

# MEKONG UPDATE & DIALOGUE



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The Australian Mekong Resource Centre was established at the University of Sydney in 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 & Dialogue* provides:

- lead article on the key topic of the issue
- responses to the lead article
- news of current developments in the region
- news from the AMRC
- information on Mekong-related conferences and events in Australia

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#### READER CONTRIBUTIONS

The Mekong Update & Dialogue welcomes the comments of its readers on issues raised in the Feature article and in the Responses to the Feature. If you do wish to make comment please email us at mekong@mail.usyd.edu.au. Comments should be sent by late January and should be limited to 1-2 paragraphs.

## EDITORIAL - Transboundary environmental conflict

As an international river basin, the Mekong inevitably faces challenges of sharing water resources and dealing with development impacts across borders. Not all such challenges necessarily involve conflict, but it is likely that many will do so. The greater the development pressures in some parts of the river basin, the more likely that conflict will arise.

How are we to understand and deal with environmental conflict? One approach is to see conflict pre-emption as the main goal. However, as John Dore recognises in the lead article overleaf, conflict can have an important and useful societal and political function, so long as it does not turn violent - and so long as it leads to more equitable and sustainable outcomes through the challenges it imposes on the *status quo*.

There is sometimes confusion between conflict and violence. The Sesan Protection Network's response in this edition of Mekong Update gives a very clear example of the kind of "silent violence" suffered by communities along the Sesan River who are on the receiving end of transboundary environmental impacts. If conflict pre-emption remains the primary focus of agencies such as the Mekong River Commission, it might superficially make sense to try to avoid confrontation between these isolated communities and the electricity utility responsible for building and operating the dam that has caused the impacts.

However, dealing with transboundary conflict in a more progressive, equitable and sustainable way requires tackling such challenges head-on and finding appropriate governance arrangements - or giving further support to those that are already in place. An example of the latter might be the Cambodian National Mekong Committee, by enhancing its ability to generate and utilise scientific information in its negotiations with other NMCs, and developing its links with civil society groups within Cambodia in order to serve as a vehicle for articulating local actors' concerns across borders. Fiona Miller's response below pays particular attention to such issues of governance.

In December 2003, the Danish Institute for International Studies hosted a one-day conference in Copenhagen, at the request of Denmark's official development agency DANIDA, under the title "Water wars or water riots?". The conference looked specifically at how development assistance agencies should understand conflict over water. Are we concerned primarily with disputes between sovereign nations, implying a focus on government-to-government conflict management processes? Or should we look for the roots of water conflict in social processes and developments in which winners and losers are divided within as well as between countries, for example through privatisation of water utilities or construction of large scale water resource infrastructure? The meeting had a heavy emphasis on the Mekong. The clear conclusion was that we need to look at social processes and not be diverted by the "water wars" scenario in a way that blinds us to higher-resolution dimensions of conflict. The Sesan case is a particularly interesting context in which to consider this proposition, as it involves both transboundary and other dimensions of conflict, posing a seminal challenge to dealing with transboundary environmental issues in the Mekong.

# FEATURE

## Transboundary environmental conflicts: some thoughts about water-related governance

by John Dore

Regular readers of this newsletter are not strangers to Mekong Region social challenges, many of which have strong transboundary (or crossborder or region-wide) dimensions. This article will focus on transboundary 'environmental' conflicts – in particular related to water – and associated governance processes. A call is made for more effective use of 'social learning' approaches.

Conflict refers to disagreement between two or more parties resulting from an incompatibility of goals, interests, perceptions or values. Thought of in this way, conflict is not necessarily bad, abnormal or dysfunctional, but rather an inherent element of human interaction. When thinking about the directions taken by society, the governance processes by which we deal with conflict are what really matter. Are they adequate?

In addition to 'environmental', the Mekong Region has many other significant, often related, transboundary social challenges. These include managing pressures associated with new forms of regionalisms, international economic integration, finding sufficient space for local and transnational civil society, still tense and largely self-interest dominated relationships between Mekong states, handling interference/interventions by external powers, poverty, government policies affecting ethnic minorities, labour migration, HIV-AIDS and drugs use, biotechnology impacts on rural production systems, and various blatant and subtle injustices. Many of these have been dealt with in previous issues of this newsletter and elsewhere (for a recent collection of local views, see also Mingsarn Kaosa-ard and Dore 2003).

