BRIDGING THE MEKONG ON PIERS OF OPPORTUNITY

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1 Introduction

Transboundary relations comprise the yin and yang of constraint, conservation and regulation on the one hand and initiative, action and development on the other.

Water resources management at the basinwide level is very much a matter of observing and supporting the balance between these intertwined perspectives. This requires awareness of, and orientation towards the various linkages and relations that connect the economic, social and environmental perspectives of development, and which determine the intended benefits and the predictable or unknown side effects of intervention.

2 Background

2.1 The Lower Mekong Basin

The Lower Mekong Basin covers 609,000 km2 (77% of the entire Mekong Basin) and harbours 55.3 million people, of which around 50% is below 15 years of age. The average population growth is 2%. The countries are classified as low-income nations with GDPs of less than US$ 300 per capita per year, except for Thailand, which is a middle-income country [1].

Traditional livelihoods are water-based or water-related. Paddy cultivation, rainfed or irrigated, is the main livelihood in terms of occupation. Thailand and Viet Nam are the World's no. 6 and 5 rice producers; no. 1 and 2 rice per capita producers; and no. 1 and 2 rice exporters. [2]

Important economic and socio-economic sectors are Paddy cultivation; fisheries; tourism/recreation; and hydropower. Forestry can retain a position as an important sector subject to improved governance.

Major development opportunities and important assets include [3]:

- A vast immediate growth potential, notably within agriculture, hydropower, tourism, and navigation;
- highly valuable fisheries resources;
- a large scope for integrated water resources development, including intra-basin and inter-basin transfers, improved water efficiencies, and improved economic efficiencies of water uses and water-related production systems;

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1 N van Zalinge et al (Feb 2003)

2 2003/04 data published on the Internet by US Department of Agriculture

3 The remainder of this section is quoted from an unpublished BDP working paper

- unique river, lake, wetlands, floodplain, and headwater habitats and ecosystems, many of which remain in a healthy state; and
- an opportunity for prevention (rather than mitigation) of adverse social and environmental impacts of urbanisation and industrialization.

Tools and practices for basinwide management of water and water-related resources are in place or are being developed.

Major economic, social and environmental challenges comprise

- An escalating demand of electricity;
- an escalating demand of water for irrigation;
- the need of conservation of wetlands and other important habitats, fisheries resources, and important icon species;
- preservation of the Delta as a freshwater regime;
- effects of changed lifestyles: Increased per capita consumption of energy, food and water, and increased per capita waste production;
- population pressure (notably including migration from the countryside to urban growth centres); imbalance between loss of employment in agriculture and employment generation in other sectors;
- deforestation due to timber logging and expansion of agricultural lands; and consequential changes of maximum flows, minimum flows, and silt transport, increasing the risk of both floods and droughts;
- agrochemical pollution, including contamination of edible fish;
- effects of regulation, such as (i) adverse land use consequences, including habitat degradation and loss of fish spawning grounds; (ii) blocking of fish migration routes; (iii) loss of flood plain storage capacity; and (iv) river bank erosion;
- an imperfect knowledge about important cause-effect relationships and related management options, such as for example groundwater resources, environmental flows , flood risk, droughts, morphological processes, etc. etc.; and
- a set of ordinary upstream/downstream divergences of interests related to water uses.

2.2 Mekong River Commission

Recently, Mekong River Commission (MRC) could celebrate its 10 years anniversary, being established by the governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam on 5 April 1995. Its mandate is described in the 1995 Mekong Agreement, which carries forward the collaboration initiated by the 1957 Mekong Committee.

The Mekong Agreement specifies the tasks of MRC within management of water and water-related resources in the Lower Mekong Basin [4]:

- Development of the basin: Planning and coordinated implementation of basin-wide water resources development, supported by the international donor community;
- using the water: Adoption of common rules for equitable and reasonable utilization of the water of the river system;

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[4] Olivier Cogels (Nov 2004)

- protecting the people and the environment: Prevention and cessation of harmful effects, through flood management and protection of environment and water quality; and
- development of freedom of navigation on the mainstream.

It is seen that the mandate reflects the dual principle of regulation and pro-active development.

