

(Presentation to *A Greater Mekong: Poverty, Integration and Development*, University of Sydney, 26 September 2007.)

## **Introduction**

My brief today is to talk to you about civil society and river basin development and management in the Mekong Region. That is a lot of ground to cover in fifteen minutes, especially given the enormous diversity in civil society and river basin governance arrangements in the region. So rather than try to provide you with a whole lot of detail I would rather take a more thematic approach, focussing on what I see as some of the key issues when we are talking about involving civil society in something as ambitious and vague as “river basin development and management.” I should say at the outset that my presentation is implicitly informed by a view that we cannot really manage river basins given their enormous biophysical, social, economic and political complexity. All we can do, I think, is attempt to nudge them in directions that we see as desirable but even that is a difficult task as one person’s desirable direction is another person’s road to disaster.

I want to focus on three specific issues – institutions, politics and knowledge. I'll take them one at a time.

## **Institutions**

I think we can start the discussion with the general point that formal civil society representation in river management organisations is desirable. I don't think many people here would disagree with that. There is general recognition that public involvement in resource management and development processes enhances efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. And the nice thing about river basins is that they have a natural spatial hierarchy that can provide a template for various levels of management representation: sub-catchments feed into catchments, which feed into rivers, which feed into basins. Management structures created at these various levels can represent increasingly inclusive fora for civil society involvement. Often there may be some difficulties in terms of mismatch between administrative structures and hydrological structures but these are not insurmountable and, in fact, in many parts of the Mekong region we find that district and provincial and sometimes national boundaries are often consistent with hydrological boundaries. Well established traditions of local water resource management also create considerable potential for linkages between official and community based organisations.

Some of these points can be made more concrete in relation to Thailand's river basin organisations. Thailand has been a regional leader in establishing a nested hierarchy of basin and catchment management organisations in which community or civil society representatives have had a voice. These river basin organisations are involved in a range of planning, development and sometimes advocacy activities. They

represent one model for civil society participation that has attracted significant interest throughout the region. Though I think it is also fair to say that some observers have expressed reservations about how meaningful non-bureaucratic input into these organisations really is. And in some quarters there is a cynical view that river basin organisations function largely as rubber stamps for bureaucratically driven infrastructure development plans.

My third point in relation to institutions relates to some of the lead organisations involved in river basin management and development in the region – this includes national agencies such as irrigation departments, water resource departments environment agencies and the national Mekong committees. My comments also apply to multilateral agencies such as the Mekong River Commission, the ADB and the World Bank. I have no doubt that a good number of these agencies have adopted policies that signal a commitment to various forms of civil society participation and engagement. But this is often accompanied by a profound lack of sophisticated social science expertise. A commitment to “participation” or “engagement” is simply not enough if it is not accompanied by both the willingness and capacity to critically evaluate the social context in which that participation is taking place and to critically evaluate the outcomes of participatory processes. Let me be a bit more specific. A key example of this is the poor quality, and sometimes even the comical quality, of social impact assessment, monitoring and mitigation work done on some of the major water resource development projects in the region. The Nam Then 2 project certainly established a benchmark for social assessment in the Mekong Region but it is a benchmark based on quantity rather than quality and the social assessment plan it developed simply does not stand up to concerted scrutiny. Of course, as the NT2 advocates will protest, there was no lack of community consultation and civil society

engagement in the preparation of the various NT2 plans. But what was lacking was a willingness and capacity to undertake high quality social analysis. And this is in relation to one of the most of the world's most scrutinised development projects.

## **Politics**

Let's move onto something a bit less contentious, politics.

My first point here is an obvious one, but one that can tend to be overlooked in relation to river basin management. As much as some river basin technocrats may want to think otherwise, river basin management is a political process and management decisions reflect political agendas as much as they do hydrological or developmental agendas. A couple of years ago I was involved with some work in relation to the Mekong River Commission and I must say I was rather puzzled, and even a little amused, at the outrage of some of the key donors at the fact that the MRC seemed to be driven in some key respects by the national agendas of its member nations. That's politics and there shouldn't be anything surprising or even alarming about it.

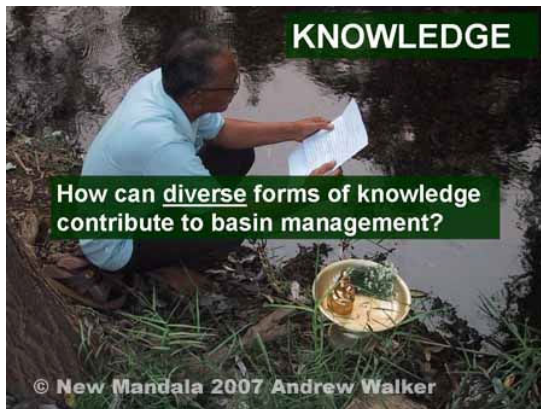
But it does raise some important issues in relation to civil society involvement. I'll just mention one. Clearly at whatever level of catchment or river or basin management we are talking about there is considerable potential for civil society representatives to be coopted to local, regional or national political agendas. In fact, it is often naïve to assume that there is a clear or meaningful separation between the state and civil society. My current work is in Chiang Mai province in Thailand – it's outside the Mekong Basin but the experience is instructive. And there the sorts of people who get involved in river basin organisations are exactly the sorts of people

who are involved in all sorts of collaborative business and political deals with local and provincial state officials. One of Thailand's previous governments was once called a contractors cabinet and I do wonder how many catchment, river or basin management organisations represent a chance for local and provincial contractors to get a slice of the infrastructure pie. Civil society engagement takes many forms.