Transboundary environmental conflicts in the Mekong already exist on matters such as water use, flooding, pollution, land use, forest use, timber trade, non-timber forest products trade, fisheries, biodiversity conservation, ecosystem health, infrastructure development, impact assessment, access to natural resources and access to information. These all fall within the realm of environmental governance (see Badenoch 2001, UNECE 2001). This is such a large domain that for now I'd like to focus down to 'water governance' defined by the Global Water Partnership as "*the range of political, social, economic and administrative systems that are in place to develop and manage water resources, and the delivery of water services, at different levels of society*" (Rogers and Hall 2003). This can, but does not always, involve multi-layered negotiation and decisionmaking, involving interplay between many individuals and formal or informal institutions.

Conflicts over water in the Mekong Region are increasing in their extent and seriousness. Disputes exist and others are looming, over extractions, diversions, sharing/allocations and their consequent impacts on hydrology, ecology, food production, cultural traditions and economies. Growth in demand, prospects of climate change, increasing interference to natural

flows, dams, altered sediment loads, impact on fisheries, financial and ecological sustainability of irrigated agriculture – all of these issues are in the mix. Local communities, governments, business interests, local NGOs and international organisations each claim to be 'stakeholders'. Negotiation platforms that can cope with and adapt to this complexity and dynamism across time and spatial scales are not easily created or maintained.

Participatory research and multistakeholder dialogues both have essential roles to play.

For transboundary water conflicts, the research scope needs to be: **multi-country** in both a territorial and social sense, with distinctive Cambodian, Chinese, Lao, Burmese, Thai and Vietnamese parts to the story, as appropriate; **multi-scalar** where the local impacts are placed in watershed, basin, national and regional contexts, and vice versa; **multi-perspective** in its learning approach seeking to enrich understanding via input from grass roots and State politics. Water governance should be inherently inter-disciplinary. Agricultural science, international relations, political economy, customary and State law, ecology, economics, engineering, geography and sociology all have a place. If wanting to enhance water governance, legitimate domains of research inquiry could include: history; competing discourses; knowledge production and use; contrasting notions of 'stakeholder participation'; institutional arrangements – formal, informal; power – context, vested interests, potential to influence; risk – biophysical, market, political, precautionary approaches etc. And wherever possible searching for creative possibilities to improve the present situation.

Dialogues can be an important and positive element of governance. There has been a series of contemporary ongoing and one-off dialogues in the Mekong Region, of relevance to transboundary water conflicts. Most have fallen well short of any learning-oriented ideal. Recall for a moment your own understandings of:

- the Asian Development Bank 'facilitated/led/coordinated' Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Cooperation initiative,
- the Lower Mekong River Basin Cooperation embodied in the activities of the Mekong River Commission, including their secretariat 'facilitation' of water utilisation negotiations (1999-2005), basin development planning (2001-2004) and writing of transboundary impact assessment protocols (1998-2004),
- the first phase of the Oxfam Mekong Initiative culminating in parallel activities with the 2002 GMS Leaders Summit in Phnom Penh, and
- the 'dialogue' on river basin development and civil society in the Mekong Region which held forums in Australia and northeast Thailand in 2002

A shortlist of relevant questions about each could include: What are the relative powers of the stakeholders involved in these dialogues and to what extent was/is the dialogue itself context-shaping? What are the core and dominant values and visions of the key included or excluded stakeholders? Were/are ethics and rights/responsibilities dimensions central to the dialogue? Was/is the dialogue open, informed and informing;

gathering, using and sharing the best available information? Neils Roling and Jim Woodhill from Wageningen in The Netherlands describe an 'ideal' dialogue as being a process where "more or less interdependent stakeholders in some resource are identified, and invited to meet and interact in a forum for conflict resolution, negotiation, social learning and collective decision making towards collective action" (Roling and Woodhill 2001). Whilst it is easier to criticise than implement, it is true to say that most of the aforementioned fall well short of any ideal.

