

MEKONG UPDATE



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The Australian Mekong Resource Centre was established at the University of Sydney in late 1997 to promote research, discussion and debate on development and environment issues in the Mekong Region. The AMRC is a focal point for information, dialogue and activities in support of an equitable and sustainable development path for the Mekong Region.

The **Mekong Update** provides:

- news of current developments in the region
- news of research activities
- regular information on Mekong-related conferences and events in Australia
- an update on the activities of the Centre

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EDITORIAL Media Spaces in the Mekong

Electronic and print media play a crucial role in social, economic and political development. The media helps underpin democratic command of resources. It is an important part of domestic and international civil society input into the direction that a society's development takes. Control over the media implies influence over public flows of information, values and agendas. In a globalised world, this media influence transcends country borders.

Who controls the media? In Australia and other wealthier democratic societies, media control has become a hot topic as a result both of new technologies and of corporate restructuring of media industries. Government regulation is an important check in such circumstances. Ironically, the celebration of freer media in several countries of the Mekong Region, notably Thailand but also Cambodia, is often associated with decline in government involvement. Many questions are begged in this context, perhaps none so general or relevant as the nature of state control and the nature of the civil society whose influence is growing so fast and celebrated so widely.

Relatively open and independent media in Thailand have undoubtedly created spaces for progressive critiques of inappropriate, inequitable, repressive and unsustainable development directions. Absence of such spaces in a country such as Lao PDR is reflected in both the Lao and English language media. Media tend to reflect – as much as create – levels of political space. Yet at key moments and on key issues newspapers, and sometimes even television, have important impacts. Examples include the role of public information via the media in Bangkok in May 1992, and the shaming impact on international institutions such as in the case of Nam Theun II Dam (see Mike Carey's article below).

Public discourse via the media reflects the influence of the ownership structures of newspapers, television and radio stations, but also of individual journalists' agendas and "issue entrepreneurship", to use a phrase coined by one of the *Points of View* contributors in this edition of *Mekong Update*. Environmental journalists in Thailand, socially concerned journalists in Cambodia, journalists testing the water for the limits of exposure of corruption in Vietnam, have all shown immense courage and integrity in difficult and sometimes personally dangerous circumstances.

In the Mekong Region, the media has had an important role since the critical journalism prompted by the horrors of the Second Indochina War, during and since which newspapers and television have played a progressive part in promoting justice or exposing injustice and violence. The profile of the Indochina Media Memorial Foundation below illustrates this continuity. However, media has sometimes also played a conservative, elitist or reactionary role, whether in Bangkok in October 1976, in China where the "Remake the West Campaign" is currently promoting more large dams on the upper Mekong in a crude emulation of nineteenth century US expansionism, or in Australian financial reporting of the infrastructure bonanza that was the big business lens on Indochina in the mid-1990s.

As with many aspects of development, the media's social role depends in large part on who controls and otherwise influences it. Those concerned for more equitable and sustainable development in the Mekong Region need to support an enlightened and informed media, whose independence is contingent on recognising corporate as well as state power as a potentially corrupting influence.

Inside . . . • Points of Views from Satoru Matsumoto and Mike Carey on media representations • Profile of the Indochina Media Memorial Foundation • News on the East -West Corridor • Update on the Mun River • Debate on Lao Forests

NEWS FROM THE REGION

ADB Approval for East-West Corridor Upgrade

In November 1999 a trilateral pact was signed between Thailand, Lao PDR and Viet Nam to open up trade routes between the three countries. This has since been followed by the approval of US\$57million worth of loans to Viet Nam and Lao PDR to upgrade a section of Route 9 linking Muang Phin in Laos to Dong Ha in Viet Nam, an important link in the US\$740 million East-West corridor (M2 Communications, 1999). The East-West corridor forms an important part of the ADB's Greater Mekong Sub-region Programme. The project is heralded as an opportunity to increase access to markets, health and education for the economically poor Lao PDR.