3 The MRC Basin Development Plan

3.1 Scope and structure

The MRC *Basin Development Plan* (or BDP) is instituted by the 1995 Mekong Agreement. This Plan deviates from previous regional plans by its broad scope and by its character of a process, aiming to identify and promote water-related, transboundary or basinwide development initiatives that support the principle of balance expressed by the MRC vision of an *'economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin'.*

With the broader aim of *'acceleration of inter-dependent sub-regional growth by establishing a process and a framework conducive to investment and sustainable development'* the BDP tries to enhance the benefits of national development plans and initiatives by placing them in a transboundary context.

The BDP is prepared by the MRC Secretariat in a close and active collaboration with the National Mekong Committees and the BDP Units of the member countries. A major part of the work is done by national working groups reporting to the National Mekong Committees. Formulation of the first version of the Plan began in late 2001 and is scheduled for completion by late 2005.

The formulation process involves a large number of institutional stakeholders. It addresses all major water-related sectors and cross cutting themes, including poverty reduction, gender aspects, and capacity building and institutional support within water resources management.

Taking its starting point in the 1995 Mekong Agreement, the BDP builds on various regional sector development strategies prepared by MRC, Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) and others [5]. It interfaces with the national (5-years) development plans of the MRC member countries, and with a a variety of national sector development strategies and poverty reduction strategies.

While the BDP is intended as a platform for active intervention, a number of constraints must be observed, such as the finite availability of water; inter-sector trade-offs; and trade-offs between in-stream and off-stream (or consumptive) water uses.

The BDP has the following components (completed or in preparation):

1 A knowledge base (national and regional sector reviews, sub-area studies, scenario analyses);

2 a set of decision-support tools for economic, hydrological, social and environmental analysis;

3 the required supportive capacity-building;

4 a semi-formalized planning cycle;

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[5] In parallel with the BDP formulation, several other MRC programmes (hydropower, flood management and mitigation, and navigation) have produced comprehensive and carefully negotiated, agreed basinwide strategies and implementation plans

5 an IWRM strategy for the Lower Mekong Basin, delineating values and preferences shared by and agreed among the member countries; and

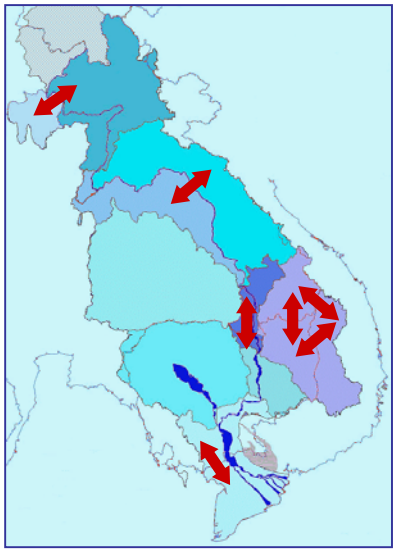
6 a live portfolio of development initiatives that can support the strategy.

The BDP differs visibly from ordinary *'rational'* water management plan (with a consistent set of components and outputs that, between them, could assure the achievement of some agreed immediate goals). This is for a number of reasons: (1) MRC and its BDP do not have the power (nor funds) required to implement such a plan, and no mandate at all for the required control of the national water-related development; (2) the required knowledge is not yet in place - for example about a basic thing like the water availability in the Basin; and (3) a management plan covering 4 countries and many sectors and themes would be almost certain to fail.

Rather, a flexible and organic planning process is intended that on the one hand can accommodate a broad range of relevant development initiatives, ranging from very *'soft'* ones (research initiatives and knowledge-sharing) to very *'hard'* ones (infrastructural intervention); and that can, at the same time, adjust flexibly to new knowledge, new priorities, and new challenges.

3.2 Sub-area studies and transboundary meetings

The planning process has comprised so-called sub-area studies [6], hereby dividing the Lower Mekong Basin into 10 sub-areas, used as the basic planning unit. The sub-area studies were carried out by working groups established for the purpose, or (in the case of Thailand) by the new river basin committees, under guidance by the National Mekong Committees. They comprised a baseline description, a trend analysis, and a multi-sector scoping analysis of concerns and development opportunities. The analyses reflected national development priorities as accentuated by specific conditions in each sub-area.



On this basis, and at the request of the member countries, a series of 5 transboundary meetings were held (in November-December 2004) between adjacent sub-areas in neighbouring countries (see figure).