At the time of writing another 'dialogue' is about to take place – the 1<sup>st</sup> South East Asia Water Forum, being held in Chiang Mai, Thailand 17-21 November 2003. This forum is the South East Asia (SEA) child of the Global Water Partnership (GWP) which claims to be an international network open to all organisations involved in water resources management. In SEA this has not been the case. In the early years of its activity it has taken a very safe path, uncritically walking hand in hand with State governments, dominated by particular 'water resources development' ideology and carefully avoiding controversy, in the main by excluding non-aligned views. Wedding itself to the relatively mainstream Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) approach this has been a 'successful' strategy enabling the initiative to capture reasonable attention from state bureaucrats who have found it a particularly unthreatening forum, in contrast to the disparate and at times unruly reality of water politics in wider society. It will be interesting to see how this particular event in Chiang Mai unfolds. Whilst participation by wider society is not possible due to a hefty admission fee, nevertheless a governance session will take place which is intended to confront participants with alternative perspectives about two of the highest profile and most controversial Mekong water governance issues, each of which have already created serious transboundary and within-country tensions – the 'Three Rivers' hydropower development in Yunnan, and the Thaksin reinvigorated river diversion and irrigation development planned for northeast Thailand (for a critical perspective on the background to the latter project, see Lerdsak Kamkongsak and Law 2001)

In July 2003 the San Jiang or 'Three Rivers' region of southwest China was declared a World Heritage site. This is part of the upper watersheds of the Nu Jiang (Upper Salween River), Lancang Jiang (Upper Mekong River) and Jinsha Jiang (Upper Yangtze River) in China's Yunnan Province. Far removed from concerns about World Heritage listing, particular economic reforms have catalysed a dramatic increase in the dam-building aspirations of 'developers' on each of these rivers. Of particular importance are recent wide-ranging reforms to the power industry, coupled with the Beijing government commitment to initiatives intended to increase the prosperity of China's western region and meet the needs of the energy-hungry east. The plans for the Lancang Jiang are now well known (for example, see AMRC 2002) but the recent changes are confirming the likelihood of all or most of the dams being built. Less well known are the details of the new pressure on the Nu Jiang, currently under non-transparent review by Chinese authorities. In Thailand, river diversions and large-scale irrigation development are firmly back on the political agenda, having been placed there by the presently omnipotent Prime Minister Thaksin as a 'solution' to the poverty woes of Isaan. In each case, the water governance process demands greater scrutiny. At the SEA Water Forum, mainly due to some subcontracting out of the

sessions, there will be more opportunity for genuine dialogue than at previous SEA GWP activities. Those attending will be challenged by the examples to reflect on the following questions relating to knowledge, participation and 'frameworks'.

- How are different forms of knowledge (eg. economic, social, engineering, ecological) used (or not) in water governance? Which knowledge dominates and which is marginalised? Why? Etc.
- Who participates in water governance? How can the current situation be improved? Should more stakeholders be more meaningfully involved? If so, why and how? What processes enabled the participation of which stakeholders and what factors prove constraining? Why and how? Etc.
- Regardless of perhaps pre-conceived notions of the World Commission on Dams process, is their legacy 'policy framework' (if adopted) likely to enhance water governance processes in Three Rivers, Khong-Chi-Mun or anywhere else in the Mekong Region? If so, why and how? If not, why not?
- How effective or insignificant are national impact assessment processes in China or Thailand? What hope is there for the transboundary impact assessment protocols being developed by MRC? How relevant is the already GMS Minister-approved ADB Strategic Environment Framework intended to guide water and transport investment?

Events such as this are opportunities for all to learn, but sadly often no learning takes place. By creating an interactive space which enables different perspectives to be heard, and then focusing in on some serious questions, the hope – backed up by improved process design – is that opportunities like this are not wasted.

A belief in the worth of social learning (see Leeuwis and Pyburn 2002) commits an advocate to proactive enablement of different groups in society to participate in communicative processes searching for better futures by attempting to understand and move through conflicts and dilemmas. A tool of the social learning paradigm is the multi-stakeholder dialogue – the facilitation of which Neils Rolings suggests is akin to pushing an overloaded 'wheelbarrow full of frogs' across bumpy ground [in poor light]. Despite the apparent plethora of recent attempts, these still have unfulfilled potential in the Mekong Region and could make a greater contribution to enhancing water-related and other governance.

Having said that, I do not underestimate various political resistances to this type of approach – particularly grounded in self-interest and transboundary geopolitics – and I have no doubt that various other forms of advocacy will remain important, especially to 'encourage' more (and less) powerful actors to perhaps adjust their own paradigms, draw back from fixed short or long term visions about what the future should hold, and engage in meaningful and equitable negotiations.

