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MEDIA RELEASE: Warragamba consultant embroiled in international dam controversies

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Seventeen Indigenous and environmental NGOs from six countries have made a damning joint submission to a parliamentary inquiry about the consultant commissioned by the NSW Government to do cultural and environmental assessments for the raising of Warragamba Dam. The [submission is available here](#).

In the submission the seventeen international NGOs have stated that SMEC Engineering has a history of abusing Indigenous rights across the globe as part of environmental and cultural assessments for dam projects, notably in Southeast Asia, Mongolia and Africa. For example, the submission details that in 2015 SMEC faced controversy for undertaking the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment for the Mong Ton (or Tasang) Dam in Myanmar, which is predicted to displace as many as 300,000 Indigenous people and threatens the existence of 104 migratory species.

Locals from Myanmar have said "SMEC's consultations are entirely insufficient. The first consultation was only two hours. You cannot discuss anything in two hours. And they announced this consultation via a tiny ad in one of the last pages of the newspaper", with other locals also reporting that military authorities in Shan State sent a tank through the villages "to remind them to participate in the consultations" run by SMEC.

The first signatory to the submission, Dr Eugene Simonov from the Rivers without Boundaries International Coalition (China), said SMEC had been involved in several "very questionable" water infrastructure projects since the mid-2000s, including the Taishir Hydro in Mongolia and the Mong Ton Dam in Myanmar.

"SMEC Engineering has been enabling destructive water infrastructure projects all around the world and has rarely been kept accountable because poor governance systems and suppression of civil society in most countries of operation," Dr Simonov said.

"SMEC is always hiding behind developers on whose orders it carries out consulting work. In Mongolia, local herder communities have been struggling for 10 years to get compensation after the SMEC assisted a Chinese company to construct a dam which completely changed the environment in the Zavkhan River Valley which was their home.

"We hope that this time people in Australia will be able to prevent them from enabling a questionable project threatening the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage site as well as the culture and livelihoods of local communities."

In another submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry, archaeologist Dr Michael Scarp described the cultural assessment completed by SMEC on the Warragamba Dam project as “flawed” and “inadequate”.

“Overall, the report does not meet the requirements of Best Practice Cultural Heritage Management. The survey strategy is flawed,” Dr Scarp said.

Blue Mountains Traditional Owners have shown that similar tactics are being used by SMEC Engineering as part of the Warragamba Dam assessments.

In one instance, Blue Mountains Traditional Owners said they were given four days warning of an information session on 20 March 2018. The briefing was held in northern Sydney, more than three hours’ drive in peak-hour traffic from Warragamba.

The company has also not attended briefings held by Traditional Owners about cultural impacts, avoiding public transparency of their assessment.

Sydney-based GIVE A DAM Campaigner, Harry Burkitt said if the NSW and Federal Governments took their commitments to the World Heritage Committee seriously, they would find a new consultancy firm.

“These investigations show SMEC Engineering are in the business of rationalising the destruction of nature and Indigenous cultures around the globe,” Mr Burkitt said.

“The NSW and Federal Governments must now find a world’s-best practice environmental consultancy firm to conduct the cultural and world heritage assessments for the Warragamba Dam project.

“Any assessment by SMEC Engineering is not worth the paper it’s written on. If the NSW and Federal Governments are serious about their commitments to the World Heritage Committee, they must find a new consultancy firm.

“The coming NSW Parliamentary Inquiry must examine SMEC Engineering’s work in detail. The community deserves to know how the government came to choose such a controversial firm to undertake the Warragamba cultural and environmental assessments.”

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Both are available for radio interview.