enormous.



Jiten Yumnam. Photo by David Gordon/International Rivers.

In the Mapithel Valley, villagers have watched helplessly as a reservoir's rising waters consumed their agricultural land, forests, community halls, houses, churches, and school buildings. The experience galvanized their resistance.

The developers — National Hydroelectric Power Corporation, Irrigation and Flood Control Project — have been largely unaccountable for the problems they've caused, says Yumnam. He's now working to stop new dams proposed for the Barak River, as well as ongoing development on the Mapithel. He's even working to decommission some dams.

"We feel ultimately that this development process happening in Manipur is no longer democratic. It's no longer helping the community. And when it comes to the benefit of these dams, most of the power goes to the company first... the people are not getting access to electricity."

"Why should we build dams that don't perform, and which destroy people's lands and forests?" he says.

"Our job is to let the river flow free. We will not allow these dams to come up. We don't want our forests to be destroyed. We don't want our children and our old people to suffer."

Saw John Bright

When activist John Bright describes life on Myanmar's Salween River, his eyes light up.

He talks of spending idyllic weeks on islands in the river, living solely off fish he's caught and food gathered on the island. His principal activities? Swimming and singing. "It's like a vacation," he laughs.

It's no surprise. The Salween — one of Southeast Asia's last major undammed rivers — is a hotbed of biodiversity and home to many of the country's ethnic minorities. It's also ground zero for the Myanmar government's decades-long conflict with the ethnic Karen people, a standoff that dates back to the end of the Second World War. (One publication called it ["the longest-running civil war you've never heard of."](#))



John Bright. Photo by David Gordon/International Rivers.

Over a million people have been displaced during the conflict, and the area is heavily militarized. Now, five major hydropower projects are proposed for the river — right in the middle of the conflict zone.

Building these dam projects gives Myanmar further excuse to militarize the region, says Bright, who's coordinator of the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN). "They are using the dam projects to destroy the ethnic nationalities."

KESAN is fighting to stop the projects. In many countries, says Bright, these dams wouldn't be built — they're too costly and damaging, and will deliver few benefits to local people. But Myanmar offers ideal conditions for this type of development. "To stay in business," wrote Bright a few years ago, "the dam-building industry needs countries with weak governance like Burma/Myanmar" so these corrupt, capital-intensive projects can get greenlighted.

But for Bright, the region around Myanmar's Salween River is more than a conflict zone — it's also home. So he's working to establish a peace park along the Salween to put an end to development projects that drive or exacerbate local conflicts. A combination of local and international support, he says, is key: "Once you have local pressure and international pressure, then the people you are fighting against will have to listen to you."

The conflict has personal repercussions, too. “We are also facing a risky situation, risky to our personal security,” he says. “But we have to deal with this. We can’t stop.”

Sani Ayouba

Ask Sani Ayouba what it looks like when people are resettled to make way for a hydropower project, and his answer isn’t pretty.

The activist from Niger has firsthand experience with resettlement: From 2012 to 2016, he watched as more than 5,000 people were displaced to make way for Kandadji Dam, a project proposed for the Niger River not far from Niger’s capital city of Niamey.

“This first phase of resettlement has faced many problems,” says Ayouba. The resettled families, he says, have no access to water. “You can imagine what life is like without water. They can’t do anything.”



Sani Ayouba. Photo by David Gordon/International Rivers.

Women walk for days to gather drinking water from distant villages, he says, and agriculture is impossible. Villagers who used to fish and farm along the riverbank have lost all means of making a living.

As riparian communities, they never had to pay for water access before. “But now they’re supposed to pay for water,” says Ayouba, “and this is a new thing for them.”

Niger ranks as one of the least-developed nations on earth, according to the UN. Drought, food security issues, and widespread poverty plague the desert nation, and activists frequently face jail time for their activities.

The World Bank and others have held out the Kandadji Dam as a possible solution to Niger’s problems. If dam construction begins, it will oblige more than 14,000 communities — up to 50,000 people — to leave their homes.

“We’re trying to organize them [affected people] and let them know their rights, and to get them involved in the process according to public participation principles, so they can enjoy their rights and improve their lives.” Ayouba says the community isn’t against the dam, but doesn’t want it to go forward at their expense.

This first group accepted resettlement, Ayouba says, because they wanted their lives to be improved. “But if they don’t see anything from this, this is a problem.”

The dams, he says, have also frayed the cultural fabric of the resettled communities. “You can’t leave your land and the history you have. These people are leaving the place where their grandfathers were born.”

Dato Chipashvili

Russia and the former Soviet republic of Georgia share a tense relationship. For a Georgian, there’s no more severe attack on one’s character than being labeled a Russian government operative.