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## RESPONSES TO FEATURE

### Water conflict and governance in the Mekong Basin: diverse interests, power and participation

by *Fiona Miller*

#### Introduction

John Dore argues that the governance processes taken to address conflict are what really matter in the context of water conflict and raises the question of who participates in water governance? I wish to pick up on this question, and explore the relationship between water conflict and governance in the Mekong Basin and the transboundary dimensions of water resources development. My response to Dore's article highlights some of the challenges associated with water governance at multiple scales, and concludes that the key to the avoidance of future water conflict is inclusive, meaningful and equitable decision making structures today.

#### Multiple-scales of water governance

Whilst history has shown that people are more likely to cooperate than resort to conflict in situations of water scarcity or competition, the number of cases and potential for water-related conflict have grown in recent times in the Mekong Basin as the intensity of water resource use and human-regulation of the water regime has increased. The transboundary nature of environmental and development change processes which contribute to rising water scarcity and competition means there are numerous political, cultural and practical barriers to meaningful cooperation between people, communities and nations throughout the basin. Yet, the number of dialogues (as Dore points out) and institutions dealing with water resources management or water governance at multiple scales has increased in recent times. Newly established institutions for water management can be seen at the local level (e.g. water user groups, cooperatives), sub-national level (e.g. river basin

organisations), national level (e.g. national water councils) and supra-national level (e.g. Mekong River Commission). Whilst these institutions bring people together to discuss and negotiate water issues, the potential for a worsening future conflict scenario remains. This is due to two primary factors: the continued promotion of large-scale, environmentally destructive water resource developments, albeit under the 'sustainable' and 'integrated' management of water governance agencies; and, the continued absence of diverse water-resource interests in these agencies. I wish to elaborate on the second factor. However, it is important to note that good water governance cannot be achieved if projects and development schemes which undermine the regenerative capacity of river ecosystems and degrade watershed resources continue to be promoted, as it is this environmental destruction which generates conflict.

#### Types of conflict

Water-based conflict, whether between neighbours or countries, forms just one of the numerous issues water governance institutions deal with. Yet, the manner by which all water management issues are dealt with reflects back on the potential for conflict. The process of decision making is as important for avoiding conflict, through the promotion of mutual trust and understanding, as the outcomes of such decisions. For example, who sits at the decision making table and is able to influence the decision making process is as important as the outcomes of decisions on water property rights, water pricing, infrastructure development, and regulation of prices for inputs and products.

There are overt and subtle, dramatic and not so dramatic forms of conflict evident in the Mekong Basin. The kinds of conflict which tend to (eventually) register with water management authorities are the more overt forms, involving death, violence, social dislocation and destruction of resources and assets. Dore mentions some of the high-profile forms of conflict currently receiving international and national attention, including dam construction and large-scale inter-basin diversion schemes. Yet these interventions are less numerous than the cumulative, iterative changes in the natural environment which lead to more subtle forms of conflict between neighbours, communities and countries. For example, the increase in the cost of water access for farmers (through deterioration of canal system or increased government charges resulting from 'water sector reforms') may form the additional burden which makes a household's livelihood no longer viable, resulting in landlessness or out-migration. Other more subtle forms of conflict, include:

- declining water quality, due to the impacts of industrialisation and rising agro-chemical use, which impacts upon the health of those reliant on the Mekong waters;
- the decline in fish numbers and diversity, due to the construction of in-stream barriers and modification of floodplains, impacts especially on the poor, as people must fish for longer, travel further or expand more effort to maintain a decent catch;
- decline in the availability of water in the dry season particularly affects those with poor seasonal access to water for production or household consumption needs;
- changes in water levels, of merely 15 cm, may mean the difference between a decent or lost harvest as a field is inundated or left high and dry;

Each of these, and many other, forms of environmental change

impact upon people's livelihoods and contribute to tensions between neighbours and communities along the waterways of the Mekong. Some households and communities are more vulnerable to such changes than others, with local institutions for cooperation and decision making on water and natural resources management determining to a great extent how resilient people are to changes in the timing, availability and quality of water.

### **Challenges associated with water governance**

At a local level the extent to which marginalised interests, such as those of the poor, the landless, agricultural labourers, fishers, and others are taken into account in local cooperative structures greatly determines the sustainability of water use. The inclusion of diverse resource interests in decision making at a local level can ensure a more fair, just and equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of water resources management and development. In contrast, institutions strongly dominated by political and economic elites can skew decision making on water matters to their benefit. For instance, choices on the location of canals result in some households losing agricultural land whilst others gain easier access to water; the height of dykes determines whose land is protected from floods, whilst other land is inundated; and investment in improved technology to pump or drain water may be beyond the scope of some, yet benefit others.