Media criticism of the development, which will include a third bridge over the Mekong from Mukdahan to Savanakheth, however, highlights the risks of increased prostitution, drug trafficking, and smuggling of endangered fauna and illegal logs, as well as the spread of HIV/AIDS, between the populations of the three countries (Winn, 1999). The corridor has been noted as an opportunity to increase trade and tourism between Northeast Thailand and Vietnam. Out of the three countries it is Lao PDR which may lose most out of the scheme. A Lao provincial official commenting on another East West Corridor project (Route 8) noted that Thailand and Viet Nam are likely to benefit from increased trade yet Laos would have to shoulder the burden of containing contraband smuggling and the entry of illegal immigrants (KKRNC, 1999). The main commodities currently traded between the three countries are construction materials, fuel, timber and wood products, machinery and equipment, foodstuff, textiles, marble and livestock. It is yet to be seen how, under the ADB's broader strategy of 'poverty alleviation', transport links through Laos will directly benefit local communities.

M2 Communications, "ADB: Green light to upgrade East-West corridor", 22 Dec 1999.

Winn, H. "Transport development pact could be Laos' road to ruin", South China Morning Post, Dec 1, 1999.

Khon Kaen Regional News Center, Bangkok Phuchatkan (Thai), 13 Sept 1999.

Southeast Asian WCD Consultation

The World Commission on Dams (WCD) is currently compiling submissions for their 4th Regional Consultation encompassing East and Southeast Asia to be held in Hanoi in February 2000. Three previous consultations have been held for South Asia, Latin America and the Middle East in December 1998, August 1999 and December 1999 respectively. The guiding principles of the consultations, as set out by the submission request, are heralded as openness, transparency, inclusiveness and accessibility. In following these principles the WCD hopes "to include a broad range of interested parties to participate" and "facilitate the public exchange of ideas and views among various constituencies in the region"(WCD, 1999). Guiding (not prescriptive) themes for the meeting include Large Dams in East and South Asia: a review of benefits and

impacts, Decision-Making and Planning Process: responding to competing needs, Changing Institutional and Policy Frameworks: their influence on current practice, and Dams and Water Resource Management: reviewing options.

Already submissions have been made discussing 'aesthetic' considerations of dam construction and fish ecology in the Mekong. Numerous NGOs and interested parties are concerned over the selection of Hanoi for the venue for the meeting in a country where there is limited political space for open debate of the costs and benefits of development, and where civil society organisations are poorly developed. The stated principles of the WCD, require a venue that enables a free and open exchange of ideas and concerns.

WCD (1999) *Large Dams and their alternatives in East and Southeast Asia*. Call for Submissions: Fourth Regional Consultation of the World Commission on Dam.

<www.dams.org>

[Ed.: The next issue of Mekong Update will discuss in more detail the outcomes of the Consultation.]

Mun River Protests Continue

On December 4, 1999 a Mun River walk was held to commemorate the 10th anniversary of Thai Environment Day and to also mark the 10th anniversary of the people's movement against the Pak Mun dam. The purpose of the walk was to raise awareness in environmental protection in the Mun River basin. The event was held at the end of a very turbulent year for Mun River activities. Earlier in 1999, 3000 protesters occupied the Pak Mun dam site demanding compensation of 2.4 ha / family for each of the 3084 fishing families (Sharma and Imhof, 1999).

Upstream in the Mun River Basin the highly controversial Rasi Salai dam is attracting world wide attention for the protest by local people against the construction and management of the dam. As of November, 1850 people of the village Mae Mun Man Yuen Baan 2 face submergence as they refuse to vacate their homes, now half submerged by the rising dam waters. As a result of the dam 3000 families have lost farmland to the reservoir. The government has only paid compensation for the loss of private land and not for loss of land based on customary land rights.

On December 2, a show of force of 2000 policemen at the Pak Mun Dam site occurred when they moved in under the auspices of a tree planting party for the King's birthday. Other action from police and officials include the detainment of four Rasi Salai village leaders in November accusing them of embezzling money from the state. The latest action against Mun River protesters is the flooding of the Rasi Salai dam at a rate of 10cm per night to try to force the villagers from their already flooded houses. They are refusing to move until the government agrees to further compensation or draining the dam until full environmental impact surveys can be undertaken.

Sharma, S. and Imhof, A. (1999) *The Struggle for the Mun River*. International Rivers Network, December 1999.