The meetings identified shared concerns and shared development opportunities. As one outcome, between them, the 5 meetings raised 69 ideas on development initiatives. The ideas were characterized by (i) being water-related (in accordance with the mandate of MRC); and (ii) having transboundary implications, either betwen an upstream and a downstream area, or spanning across the Mekong mainstream.

The ideas were distributed as follows (in random order):

Agriculture	9 project ideas
Fisheries	8 project ideas
Floods and drought management and mitigation	7 project ideas
Morphological management and river bank protection	6 project ideas

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[6] A *'sub-area'* being a planning area delineated mainly by watersheds but partly by administrative boundaries (including national borders), much like the *'sub-basin river districts'* applied in the European Union's Water Framework Directive. Suggestions on a better name are invited!

Watershed management	6 project ideas
Public water supply	6 project ideas
Navigation and river transport	6 project ideas
Institutional development, capacity building, IWRM	6 project ideas
Hydropower	5 project ideas
Environmental management	5 project ideas
Tourism	5 project ideas

The ideas comprised structural intervention (preparatory studies and implementation) as well as policy and decision-support studies and institutional development efforts.

Following a review of strategic significance, political support, benefits, and relations (including possible overlaps with other activities), the ideas will be carried forward to a live portfolio of priority development initiatives.

3.3 Stakeholder participation

Stakeholder participation is a cornerstone of contemporary IWRM [7] and is regarded as a key element of the BDP formulation.

During the BDP formulation, the following principles were pursued [8]:

- Accessible information: The widest possible use of national languages; use of clear, easily understood language; and, timely availability of information.
- Flexibility: A process and methods responsive to existing policies and procedures for participation; stakeholders' experience and capacity to participate; issues and stages of BDP.
- Representation: Inclusion of all relevant stakeholders, including efforts to facilitate the involvement of groups that may not easily or readily participation, such as women and minorities.
- Efficiency: Design and implementation of participation activities in a manner to use available resources (personnel, time, money) effectively and efficiently.
- Openness: Maintenance of good practices for openness and knowledge sharing within the BDP programme; participatory approaches used wherever relevant.
- Transparency: Work and analyses based on agreed guidelines, wherever possible; development of an agreed strategy for stakeholder involvement.

A set of supportive tools were identified but were only partially implemented.

The structure of participation in the process is outlined in the figure below.

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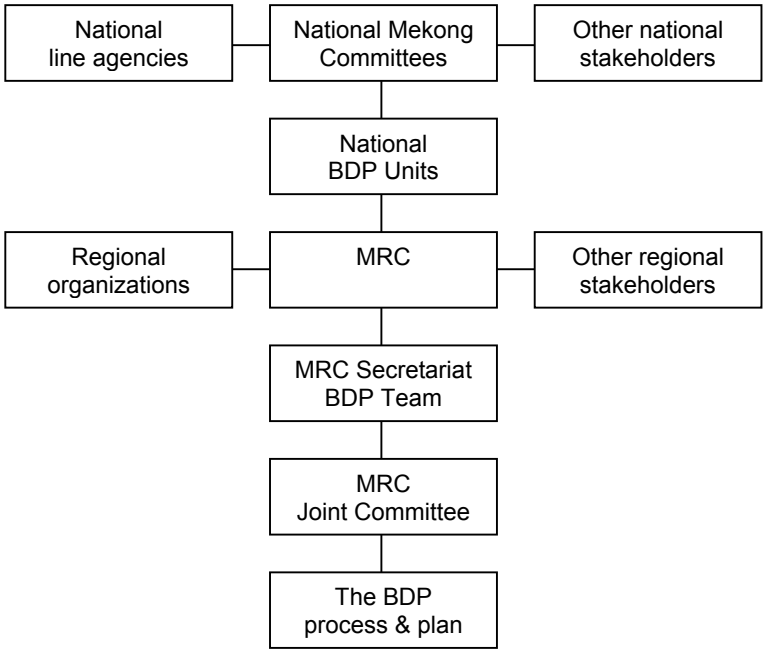
7 Apichart A (Oct 2004): 'Integration and public participation are the keys to real IWRM. Without them, it is not IWRM'

8 MRC (July 2002), p. 41



Outline of BDP participation and information flow

4 Analysis

4.1 Shared values and shared opportunities

The BDP covers transboundary development in exclusive support of values, concerns and preferences that are shared by the MRC member countries.