Many of the challenges associated with water-related decision making at the local level are magnified at a transboundary scale. Just as disparities in power within institutions at the local scale affect the decision making process, so at a transboundary scale we have recently witnessed examples in the Mekong Basin of more economically and politically powerful nations pursuing water resources developments which concentrate benefits within their own borders (such as flood protection, hydropower, or agricultural expansion) yet transfer impacts and risks elsewhere.

### **Addressing future conflict today**

Conflict often has its origins in processes of exclusion. Exclusion from the decision making process of those who hold alternative or dissident views to those of political or economic elites is likely to mean those issues, which have their origin in differing views, values, or perspectives on natural resources and their development, are unlikely to be properly understood and negotiated by all parties. Thus it is important to note that the nature of governance or cooperation itself can create the conditions which lead to future conflict. Good governance requires the meaningful participation of all stakeholders in the management of water. This makes participation central to wise decision making on water. Moreover, the decision-making processes need outcomes that reflect the interests of all stakeholders. As such, the concept of water governance should embody a more politically nuanced approach to water management, addressing the differential power relations that exist between stakeholders, and the role such power plays in water competition and conflict.

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Fiona has several years experience working on natural resources management issues in the Mekong Region. She recently received her doctorate for her PhD thesis on water resources management in the context of environmental change in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam.

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## **Learning from transboundary environmental conflicts**

*by the Sesan Protection Network, Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia*

*“Once the water levels rose so quickly an elderly woman was unable to escape to higher land, she tried to swim for her life, but she could not reach the dry ground, she drowned.” (Sesan villager, 2002)*

The Yali Falls dam has caused death, destruction, and suffering to the people living along the Sesan River. Downstream communities consisting of approximately 50,000 people in Cambodia knew nothing of the dam until 1996 when the dam's coffer-dam broke, causing massive flooding downstream. Since then, water releases from the dam have drastically altered the water quality and hydrology of the Sesan River downstream. People have died as a result of sudden releases of water and poor water quality. Unusual and extreme water level fluctuations have dramatically impacted riverine life, and have led to the cessation of fundamental income-generating activities such as gold panning, fishing, and river bank agriculture. People are afraid to continue riverside gardening and to use the river as before. Now that the Yali Falls dam is fully operational (since 2001), fluctuations and poor water quality are continuing to impact the lives of Sesan communities in Cambodia, which have received no compensation for their suffering. This situation remains one of the most significant and urgent transboundary environmental issues in the region. We are asked what can we learn from environmental conflicts over water?

At the recent 1<sup>st</sup> Southeast Asia Water Forum, held in Chiang Mai, 17-21 Nov, many speakers suggested that conflicts occur because of incomplete processes of participation and cooperation in the planning stage. Furthermore, accountability processes are ignored by stakeholders.

The planning process for the Sesan hydropower dams represents some of the worst cases of these processes. The EIA conducted by Electrowatt for the Yali dam only reached 8 kilometers downstream of the dam and concluded that the population downstream of Yali Falls “is very sparse, and are not dependant on the River in any way”. It is a case where the dam constructors, financiers, and planners failed to apply ‘best practice’ in environmental governance.

Communities affected by the Yali Falls Dam have been calling for support and for the government of Cambodia to focus on this issue and negotiate with the government of Viet Nam to improve the situation. In 2001 an initiative began, with support of the provincial authorities of Ratanakiri and Stung Treng Provinces, to support the affected communities by giving them a louder voice in processes affecting their lives. Communities want to see the Yali Falls Dam decommissioned and their river restored to its natural condition. They also demand that no further construction of large dams be allowed in the Sesan Basin.

John Dore suggests that multi-stakeholder dialogues have an essential role to play in resolving conflicts, and that they are key forums from which we could learn. The SPN, since its formation, has engaged in dialogue with a number of stakeholders involved in developing and supporting the hydropower dams in the Sesan.

For example, at a conference in Ubon Ratchathani in Nov 2002 a representative of the Vietnam Ministry of Industry stated “We are very sorry for the losses of the people living downstream on the Sesan River in Cambodia, caused, of course, by releasing water from the Yali Falls Dam’s reservoir in February 2002”. We received an apology from the Ministry, but no action has resulted. So, in order to ensure that the apology stated by the Ministry of Industry is transformed into action to resolve the impacts of the Yali Falls dam to the satisfaction of the local communities, the communities along the Sesan request to all stakeholders involved in the Sesan case to support their cause.