People, Forests and FOMACOP

In September 1999, the Finnish NGO umbrella organisation KEPA organised the conference *Forestry, Energy and the Development Crisis in the Mekong Region*, held in Helsinki. The conference brought together interested and concerned parties of the Lao Forest Management and Conservation Project (FOMACOP) - a project jointly funded by the World Bank, Global Environmental Facility (GEF) and the Finnish Government. The project was set up in 1995 and is based in Savanakheth and Khammouane provinces. The Helsinki conference provided a forum for representatives in Southeast Asia, namely TERRA and PER, to present concerns over Finnish involvement in development work within the Mekong region.

There is disagreement between the NGOs and FOMACOP over two essential points: the interpretation of 'forest management' and the appointment of Finnish forestry consultant Jaakko Poyry. TERRA and PER argue that the FOMACOP project is based on a Western system of forest management and does not take into consideration the diverse local values associated with community forests in Laos. This concern centres on the interpretation of forest management as defined by Finnish experience and expertise, which they argue is considerably removed from the Lao equivalent. Their second concern, over the selection of Jaakko Poyry as the primary consultant, is founded on the Thai experience with this consultant from involvement in the Thai forest master plan and concern the Thai experience will be replicated in Laos. Thai NGOs and community groups were outraged after the consultant prescribed the resumption of the logging of natural forests within Thai borders in the 1991 Thai forestry masterplan.

TERRA and PER maintain that the experience of other countries, including Laos' neighbours, reveals that forest-associated international aid is not always in harmony with the needs of local communities and local resource based protection and enhancement practices. In the past foreign consultants have proven to have little understanding of the tenure rights and relationships between governments and local communities resulting in poor decisions and inequitable policy formulation which sees the extraction and export of logs by foreign companies and national government agencies, not local communities (Jarventaus, 1999).

After the conference, TERRA, PER and KEPA faced criticism from FOMACOP and members of the Finland-Laos Association for basing their concerns on poor consultation with local communities and falsely accusing FOMACOP of liaising mainly with government and not community groups. FOMACOP insist that they have a good system of consultation already on board (Dahlgren and Laukkanen, 1999). TERRA and PER have also been accused of trying to turn Laos into an undeveloped 'ethnographic museum' by not allowing any local communities to earn income from their natural resource base in a country that badly needs export income.

The inclusion of foreign consultants remains a hot topic in all aid work. It raises issues of control - control of funds, control of knowledge, and control of development. The

output of projects such as FOMACOP is heralded as poverty alleviation, while TERRA, PER and KEPA are concerned that commercial logging will not provide a sustainable and equitable source of income to the people of Laos, but instead weaken the local based system which is important to sustainable forest management.

Dahlgren, Taina and Jari Laukkanen (Finland-Laos Association), "Hot debate on forest issues", Kumppani Magazine, 1999.

Jarventaus, Kaarina. "Thai environmental activist does not believe on the forest aid from abroad", Helsingin Sanomat, Sept 12, 1999.

NEWS FROM THE CENTRE

New AMRC Associate

Last semester the AMRC welcomed Anucha Leksakundilok from Thailand. Anucha joins the AMRC and Department of Geography as a PhD student researching community participation in environmental management in ecotourism. He previously graduated as an Architect and Regional Planner from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand before working at the Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technological Research, where he was responsible for research and design of environmental and natural resource management plans for both the government and private organisations. He also has experience in physical planning and project management, particularly in the area of tourism development.

AMRC Visiting Researcher

Mr Takayuki Namura is spending six months at the AMRC during the first half of 2000. A PhD candidate at the University of Tokyo, Namura-san is carrying out research on forest management and land allocation policies in Lao PDR. He has previously worked on JICA projects in that country. During his stay at AMRC, he will be doing background work in political ecology. AMRC will host a weekly reading group in political ecology during the first semester 2000, commencing 15:00-16:00 on Friday 3 March.

Annual Report

The second AMRC Annual Report since the Centre's inauguration in late 1997 will be available shortly by contacting the Administrator on tel + 61 (2) 93517796, Fax. 9351 3644 or by email: mekong@geography.usyd.edu.au

Training at NUOL

A three year training program in natural resource management research for twelve academic staff at the National University of Laos commenced in December 1999. AMRC Director Phil Hirsch kicked off the program with an introductory session 8-15 December. He was joined by colleagues from the Faculty of Social Sciences at Chiangmai University. The NUOL staff come from four disciplines: Agriculture, Economics, Forestry and Geography. Each training session includes a field survey. The second session, focusing on food security and resource tenure, was run by Phil Hirsch and Penny van Esterick (from York University in Toronto) from 22-27

January 2000. Participants are to be taken through each step of research design, project formulation, grant application, administration, fieldwork, data analysis, writing and dissemination.