Shared values are largely reflected by overlaps between the national social and economic development plans and related policies. They comprise for example

- national economic growth;
- food security (based on paddy cultivation);
- preservation and development of rural livelihoods (with a view to maintaining a reasonably low urban migration rate);
- added economic value of water consumption;
- protection of water-related habitats;
- facilitation of navigation;
- improved flood protection;
- improved drought management; and
- healthy fisheries.

It is seen that, between them, the shared values represent a broad range of shared opportunities for potential development initiatives.

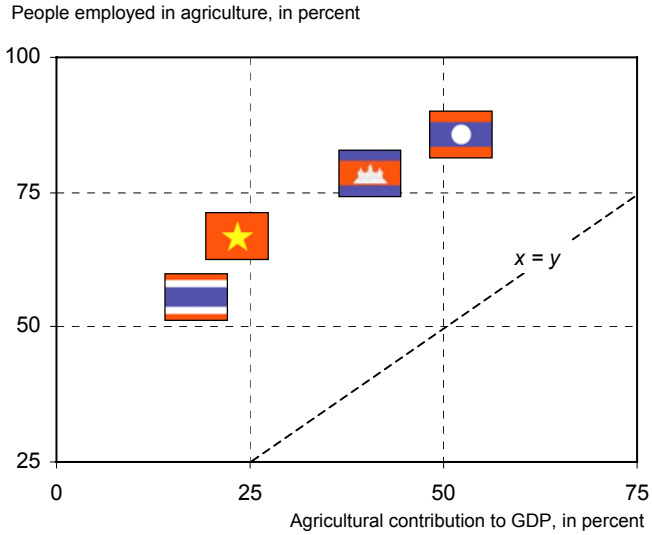
The shared values are less visible with respect to stakeholder participation and gender mainstreaming.

Transboundary development can reflect the following categories of relations:

- *Natural* relations: Physical or ecological cause-effect relations, for example an upstream regulation affecting a downstream water availability, an upstream withdrawal affecting the salinity intrusion in the Delta; or a downstream regulation preventing fish from migrating to an upstream habitat;
- *structural* relations: Economic or infrastructural links between development goals with a joint or related decision basis - for example the channel depth of a regional waterway; the performance and benefits of a flood protection scheme; or joint tourism development;
- *immaterial* relations: These occur between development goals that can add value to each other without being formally linked, for example in connection with policy and strategy formulation, awareness-building, research, or knowledge-sharing.

Again, it is seen that the different relations cover a broad range of shared opportunities for development collaboration.

Structural barriers between the member countries are imposed by their different stages of economic development (exemplified by the figure below [9]), with different comparative advantages and consequential development agendas and priorities. Also, a range of trivial (yet important) conflicts of interest apply, reflecting upstream-downstream or inter-sector water allocation divergences. It may be claimed that the barriers are enhanced by a visible measure of nationalism and self-interest.



Different comparative advantages have their origin in for example land availability, water availability, infrastructure, and applied technology. In many cases, such divergences represent particular opportunities for added value of transboundary collaboration. Whenever something can be done better, faster or cheaper on one side of a border than on the other, there is a scope for collaboration - be it by trade, joint production systems, distribution and marketing, or knowledge-sharing and capacity-building.

From this point of view, also the barriers can be regarded as potential opportunities for development collaboration. While pursuing opportunities as much as barriers, this is a circumstance to keep in the top of the mind in basin development planning.

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[9] Data from 1997-2000, State of the Basin Report, MRC, June 2003, p. 62 and 146

4.2 Stakeholder participation

Several particular aspects have characterized the stakeholder participation in the BDP formulation process:

(i) The four member countries have quite different policies and modalities regarding stakeholder participation in public planning. MRC must strictly observe the national policies and practices, and all activities at the national level (including a large part of the stakeholder dialogue) is taking place by or via the autonomous National Mekong Committees;

(ii) a stakeholder dialogue about transboundary, multi-sector, strategic development efforts is technically more difficult (and less *'sexy')* than a dialogue about a single sector in a single country, not to speak of a specific intervention;

(iii) stakeholder participation based on documentation that is predominantly in English is not at all effective in this region;

(iv) on the other hand, it can reasonably be claimed that all or most people living in the Lower Mekong Basin have some potential interest in one or several elements of the BDP;

(v) national routines for stakeholder participation are not fully consolidated, as well as the confidence between the actors that are a precondition for a fruitful process with a useful outcome.

