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**Letter to the Editor**

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### **Halt construction of more dams in Sarawak**

SAM is gravely concerned with the proposal to proceed with the construction of the Trusan dam in Lawas, Sarawak, as announced by its Chief Minister on July 21. The dam has a planned generation capacity of 275 MW. It is one of the 12 hydroelectric projects proposed for Sarawak, which also include the Murum, Baram and Baleh dams. The Murum dam has already been completed. The construction of the Baleh dam, with a planned generation capacity of 1,285 MW, is expected to commence in October 2018 and completed in 2025.

However, the construction of the Baram dam was called off by the former Chief Minister of Sarawak, the late Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Datuk Amar Adenan Satem, in March 2016, amid the sustained blockade and protest by affected communities. As reported by Channel News Asia later in May 2016, Adenan stressed that the cancellation of the Baram dam was the result of his examination on the matter. "There's no need to have another big dam. We can have mini dams and so on, but not a big dam especially when we don't supply (power) to west Malaysia anymore."

According to the Energy Commission in its annual publication, 'Performance and Statistical Information on Electricity Supply Industry in Malaysia 2015', the total installed generation capacity for Sarawak Energy Berhad (SEB) in 2015 stood at 2,241 MW while the maximum demand during the same year registered at 2,288 MW. This however does not imply that there was a negative energy reserve margin in Sarawak. With the inclusion of the Bakun hydroelectric dam, the total installed generation capacity of Sarawak in 2015 actually stood at 4,641 MW, of which 66 per cent was sourced from hydroelectric dams. Overall, Bakun provided 50 per cent of the total unit of electricity generated in Sarawak in 2015, or at 7,721 GWh out of a total of 15,486 GWh.

For this reason, we are thus unclear of the actual level of the energy reserve margin in Sarawak in 2015. Energy reserve margin is the amount of unused electricity that is still produced to ensure that an energy provider is always ready for any sudden and unexpected increase in power demand. Therefore, we would like the Sarawak State Government to provide the public with the current and projected rates of the energy reserve margin in the state before making any decision to build more hydroelectric dams or other new power generation sources. The International Energy Agency (IEA) reportedly recommends a reserve margin of only between 20 and 35 per cent.

It appears to us that the policy for energy development in Sarawak is approached in a highly disorganised fashion. Rational decisions that had been made by a former Chief Minister, can easily be reversed just a year later. The announcement to construct the Trusan dam has been made without clear reference to any recent study to justify its development. It has also been made without prior consultations with civil society groups

and most importantly, affected communities. The decision to develop hydroelectric dam after dam for a state with a population of only 2.5 million certainly defies any logic. Ironically, many of the indigenous communities living in the rural areas of the state, are still living without state-built electricity infrastructure.

The planned dams will also be flooding the forested and cultivated territories of such indigenous communities. The state had previously undertaken the involuntary relocation of the communities affected by the Batang Ai, Bakun and Murum dams in such an incompetent manner. Affected communities already traumatised by the loss of their ancestral land and traditional livelihoods continued to suffer from prolonged distress, economic hardships, socio-cultural disruptions and an overall severe drop in their quality of life in the resettlement areas.

As such, we would like to strongly urge the state to call off the plan to build the Trusan dam as well as others in the pipeline. At the same time, the state must intensify its effort to provide de-centralised and renewable sources of energy to its rural communities, be they based on solar or mini-hydroelectric dams. In addition, we also would like to know the current and projected rates of the energy reserve margin for the state. Haphazard energy planning and energy wastage will clearly affect the financial well-being of the state, especially at a time when the country is already facing various economic challenges.

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