IGES deforestation study

AMRC has been commissioned by the Institute for Global Environment Studies in Japan to carry out a desk review of underlying causes of deforestation in the Mekong Region. IGES has a forestry program that includes sub-themes on participatory forest management, timber trade, administrative/legal frameworks and underlying causes of deforestation. The latter sub-program is administered by Yoichi Kuroda, a well-known environmental activist on tropical timber issues in Japan. AMRC is developing an explanatory framework with which to better interpret various positions and debates on deforestation and to inform policy in the region. Two student interns have been assisting AMRC Director Phil Hirsch in this study. A preliminary report is due by the end of March 2000.

Centre Administrator

After two years as part-time AMRC administrator, Fiona Miller is stepping down to concentrate full-time-and-a-half on her PhD studies on water resource management in the Mekong Delta. Fiona has done an outstanding job and is to be credited with helping get the Centre up, running and making its mark over this relatively short period of time. She has brought administrative skills, a keen understanding of the research context of the Centre, and above all a rare level of commitment. It will be hard to fill her shoes, but we will try. We will shortly be advertising for a full-time administrator, with an option of job-share if appropriate. Thanks also to Simon Bush who has valiantly and smoothly been helping out in the transitional period.

AUSTRALIAN MEKONG NEWS

First ADF Replenishment Meeting held in Australia

The first in a series of meetings to discuss the eighth replenishment of the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Asian Development Fund (ADF) was held in Brisbane in October 13-14, 1999. The stated aim of the ADF is to provide loans on concessional terms to the poorer countries of the Asia Pacific region. The ADB is currently meeting with donors in order to secure funds for the ADF by mid-2000, with further meetings scheduled for Edinburgh in February and in conjunction with the ADB's Annual General Meeting to be held in Chiang Mai, Thailand May 9-10. The Bank announced a 'new strategy' of poverty alleviation in November 1999 in what is widely seen as part of measures to ensure criticisms of the Bank's lack of attention to poverty alleviation do not hinder contributions to the ADF. The Bank currently aims to replenish the ADF to the tune of US\$6.3 billion - equivalent to previous ADF replenishment period (1997-2000). Australia has currently committed an effective amount of US\$147.441 million (30/11/99) to the ADF, making Australia the 3rd largest contributor after Japan and the US <www.adb.org/news/adfviii>.

PROFILES

*In this issue we profile the **Indochina Media Memorial Foundation**. In its inspiration and implementation, IMMF transcends the periods of conflict, cooperation and new development agendas that have all helped to shape the Mekong Region.*

Organisational Profile: Indochina Media Memorial Foundation

History of the IMMF

The Indochina Media Memorial Foundation (IMMF) was founded in the United Kingdom in 1991 by veteran Vietnam War photographer Tim Page. The organisation has expanded to include IMMF (Thailand) which was set up as an affiliated organisation in 1993 by Denis Gray of Associated Press, Dominic Faulder of Asiaweek, Charles de Nerciat of Agence France Presse and other Bangkok-based journalists.

Aims and Objectives of IMMF

The goal of the IMMF is to provide training courses for journalists in the Mekong Region, including Myanmar.

The IMMF aims to:

- improve the standards, ethics and practices of journalism in the region on a continuing basis,
- raise the quality of specialist reporting by fostering the participants' ability to ask appropriate questions and research background information in the interests of balance, accuracy, and fair reporting,
- help those pursuing careers in journalism, and
- foster closer media relations between Thailand and its Indochina neighbours, and to strengthen ties between correspondents of all nations and their colleagues in Indochina.

Activities of the IMMF

To realise these objectives, the organisation, which espouses no political cause or philosophy, concentrates on journalists rather than governments or media ownership. The IMMF approaches journalists in each of the countries through different channels. Applications for training courses are sent to the Vietnamese Journalists Association in Hanoi, the Cambodian Communications Institute and other media outlets in Phnom Penh, the editor of the Vientiane Times in Laos and various media outlets in Thailand.

