

Transboundary water governance and issues of scale in the Mekong River Basin¹

Philip Hirsch

ABSTRACT

The Mekong River Basin has achieved prominence among the world's more than 260 river basins that cross national boundaries, as a river and a basin that is actively managed across borders. One of the reasons for such prominence is the long-standing institutional basis for cooperation among the four lower countries of the Basin and the international support for this governance framework. At present, however, the Basin is moving toward something of a crisis of transboundary water governance. This paper explores the extent to which the problems of transboundary governance can be seen as an issue of resolving national interests of one riparian nation versus another, and the extent to which more complex arrays of interests at multiple scales need to be brought into the analysis. The paper draws on case studies of the Sesan transboundary tributary, the Chinese dams and the Thai water grid to demonstrate some of the shortcomings of the current river basin governance arrangements. It outlines a forthcoming study that will address issues of national interest in transboundary river governance by looking more closely at how these multiple national interests are constructed and at different ways of understanding the "common good" at multiple scales.

¹ For more information or to get a copy of the full paper, contact Philip Hirsch, Assoc Prof of Geography at School of Geosciences, University of Sydney and Director, Australian Mekong Resource Centre, p.hirsch@geosci.usyd.edu.au