We expected that the Mekong River Commission (MRC) would help in the facilitation of transboundary- conflict resolution related to river basin management. However, we are not clear about the mandate and role of the MRC. After we faced the problem of Yali we had many meetings with the MRC, but MRC said that they are not police. According to their CEO, they cannot help to find a solution without a request from each government.

We also met several times with our government at the central level through the Cambodian National Mekong Committee (CNMC); they said that they needed specific/scientific data to discuss with Vietnam. Our communities know clearly the impacts to their livelihood system, but they don’t know what scientific data is. So, who is responsible for collecting such data? It surely is the responsibility of the CNMC to do so, yet there has been no action.

The Country Director of the World Bank, Cambodia, said that “We are not involved in Yali Dam construction, we just supported the transmission line from Yali dam to Ho Chi Minh” and suggested that the solution was not their responsibility. However she stated that “we will try our best through whatever mechanisms we have to highlight this issue and to give some support to the people who live along the Sesan and whose lives are so negatively affected by the dam...”

A promise is important if they are prepared to act on it. But it has no meaning and is dangerous for us if these are only diplomatic words. We don’t need comforting words, we need real action.

Similarly, the Head of Infrastructure Division and Counselor for SIDA in Cambodia told us that “We are not involved in Yali Dam construction; we just financed EVN for a study on Sesan 3, Sesan 3a. We are not responsible for the impacts caused by the Yali dam”, suggesting that the problem requires the two countries working together.

SIDA believes that its involvement can help to reduce impacts to downstream people and without its involvement in Vietnam’s National Hydropower Plan (VNHP), downstream Cambodians would still be affected by the dam construction in Vietnam if SIDA withdrew funding from Vietnam.

Our Sesan peoples’ opinion is that SIDA’s position is contradictory. On the one hand they say it is better to be involved than to withdraw. But on the other hand they say they cannot solve the problem and it is up to the two countries. We believe that if SIDA is involved in VNHP, more problems will happen because SIDA cannot help to solve the problem. Our understanding is that if SIDA withdraws its project from Electricity of Vietnam this would help to send a strong message that continued

development of the Sesan dams is unacceptable. Other financiers will learn from the example of SIDA.

Finally, back to the question of what we have learnt. Based on our experience, just and equitable negotiation over environmental conflict does not occur:

1. until all actors recognise, take responsibility and are accountable for their roles in the origins of the conflict
2. because local communities still have little say in their futures when powerful interests continue to ignore us or are not able to share an equal place at the negotiating table with affected communities
3. until there is widespread political support.

The 1st Southeast Asia Water Forum in Chiang Mai emphasized that it is only through cooperation and participation from all stakeholders that conflicts can be solved. It requires all stakeholders to work together without discrimination of role, function, status, and levels in order to overcome all issues.

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The Sesan Protection Network is a group of riparian communities and civil society groups who have come together to articulate concerns over the impacts of development on people and environment along the Sesan River.

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## NEWS FROM THE REGION

### Chinese cascade hydropower schemes in Yunnan

The Dachaoshan dam appears to be in full operation. This is the second dam - the Manwan dam being the first - to be completed in the Lancang (Upper Mekong) cascade hydropower scheme in Yunnan province, China. (See AMRC Working Paper #2.)

China also has a 13 dam cascade hydropower scheme planned for the Nu River (Upper Salween) in Yunnan. Despite serious objections by environmentalists, as the project affects the “Three Parallel Rivers” World Heritage Site, the developer (Huadian Co.), together with prefecture and provincial governments, is keen to proceed.

-- 2003 Email from Kevin Li, 21 October (sources: Yunnan Daily, 19 October 2003 & Xinhua, 20 October 2003)

### EIA workshop in Nan Province

Between 14 and 15 October 2003, Phil Hirsch, Andrew Wyatt and Nattaya Tubtim conducted a workshop on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Risk Assessment for the Nan Civil Society Coordination Centre and their local government and community partners in Nan Province, Thailand. The workshop, utilising case studies from the Mekong Region and Australia, generated wide-ranging discussions amongst participants on the objectives of EIAs, their implementation, characteristic failures, alternative best practice approaches, and the role of communities in the EIA. The workshop was also attended by Ms. Dam Chanty from the Sesan Protection Network, providing the opportunity for direct community to community links and joint-learning of the EIA process which both the Nan and Sesan communities are being confronted with as externally driven processes.