Issues Addressed in Training Courses

The training courses offer participants a chance to clearly understand issues facing the region as well as the ethics of good journalism and balanced reporting. Such general course aims are seen as important as the region undergoes both economic and political transitions. These changes are country-specific and affect the type of training undertaken by the IMMF. While still tightly controlled, the media in Vietnam and Laos has been afforded some freedom to report on areas like the environment and economics and has even exposed official corruption, thus giving it a limited reformist role. In Cambodia, the media has moved from an era of great control to one in which some outlets report with unbridled excess. Meanwhile, the Thai media

has and will continue to become more sophisticated and extensive.

The IMMF associates itself with some of these changes through its training activities, helping to furnish journalists with tools needed to take responsible advantage of the new opportunities and challenges. As the open market takes over from centralised economies, IMMF also brings attention to some segments of the so-called "free media" acting as pawns for political and economic interest groups or yielding to sensationalist coverage, a move away from the sometimes informative, educational stories covered in state controlled media.

The majority of courses are held in Thailand, with a few organized in the respective countries. Past courses have included:

- Basic print journalism
- Reporting on the environment - marine and coastal issues
- Reporting on the environment - Mekong River issues
- Reporting on the environment - Agricultural issues
- Photo journalism - social and health issues
- Radio journalism - women and child issues
- Business and economic reporting

Future courses are planned in the areas of current affairs reporting for television journalists, video documentary making and digital photography. A course for senior editors is also scheduled. Trainers and speakers in the past have come from the Thomson Foundation, the BBC, the Financial Times and other news and media-supporting organizations.*

Graduates of IMMF courses have gone on to start clubs, talk shows and news columns on specific issues within their countries. They also build strong links with fellow journalists in the region. Several have won scholarships to study further in the UK, the United States and Australia.

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* AMRC Associate Satoru Matsumoto was a trainer for an IMMF course for Lao journalists in 1998.

AMRC Mekong Discussion Group Program for Semester I, 2000

The program for the AMRC's fortnightly Mekong Discussion Group is currently being finalised and will be posted soon on our Website:

[www.usyd.edu.au/su/geography/mekong/
Documents/Events/](http://www.usyd.edu.au/su/geography/mekong/Documents/Events/)

It promises to be an exciting program with a great variety of speakers, so please come along!

UPCOMING EVENTS

Conferences, Seminars and Forums

Transcending Boundaries: Natural Resource

Management from Summit to Sea, June 17-22, 2000

Huxley College of Environmental Studies, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington.
Eighth International Symposium on Society & Resource Management. Boundaries crisscross the spatial landscape: between nations, states, counties, cities, public and private lands.

Contact: Anna Elliott

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The World Congress on Managing and Measuring

Sustainable Development, August 17-22, 2000, Kananaskis Village, Canada

Contact: Germain Dufour, Society for World Sustainable Development

Email: gdufour@globalcommunitywebnet.com

Oriental and Asian Studies in the Era of Globalisation: heritage and modernity - opportunities and challenges

27 August - 1 September 2000, Montreal, Canada

The conference will focus on research on the contemporary as well as the ancient and traditional Orient seen in the light of the various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences.

Email: congres@bcoc.umontreal.ca

Web: <http://www.bcoc.umontreal.ca>

Second International Human Dimensions Workshop:

Human Dimensions Issues in the Coastal Zones

September 10-22, 2000 Bonn, Germany. Organised by IHDP (International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change) and START (Global Change System for Analysis, Research and Training).

Web: <http://www.uni-bonn.de/IHDP>

Social Transformation in the Asia Pacific Region,

December 4-6, 2000, Wollongong Australia. Organised by the Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformation Studies and the UNESCO. This is the first of a series of conferences exploring the specific characteristics of globalisation and social transformation in the various world regions.

Email: capstrans@uow.edu.au

Web: <http://www.uow.edu.au/research/centres/capstrans/>

International Conference : The Chao Phraya Delta: Historical Development, Dynamics and Challenges of

Thailand's Rice Bowl, December 12-14, 2000, Bangkok.