Beforehand, it was intended to base the work on mutually agreed guidelines, hereby increasing the transparency of the knowledge base and analyses. However, this proved difficult - one reason simply being the basic diffulty of describing beforehand exactly how to carry out a non-routine activity of an innovative character (rather than *'learning by doing');* and another being some political hesitation among the participants to commit themselves to formal guidelines.

While the process has been fully open to any external participation, with all key documents broadly published and disseminated, it has mostly involved instititutional stakeholders, and only to a limited extent. Reasons include a lack of promotion, and perhaps also the subject matter being partly of a conceptual rather than a tangible character.

4.3 Outcome of the process

As by mid 2005, the BDP is still in its early completion stage. The intended outcomes have not yet fully materialized.

1 Significant results have been achieved regarding a knowledge-base for transboundary, water-related strategic planning and decision-making;

2 a set of decision-support tools have been produced and are in a stage of early consolidation;

3 a substantial capacity-building has been achieved within a broad range of actors involved in regional development planning;

4 a semi-formalized planning cycle has been developed and is in an early stage of consolidation (since a full cycle has not yet been completed);

5 an IWRM strategy for the Lower Mekong Basin is in preparation; and

6 a live portfolio of development initiatives that can support the strategy is in preparation.

It is presently envisaged that the BDP will promote water-related development in terms of quality as much as quantity; improved economic efficiency of water allocation and utilization (value generated by m3 of water); and a development from *'water for food'* via *'water for production'* towards *'water for employment'.*

In parallel, the BDP is targeted to support cost-effective infrastructural development, such as storage capacity, inter-basin water allocation, hydropower development, and flood and drought-related investment.

In the LMB, in the long term, there is no reason why economic and social development should be constrained in any way by the finite water availability - but a comprehensive and time-consuming adaptation is required. It is hoped that the BDP can contribute to this adaptation.

5 Discussion

The BDP formulation has been characterized by exploration and innovation. Most practices, routines and tools have been developed for the purpose, and often in an iterative way. *'Learning by doing'* has been a main characteristic of the work.

Many of the achievements will be finalised at a late stage, so that at present, practical application experience is limited. Also, the wotk took place in a transient institutional context, with new ministries,new river basin organizations and new regulation emerging in parallel with the BDP formulation.

Strategic planning of water resources in the Lower Mekong Basin is characterized by [10]

- a high level of complexity in water resource management;
- great variability in the hydrological cycle;
- the need to satisfy many different stakeholders;
- issues often being highly political;
- the context of water resources management undergoing rapid change, and
- a need of sustainable use of land and water.

In this connection, the following observations can be made:

- There is a scope for streamlining and interfacing the institutional water resources management framework at the transboundary, as well as the national and the (sub-) river basin committe/organization level;
- the desired positive interaction between regional and national water resources management has been successfully initiated but is still weak;
- there is a need of consolidation and enhancement of the knowlegde base in general and the predictive capacity in particular;
- the dialogue between the member countries has produced significant, agreed and useful outputs, but took much longer time than expected, and did not encompass all potential stakeholders;
- there is a scope for further consolidation of the poverty alleviation perspective in the planning process;
- there is a scope for gender mainstreaming throughout the planning process;
- there is a scope for broadening the participation in the planning process, particularly in terms of affected parties and intended beneficiaries;
- training and capacity-building are regarded as successful, but remain a high priority.

The following aspects are suggested as main characteristics to address during transboundary water resources management in the Lower Mekong Basin:

(i) Flow of information and data;

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[10] MRC (Mar 2001), p. 6

(iii) institutional capacity both at the sub-basin level, the national level, and the regional level; and

(iii) transparent and participatory decision making involving all stakeholders and actors.

The following aspects are suggested as determinants for successful planning:

(i) Adequate (if seldom full) knowledge about cause-effect relationships, management options and contraints;

(ii) a suitable, operational set of shared values, reflecting some extent of joint orientation among member countries and key stakeholders;

(iii) a useful *'mission'* - and concordance between plan and mission;

(iv) attractive and achievable development goals;

(v) an orientation towards added value of integrated action;

(vi) participation by key stakeholders; and

(vii) balance between diverse and, possibly, not fully compatible stakeholder interests

Funding

In addition to resources allocated by each member country, financial support to the BDP formulation and the related studies and capacity-building has been granted by Australia, Denmark, Japan, Sweden, and Switzerland.

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