But when national news programs accused Georgian activist Dato Chipashvili and his organization, Green Alternative, of working for their Russian neighbors to the north, his first thoughts were not for himself. “I was mostly concerned for my parents. It was a difficult time for them. It was a humiliating experience.” The news programs suggested Dato was a Russian operative fighting economic development in his own country.

For years, Dato and Green Alternative have rallied against the government’s [drive to turn tiny Georgia into a huge exporter of hydropower](#). Nearly 85 percent of the country’s energy comes from hydropower, and it has the potential to produce for export more than ten times as much as it currently uses.

But the haphazard development of the sector is proceeding without any national energy strategy, resulting in dire consequences for the biodiversity and people of Georgia, particularly in the country's northwest, which is home to rich mountain ecosystems and the culturally unique ethnic Svan population.

The [slander campaign](#) was just one of the many tactics used by proponents of dams to discredit the work of Green Alternative. (It didn't work — Green Alternative brought a lawsuit on charges of libel, forcing the ministry's hand to discontinue the allegations.) But while the intimidation and threats continue for those who stand in the way of hydropower, once again Dato is not concerned for himself.

"I can handle these attacks," Dato explains. "I am concerned about the Svan people and the threats that they face, because their way of life will be lost to make way for the dams."

Macarena Soler

Chilean lawyer Macarena Soler deplores the violence and intolerance against activists and people who are simply defending their rivers and their own way of life. Soler grew up under the military dictatorship in Chile, and she knows the risks of this activism well.

At the same time, she says, all this pain should not "obscure our souls." She believes in meeting these challenges with a sense of humor and a certain Latin American *joie de vivre*. "Our cause is not only to protect nature, it's also to build a world of greater happiness, peace, generosity, health, and quality of life."

For herself, she's decided that these risks are worth the fight because of what's at stake. Soler works principally on rivers in Patagonia — Baker, Cuervo, Puelo, Nuble, Maipo. She aims to "defend our local culture, our native people and keep nature virgin, pristine and untouched," she says. "These are the last refuges for flora, fauna, and nature."

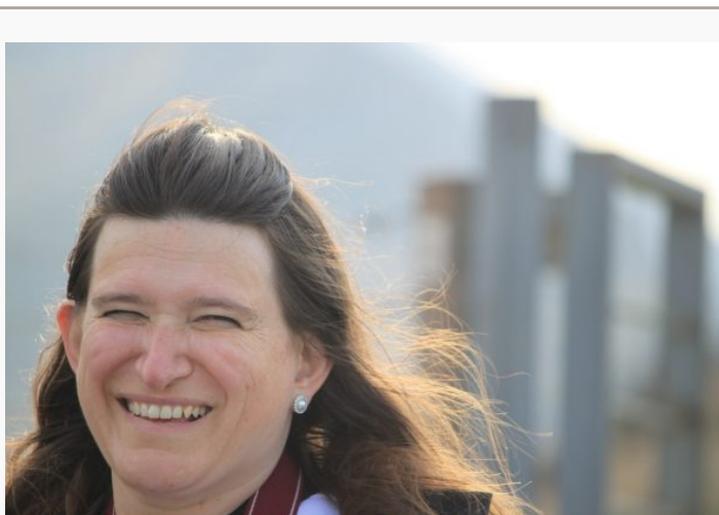
Though she does have expertise in the problems with destructive dams, Soler says that's not enough to win the fight. Arguments are important, but "[w]e must know what we're defending," she says. In order to combat dams, "you must have a profound conviction and love for the land. And to love it, you must know it." Soler says that all human beings have a deep link to their place of birth, to the place where their families and ancestors come from. "And this is our strength."

Soler was part of the winning campaign to stop HidroAysen, a series of dams proposed for pristine Patagonian rivers. Now she's working towards permanent protection for some of these rivers.

Though the work is hard, she doesn't lose hope. She sees her work, in part, as envisioning the future she wants to see: "Stopping dams is a massive endeavor. It's a way of showing the world that a dream of beauty,



Dato Chipashvili. Photo by David Gordon/International Rivers.



Macarena Soler. Photo by David Gordon/International Rivers

happiness, solidarity, compassion with other living beings on Earth is possible.”

For these activists — and the other 85 participants from over 35 countries — the River Gathering in March was just the beginning. The group is now strategizing on ways to share information, create joint strategies, and support each other’s work. Despite language and cultural differences, their goal is the same — to protect communities from large dams that threaten their homes, their livelihoods, and the rivers they depend on.



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Rainforest river in Indonesia. Photo by Rhett Butler.

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