Jointly organised by Kasetsart University, Chulalongkorn University, L'Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (France) and Kyoto University (Japan)

Conference Secretary : odoras@ku.ac.th

Web: [http://std.cpc.ku.ac.th/delta/deltacp/events/
Conference_CP.htm](http://std.cpc.ku.ac.th/delta/deltacp/events/Conference_CP.htm)

Web: www.irm.org

POINTS OF VIEW

Media in the Mekong Region

The Points of View on media presented in this issue come from two serious television journalists, one former and one current. Satoru Matsumoto summarises his own research on how debates on environment and development in the Mekong Region are shaped by different journalistic assumptions. He also shows how different “levels” of media operate and influence in different ways. In a self-critical discussion of his trade, Mike Carey reminds us of the limits of journalism to exercise progressive influence. Some of these limits are set by the modest degree of impact that even in-depth programs may have, while others are set by a failure of some parts of the media to dig below the surface of received wisdom – the latter often put out by self-serving elites.

Mekong Environment in Discourse, Satoru Matsumoto

At present, discourse analysis is regarded as an important area of study in order to understand the politics of environment. Swidden cultivation, for example, is interpreted in some cases as a destructive or environmentally unsound custom of hilltribe people, yet is praised by others as sustainable and a cultural wisdom based on their livelihoods. When major newspapers produce articles focussing only on the former interpretation of swidden cultivation, they exert strong influences on the thoughts of their readers. It is true that the mass media is not the only factor influencing regimes of thought, yet considerable research on mass media and the environment indicates the strong impact it has on readers' ways of thinking cannot be ignored.

I have conducted research on the representations of Mekong hydropower development in major newspapers at three different levels: local, regional and international. The local newspapers comprised of two Lao-language daily papers, the regional scale comprised English newspapers in Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, with nation-wide daily vernacular papers in Australia and Japan selected for the international level.

Various factors were found to influence both the quantity and quality of representations of hydropower development. For instance, the number of relevant articles on Mekong hydropower was quite few in the studied newspapers, except for Thailand and Laos. One might expect to find more articles in the papers of Cambodia and Vietnam, considering the concern these countries' over downstream impacts of upstream development. Moreover, financial assistance and foreign investment from Australia and Japan has played a significant role in dam projects in the Mekong region, yet there was a limited number of articles concerned with such topics in the papers studied from these countries.

However, the geographical distance from the sites of on-going projects is not necessarily a decisive factor influencing the quantity of articles. The study of English-language newspapers from Cambodia and Thailand revealed a decline in the number of relevant articles following the departure of reporters concerned with this issue. Furthermore, my research found that other factors influence the presence of such articles, such as the press culture, organisational conditions of press companies, legal system to control mass media, availability of reliable information sources or “issue entrepreneurs”, dominant culture in each country, and the political economy of mass media.

The qualitative analysis of the articles revealed that there are two different premises regarding the meaning of

environment and the implications of development. One being that “development destroys the environment which is rich in biodiversity and endows rural people with indispensable sources for their lives”. The other is that “development protects environment which is being degraded by the lifestyle and backwardness of rural people”.

While the studied newspapers in Thailand, Australia and Japan mainly adopted the former representation, those in Laos both in vernacular and English languages were based on the latter perception. It is too easy to say that the cause of this dichotomy can be attributed to the relative freedom of press in these countries. Yet the reporters interviewed in Laos who visited the affected area of a hydropower project, without any political pressure, were of the view that the hydropower project would save the environment. This shows that it is not the limited freedom of press in Laos but rather the prejudices or “common sense” of government officials that reflects on the reporter's representation.

I am currently working for Mekong Watch Japan, which is a research/advocacy oriented non-governmental organisation (NGO) focusing on Mekong development, after having finished this study at the University of Sydney. Such analyses on representation and discourse of development and environment in the Mekong region are implicative even for advocacy NGOs' activities in Japan which has been the largest donor country to Mekong development. NGOs are likely to be labeled as the actor promoting environmental protection and also the producer of “environment” discourse among the public through their media work. However, it may indicate that NGOs can sometimes support public opinion to accelerate huge development schemes in order to protect the endangered environment from the backwardness of rural people. Protecting the environment can also be used for the relocation of the indigenous people who are condemned as destroyers of the environment by the government. These research results show that NGOs should carefully analyse the causal relationship between development and environment, and also be careful about the implications of their use of “environment” discourse in the public arena.

