Supporting Regional Networks to Facilitate Collective Action in Water Governance

The Mekong River flows through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The livelihoods of people in these countries depend on the Mekong and its tributaries for water, food (especially fish and rice), transport and many other 'services' provided by the natural environment. The dominant economic development model relies heavily on exploiting natural resources, including building large dams and irrigation infrastructure. This infrastructure for energy and agriculture, along with urban and industrial expansion, has impact on water flow, water quality, wild fisheries and other components of the ecosystems. Creating fair and effective national and transboundary water governance arrangements to deal with these sorts of issues is a major challenge for the Mekong River, the Basin and the wider Mekong Region. Networks have a constructive role to play.

The M-POWER network—the name derived from the Mekong Program on Water, Environment and Resilience (M-POWER)—is building capacity and connecting transnational researchers and policy makers across the Mekong Region.

Two of M-POWER's flagship action research projects have been supported by the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF). Enhancing multi-scale water governance project, examined public participation and deliberation separation of powers, accountability of public institutions, social and gender justice, protection of rights, representation, decentralization and dissemination of information. This was organized around empirical comparative studies and themes, exploring how water governance could better meet the needs of societies to negotiate between competing interests. Improving Mekong water resource investments and allocation choices project has contributed to water allocation policy and practice, studying and experimenting with a wide range of decision-support tools.

Defining Network Roles

The M-POWER network has played a constructive role in bringing greater knowledge and collective action to regional water governance. Key elements of its experiences and success include:

1. Creating space for dialogues and deliberation

Countries in the Mekong Region have diverse political structures characterized by centralized political systems, which hinder open discussion of various governance-related issues. M-POWER has provided secure, informed and professionally organized dialogue spaces where stakeholders can learn about and debate on local, national and regional water resource development.

M-POWER knowledge 'successes'

◈ **Building capacity of Mekong Region researchers and dialogue convenors**
◈ **Increasing understanding of regional water governance and economic development issues**
◈ **Integrating knowledge and feeding it into water governance policy processes**

2. Working as a knowledge hub

Networks can facilitate the rapid mobilization of knowledge for collective action, as well as dynamic and organized sharing of experiences and tactics. Through this, networks become a "knowledge-based group of experts and specialists who share common beliefs about cause-and-effect relationships in the world and some political values concerning the ends to which policies should be addressed" (Haas 2009).

3. Policy inputs

Regular interaction through dialogues, international forums and conferences effectively brings together water governance actors that contribute to policy-making. Various communication products and contemporary developments on water governance issues are shared using listservs, the media, public presentations and formal publishing.

4. Critiquing and demonstrating water governance tools and processes

M-POWER has evaluated a range of water governance tools and processes across the Mekong Region, including

♦ **Multi-stakeholder platforms (MSP) and other consensus-building processes**
Policy-influencing dialogues involving of diverse stakeholders with interdependent problems, who agree to work together to pursue workable, negotiated agreements.

♦ **Scenarios and modeling**
Tools that test the impacts of changes in population, technology and service models, among other variables.

♦ **Environmental flows**
A tool that assesses how much of the original flow regime of a river should continue to flow in order to maintain specified valued features

of the ecosystem and hydrological regimes of the river. Environmental flow requirements are linked to a predetermined objective in terms of the ecosystem's future condition.

- **Cumulative impact assessment**
  A tool that analyzes the cumulative impacts of multiple activities.
- **Strategic environmental assessment (SEA)**
  An assessment tool for high-level option assessment in advance of development decision-making.
- **Payments for ecosystem services (PES)**
  Transaction schemes in which defined ecosystem services are purchased, contingent upon a custodian continuing to enable the provision of that service.

A review of these processes and tools showed that much benefit could be gained from:

- Involving MSPs to explore alternative futures and constructively search for solutions to resolve water allocation disputes;
- Improved decision making with better emphasis on sustainable use, fairness and consensus building through negotiation processes that retain elements of competition and collaboration;
- Participation of representatives from marginalized people in scenario building, which can improve transparency in water allocation by clarifying and probing actors' causal assumptions about what drives societal well-being;
- Environmental flow assessments, which clarify risks and benefits of different flow regimes on different water users and ecosystems;
- Scenario building, flow assessments, multi-stakeholder dialogues and transparent

negotiations becoming normal practices prior to major infrastructure investments;
- Water allocation becoming the results of a negotiation process that assesses options and impacts thoroughly prior to reaching agreements and making interventions; and
- Focusing on fairly distributed rewards, minimized and fairly apportioned risks, respected rights and actors performing their responsibilities.

Lessons learned

Knowledge and policy networks such as the M-POWER build rapid and flexible response capacity that is crucial for dealing with growing uncertainties and adapting to change. Lessons from M-POWER's dialogue experiences include:

- Strengthening local representation offers valuable local inputs into planning and implementation of water-governance-related policies and practices.
- Improving the quality of deliberative processes draws wider and more substantive inputs from stakeholders.
- Enhancing the constructive interplay between institutions, both horizontally and vertically, requires linking non-state and state actors at various levels.

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The M-POWER (Mekong Program on Water, Environment and Resilience) Regional Research Network

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