The second key point I want to make about politics relates to the nature of civil society itself. Civil society is a very vague term relating to a large and complex social domain that is generally seen as lying outside the domain of the state. As I've just said, there is often a tendency to overstate the distinction between state and civil society and this is especially the case where mass organisations are actively managed and regulated by the state. But there is also a key question about the representativeness and democratic force of civil society. This is a complex issue, but in general terms I think that in relation to river basin management and development there is often a tendency for some of the higher profile civil society representatives to adopt an anti-modern, anti-state, anti-capitalist and even anti-development stance that is at odds with widespread grass-roots aspirations for active political and economic inclusion. The tendency for high profile civil society organisations to adopt a traditionalist, alternative or even sufficiency economy agenda reflects some degree of embeddedness in the middle class ideology of nostalgia. So, there is some danger that the diverse aspirations and livelihood struggles of people throughout the Mekong region are squeezed out in a basin management debate that polarises between the technocratic promotion of infrastructure led development and an equally socially naïve preoccupation with the moral desirability of subsistence oriented lifestyles.

## **Knowledge**

Which leads me onto the next key issue that I want to discuss: knowledge.



Here is a nice image from northern Thailand that reflects a particular type of knowledge about river systems. It shows an offering being made to Upakhut, who is a potent spiritual entity that resides in streams and rivers in many parts of mainland southeast Asia. In many areas Upakhut is believed to be the son of a mystical union between the Buddha and a fish. Now, I'm not showing you this image to make some clichéd point about people living in harmony with nature whose cultural practices are under threat from the march of development. Quite the contrary. This particular fellow is a successful cash cropping farmer and a key member of a village that is multiply linked into the regional and global economic system.

My intention in showing you this is to prompt a key question: how can diverse forms of knowledge contribute to basin management? And I want to particularly emphasise diversity. There is a tendency when talking about knowledge in this sort of context to make an overly simplified distinction between scientific knowledge and indigenous knowledge. This does justice to neither. On the one hand what is called “scientific knowledge” is unrealistically assumed to be objective, universal and free from political influence. On the other hand local knowledge is often selectively packaged to

accord with externally imposed ideas about tradition, cultural authenticity and resistance. This sort of stereotyping of knowledge is unhelpful. If we are genuinely concerned about enhancing a broadly defined civil society contribution to river basin management and development we need to be open to forms of knowledge that don't fit within familiar frameworks. To put the point a little crudely there is not much point in expanding participation if all the participants are singing from just one or two song sheets.

Why is knowledge diversity important? I think there are three reasons.

First, our understanding of the basic biophysical processes in river systems in the region is very incomplete. For example there is great uncertainty about something as basic as the relationship between land use change (forest clearing in particular) and streamflow. (Though this uncertainty does not stop policy makers and development agencies speaking with great confidence about it.) Opening up river basin management to more diverse forms of knowledge holds the potential for enhancing our understanding of these basic biophysical processes.

Second, even if we want to remain sceptical about the usefulness of alternative forms of knowledge in understanding biophysical systems we have to admit that these forms of knowledge influence the ways in which people act within those systems. For example, standard hydrological accounts of dry season stream flow are likely to tell us little about the forms of knowledge underpinning farmers' decisions to plant, or not plant, dry season crops. If we want to attempt to effectively manage or nudge river basins we need to understand the repertoire of knowledge the various agents within that system are drawing on.

Third, embracing diversity can disrupt some of the simplified and simplistic narratives that managers bring to river basin management. For example, one of the most influential of the environmental narratives relates to the desirability of upper-catchment forest cover and the undesirability of many forms of upland agriculture. This is a simplified narrative that continues to have profound implications for many of the poorest and most vulnerable in the Mekong region. Approaching alternative forms of knowledge with an open mind may help us to realise that some of our key policy responses are driven by untested preconceptions.

## **Conclusion**

So, what can Australia do? Here I will provide a one minute review of AusAID's Greater Mekong Strategy and the "coalition of the willing" approach it takes towards Mekong region development.

My primary concern about this strategy is its failure to realise that sustainability lies in diversity. Rather than signing up to one particular development package with one particular approach to civil society engagement, Australia should be using its ingenuity and imagination to promote diverse, varied, experimental and even risky approaches to enhancing meaningful participation. There are many ways in which Australia could support civil society engagement in the region but in AusAID's Mekong Strategy the issue barely rates a mention. This is a Strategy which seems to place excessive faith in existing institutional structures for development (lead by the ADB). It is disengaged from the politics of Mekong basin development and seemingly unaware that alternative forms of knowledge may provide profoundly useful insights into the challenges of poverty alleviation in the region. The Strategy seems to score



well according to the ADB's three-Cs of connectivity, competitiveness and community. But its performance in terms of a fourth C – creativity – is rather poor.