Satoru Matsumoto has previously worked as a journalist with NHK TV in Japan. He worked for several years for the Japan Volunteers Centre in Laos, before pursuing his research at the AMRC. Satoru now works for Mekong Watch Japan and can be contacted at:

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Australian Media Reporting in the Mekong, Mike Carey

Australia's media cannot feel satisfied with its reporting of the Mekong region. In general it has been sporadic and usually focused on a crisis or natural disaster. In the last decade Australia's media reported on the fag end of the Cold war and the Indochina conflict. Cambodia's peace deal struck between the factions in 1991 and followed by the United Nations sponsored elections in 1993 were the last big event worthy of concentrated attention. Australia's interest was magnified by a perceived ownership of the peace deal, as Australia's then Foreign Minister, Senator Gareth Evans, pushed hard for the factions to sign a peace pact based around a proposal drawn up by Michael Costello who was later to head Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Since then we have fallen back into the occasional coup or in my case hydropower in Laos ("Dam Destiny", *Dateline*, SBS, August 1996).

I chose the Lao dam story because it allowed the Mekong river ecological debate to be viewed through an Australian prism. The Nam Theun II dam on the Nakai plateau was to be built by a consortium including Transfield, well known for its vehicular tunnel under Sydney Harbour.

Certainly our coverage of the Nam Theun II project increased awareness in Australia, but it was reportage in the regional press which has had the most impact on the project. The debate in Thailand and in Laos itself, amongst NGO's, has filtered back to the World Bank, which in turn required more social, environmental and economic studies to be conducted. Our reportage added to that chorus and to the understanding of these issues, but in the end the Asian economic crisis may have sealed Nam Theun II's fate.

Mark Davis' report on the Bakun dam in Sarawak on Borneo island was similar to Nam Theun II but his report for ABC TV had immediate effects. His program became the centre piece of an environmental campaign against the European construction company which then had serious second thoughts. The project banker then pulled the plug

and Bakun's construction was suspended pending better economic times.

These two stories could be considered positive if one were to approach them from the ecological angle. However, the host countries Lao PDR and Malaysia and the companies involved regarded them as unwarranted criticism of their attempts to develop the hydropower resource. With the Lao programme we tried to give all sides of the proposal, to try and report the scheme in depth. It was a complicated inquiry which included vastly differing views from different environmental NGOs which would normally present a united argument against the dam builders. It would have been easy to paint the dam builders as uncaring environmental vandals and be done with it but that would be to distort the picture.

A simple approach, a black and white depiction so often distorts Australia's popular understanding of our regional neighbours.

Last year in Indonesia was a case in point. After the bloodbath which followed the vote in East Timor and Australia's announcement that it would send an interim United Nations force, daily "spontaneous" anti-Australian demonstrations began outside the Australian embassy in the capital, Jakarta. Some Australian reporters, unused to reporting Indonesia swallowed the spontaneous tag without question. They didn't realize that it was in the middle of a presidential election campaign and that Australia had become a convenient new enemy instead of a sturdy regional friend.

The Indonesian demonstrations were squeezed for every last drop of sentiment on both sides, clearly distorting each country's popular perception. Australians reacted badly to the northern neighbour's new aggression, particularly when the reportage did not explain that the demonstrators were paid and organised as part of a wider political debate within Indonesia.

Many Australians thought Indonesia was about to invade, but when the presidential haggling was over, the tap was turned off and the demonstrations stopped from one day to the next. The Indonesian domestic audience had been manipulated by this theatre and the Australian audience had been let down by inferior reporting.

Mike Carey is a journalist with many years experience working in Australia and the Asia Pacific region. He is currently the Executive Producer of Dateline, SBS - Australia's longest running international current affairs program.