## **BothEnds-Gomukh project: Sesan update**

Andrew Wyatt, visited the Sesan Protection Network (SPN) Secretariat between 6 and 10 November to attend a monthly SPN District Focal Persons meeting and to update the BothEnds-Gomukh case study of the Sesan initiative. Significant recent events in the initiative have included a meeting between the SPN and community representatives with the Cambodian National Mekong Committee (CNMC), followed by communications from the CNMC to the Vietnamese National Mekong Committee in August stating that impacts of the Yali Dam on the Sesan communities were serious and requesting support for the return of the river's natural flows according to community demands. This was in turn followed by a directive from the Vietnamese Prime Minister to members of the Vietnamese Sesan Committee to address Cambodian concerns. While there is now significant political recognition that the impacts are serious, mitigation will prove to be a challenge as construction of the next series of dams on the Sesan continues to proceed while the Sesan communities remain on the periphery of plans and negotiations over their future.

## **JBIC dam workshop, Hanoi**

Andrew Wyatt, participated in a JBIC organised 'Dam Workshop' in Hanoi on 13 November. The workshop, which critically examined the implementation failures faced by dam developers and the cost of unmitigated impacts on communities, was a part of JBIC's technical assistance to the project formation (SAPROF) for the Ta Trach Reservoir Project. Andrew Wyatt and Phil Hirsch contributed to the SAPROF through case studies of lessons to be learnt from dam developments in Lao PDR and Thailand respectively. JBIC's SAPROF for Ta Trach reflected a refreshingly open and honest appraisal of the considerable implementation difficulties, inadequate planning, and marginalising effects of past and contemporary dam developments in Vietnam (including Yali) and the Mekong Region. At JBIC's invitation, representatives from the Sesan Protection Network were invited to present their case. Vietnamese agencies present included Ministry of Planning and Investment and Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Unfortunately, Electricity of Vietnam and Ministry of Industry declined the invitation to participate.

## **AUSTRALIAN MEKONG NEWS**

### **Australian Research Council funded research on the 'Political Ecology of Risk'**

The Nan Civil Society Coordination Centre and Sesan Protection Network have decided to join this AMRC research project as local partners, thereby providing the project with two case studies of the relationship between large-scale river developments and the social construction of risk in Thailand and Cambodia respectively. The development contexts faced by these two partners are the Kok-Ing-Nan river diversion scheme and hydropower developments in the Sesan River Basin. The

research collaboration will provide local partners with the opportunity to continue to build their research capacity as well as to strengthen their analysis of the developments they are facing. Pilot surveys in Nan which began in October are being supervised by Nattaya Tubtim while research in the Sesan is proposed to begin in March 2004.

## **NEWS FROM THE CENTRE**

### **CD-ROM now available!**

*Negotiating River Basin Management: Lessons from the Mekong.* This CD-ROM is based upon the outcomes of the whole River Dialogue process, both in Australia and in Ubon, Thailand during 2002. The CD-ROM contents include sections dealing with themes in river basin management (with case studies of the Se San Basin, blasting of Mekong rapids and Pak Mun dam), stakeholder dialogue and links between the Murray-Darling and Mekong river basins. Video clips taken at the Brisbane and Ubon conferences provide living illustrations of the diverse perspectives on river basin management. Copies of the CD-ROM are available free of charge at the AMRC Office. However if you wish to have one mailed then we ask you to email us with a brief comment on why you would like a copy.

## **UPCOMING EVENTS**

### **The 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia**

29 June - 2 July 2004, Canberra, Australia

Contact: GPO Box 2200  
Canberra ACT 2601, Australia  
Tel: (+61 2)6257 3299  
Fax: (+61 2)6257 3256  
Email: [asaa@ausconvservices.com.au](mailto:asaa@ausconvservices.com.au)  
<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/ASAA/conference>