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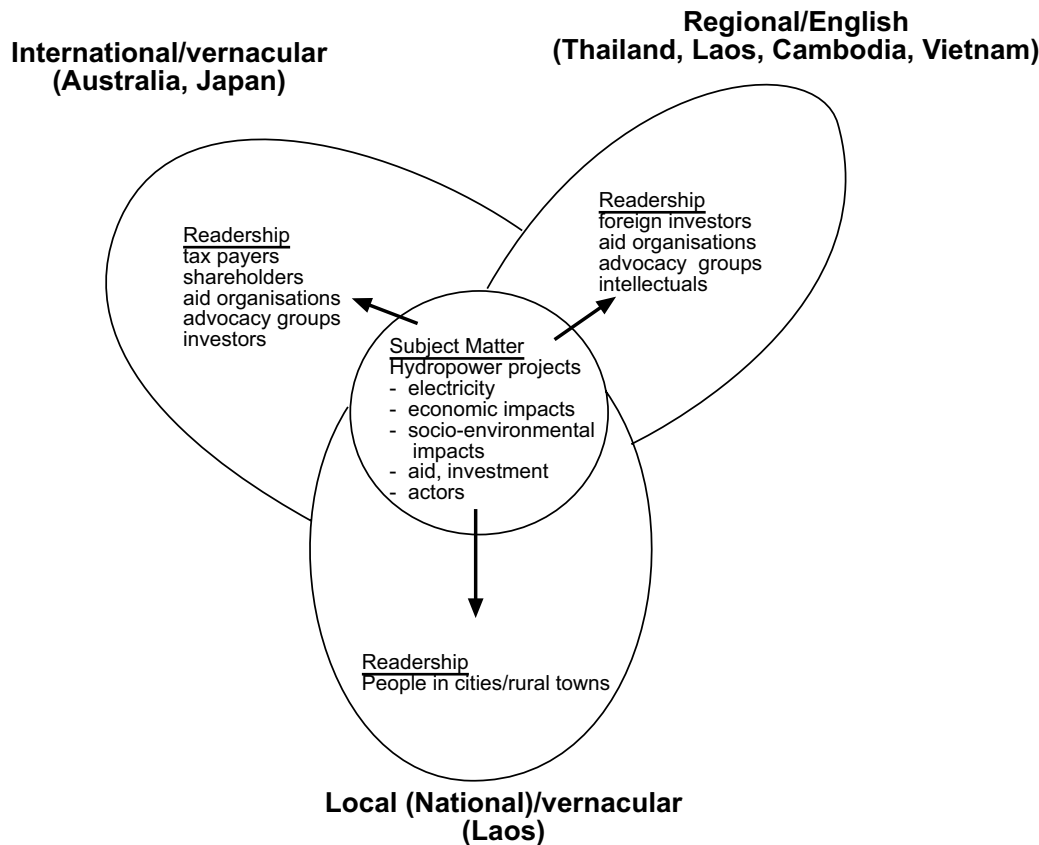
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MEKONG MAPS

Mekong Dams and Mass Media from North-South Readership Perspective

This issue of *Mekong Maps* comes from research conducted by Saturo Matsumoto in his Masters thesis entitled *Development and Environment in Press: North-South perspective on representations of Mekong hydropower development, 1999*. It is important when considering the North-South perspectives of development and environment issues to illuminate findings at all geographic scales, local, national, regional and international. Moreover, it is important to have different levels of analysis according to these scales as the impacts and implications of environmental issues, such as hydroelectric power, differ accordingly.

Identifying the readership at each level aids in the interpretation and understanding of subsequent responses to environment-development issues. The media is an important, but not the only, source of information available to people. Language and distribution are important mechanisms for, and barriers to, the dissemination of information by newspapers influencing the interaction of people with current events. As the diagram shows, the readership of different publications differs according to location and language, and as such the mass media message is presented and interpreted at different scales accordingly.



“The newspapers at these three levels have different target readers in the context of the North-South dimension.

- The *local vernacular newspapers* in Laos are mainly read by people living in the cities or the rural district towns including the political decision-makers of the local and the central government.
- The *regional English-language newspapers* are read by foreign investors, branch officers of the aid agencies and highly educated people in the region.
- The *international* (that is, just outside the region) *vernacular newspapers* in Australia and Japan are read by the tax-payers of those countries, the domestic shareholders of investing companies, members of parliament and the headquarter officials of the aid agencies. It is important to consider the role of such different readers at each level in the construction of the development and environment issue.” (Extract and figure from Matsumoto, Saturo. *Development and Environment in Press - A North-South perspective on representations of Mekong hydropower development*, MSc, University of Sydney, 1999)

→ Mass media message flow

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