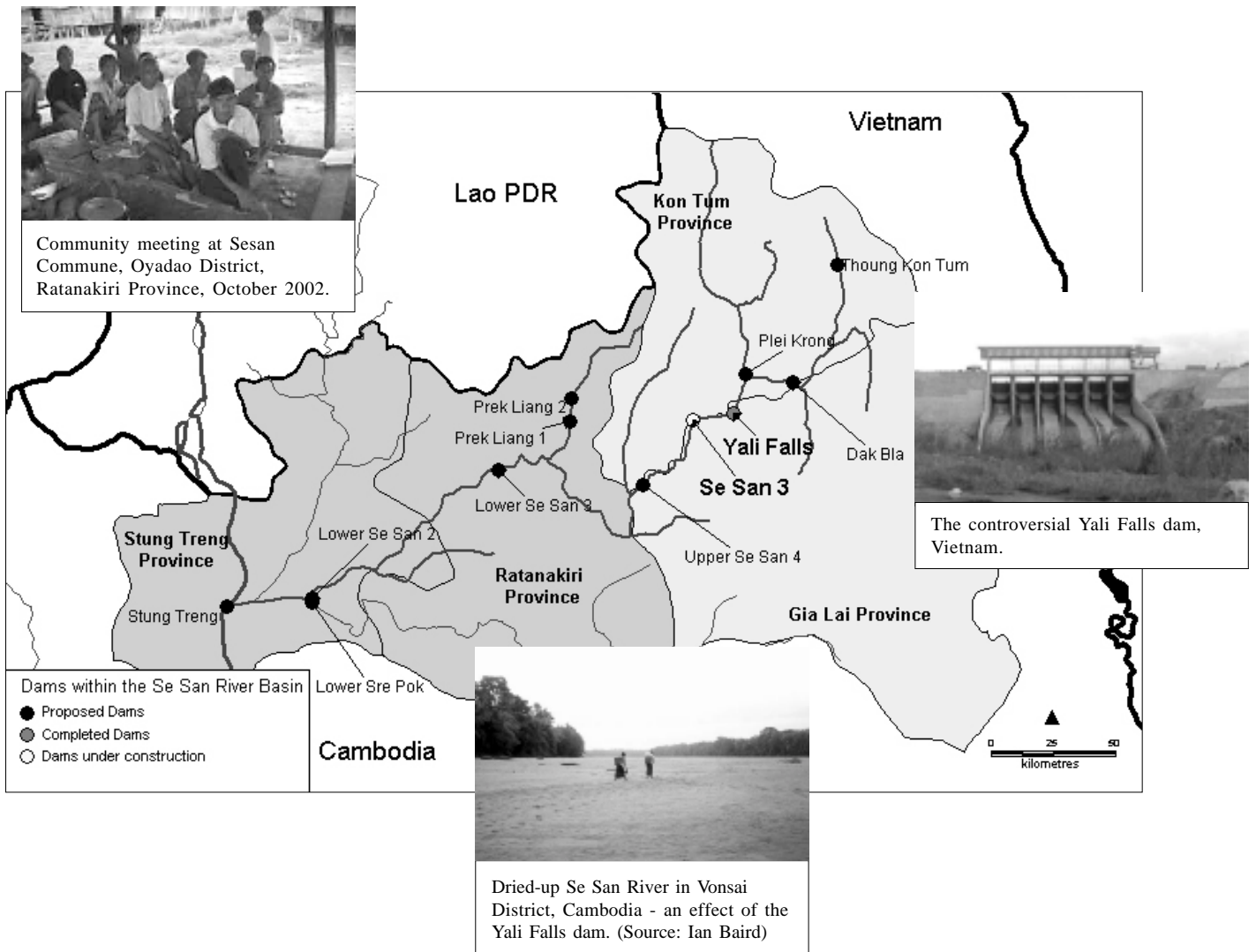
### **7th Asian Fisheries Forum: the triennial meeting of the Asian Fisheries Society**

30 November-4 December 2004, Penang, Malaysia

Contact: The Secretariat, 7th Asian Fisheries Forum, School of Biological Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Minden, Penang, Malaysia  
Tel: ++ 60-4- 6533888 Ext. 3961/2932/4005/4009  
Fax: ++ 60-4- 6565125  
Email: [7aff2004@usm.my](mailto:7aff2004@usm.my)  
<http://www.usm.my/7AFF2004/>

The events listed above are changed with each issue of Mekong Update & Dialogue. For a complete list of upcoming events please go to our website at [www.mekong.es.usyd.edu.au](http://www.mekong.es.usyd.edu.au). For submission of new events please contact the AMRC Administrator at [mekong@mail.usyd.edu.au](mailto:mekong@mail.usyd.edu.au)

# Transboundary environmental conflict: destruction of local livelihoods in the Sesan Basin due to upstream, cross-border infrastructure development



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 Australia