

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 and the Mekong Region

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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 July and should be limited to 1-2 paragraphs.

EDITORIAL - River basin organisations

It is by now self-evident that we need to change the ways in which we use and manage water. Historically, we have tended to treat water as a limitless renewable resource, whose scarcity can be dealt with simply by seeking out new supplies and piping them over ever longer distances. There is increasing recognition that water is a finite good which needs to be managed within its natural collection context – the river basin.

The reality of managing water in an integrated rather than fragmented way, within natural rather than administrative boundaries that are the accident of colonial and other histories, is mirrored institutionally in a profusion of river basin organisations. In Australia, these are manifested in catchment management authorities under state legislation and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission as a transboundary agency. In the Mekong, Thailand has established 29 River Basin Committees in the 25 river basins into which the national territory has been divided. The Mekong as a transboundary river is, in principle, managed by the Mekong River Commission (MRC).

Of course, there are limits to management of any river. River basin organisations, new as they are in most contexts, are superimposed upon bureaucratic and political frameworks that do not just disappear. They are embedded in particular cultural and political circumstances that govern the extent to which geographical, sectorial and bureaucratic fragmentation can really be overcome by integrated approaches. But they are also faced with challenges and dilemmas that are more intrinsic to the institutions themselves.

MRC is both a new and an old agency. With a history in the Mekong Committee dating back nearly half a century, the decade-old Commission carries a certain amount of institutional and attitudinal baggage. Yet it is also a different entity, one that has moved away, in the first instance, from a primary planning vision of mainstream dams toward one that looks to manage the Mekong in a more holistic way.

Yet, there are key dilemmas. Other than the obvious difficulty of managing a river whose upper two member countries neither belong to the organisation nor subscribe to its rules and principles, MRC faces the task of managing to multiple ends. Is MRC a regulatory body whose governance involves the setting and enforcement of rules to ensure equitable and sustainable use and protection of the river and its resources? Is MRC a multi-stakeholder forum in which diverse interests within, as well as between, its constituent riparian member states can negotiate rights and interests? Is MRC a technical and scientific agency whose Secretariat provides an objective basis for rational and equitable sharing of resources? Is MRC an investment broker whose main function – rather like the old Mekong Committee – is to attract investment funding for large projects?

The Integrated Water Resource Management approach to which MRC and most other river basin organisations subscribe would see roles in all of the above. Yet, there are tensions and contradictions when many of the large projects under consideration have highly inequitable, unsustainable and still unpredictable outcomes at local and basin-wide levels. This issue of Mekong Update and Dialogue presents the positions of some key players and analysts in an ongoing defining of just what sort of river basin organisation MRC aspires to be.

FEATURE

River Commission takes on development role in the Lower Mekong Basin

by *Olivier Cogels*

The Lower Mekong Basin is in a fortunate position compared with similar river basins in the world. It has suffered little impact from industrial development and both the water quality in the Mekong River and the environmental conditions of the basin are considered healthy. This situation offers basin planners a sound base from which to develop the basin's water resources so they bring benefits to all levels of society.

The main purpose and focus for the MRC as a river basin organisation now is to harness the economic potential of the river and make sustainable development a reality.

In 10 to 20 years we need to be able to see a real difference in the daily life of the fishers and the farmers of the basin. We plan to create a long-term vision for the Mekong Basin. Putting this in a context of the world, our aim is to become the model of river basin management in developing nations, to be an example of organisational management excellence that the other river basins want to follow.

On 5 April 1995 Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam, signed the Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin, which created the Mekong River Commission. Since then MRC has pursued its goals of meeting the water resources development needs of its four member countries while keeping an environmental balance in the Lower Mekong Basin.

This is a very complex task. The different countries sharing this river basin have different agendas relating to competing sectors.

It is an interesting time in the region. After enduring many years of turmoil through varying occupations, wars and political instabilities, the region is finally enjoying an extended period of stability. Now is the right time to explore what benefits investments in the water sector can bring to the people of the basin. This beautiful, mighty river has so much untouched economic potential it could transform the socio-economic status of this region. In fact, if developed in a sustainable and careful way, there is little doubt that it could hold the key to poverty alleviation in the region.

The people of the Lower Mekong Basin are, indeed, some of the poorest in the world. Many live on less than a dollar a day and still endure an unacceptably high level of health problems and mortality coupled with a paucity of social services.

Life expectancy in Cambodia and Lao PDR in poorer regions is around 55 years and ill health still reduces the number of productive years. Health conditions for children and women are among the lowest in the world, particularly in less developed areas of the LMB and Cambodia where infant mortality rates vary from 75 to more than 125 deaths per 1,000 live births.

In the majority of Cambodian provinces less than 25 percent of people have access to safe water, while in Lao PDR, it is between 25-50 per cent. In southern Lao PDR and almost all of

Cambodia less than 20 per cent of the population have access to sanitation. Electricity is available to only 15 percent of households in Cambodia and 40 percent in Lao PDR.

The list goes on. These are people who deserve a better life.

Today more than 55 million people live in the Lower Mekong Basin but it is a young population and it is growing fast. Projected population growth rates of 2-2.5 percent per year will more than double the populations of Cambodia and Lao PDR by 2025. In Thailand and Viet Nam, population growth will be slower, but populations will still increase by 20-30 percent. Overall, the basin's population is expected to reach 90-100 million by 2025. In urban areas, population growth will be two to four times higher than national rates. By 2020, an estimated one-third of the LMB population will live in urban regions.

This growth is not sustainable without there being changes in the way the resources of the LMB are used and that means developing the water resources.

Of course investment is often misunderstood when discussing the future of the poorer nations of the world. But, in truth, lack of investment (or unchecked investment) will have far greater consequences in this region. I can say, first-hand, that after 25 years in the development world I have learned that well-balanced investment, with due regard for environmental and social impacts, is the only way a country or a region can drag itself out of poverty and give its people a better life.

This is where a river basin organisation such as MRC can play a pivotal role. As an intergovernmental body it has the necessary structure in place to facilitate coordinated and balanced investments in the basin. Optimal and equitable development of Mekong's water resources requires a creative approach, collaborative planning and joint identification of investment priorities incorporating basinwide strategies in each water-related sector.

This year the MRC took on a new orientation – that of launching a Regional Cooperation Programme for Integrated Water Resources Management and Development of the Mekong River Basin. Through this strategy, the MRC plans to act as a promoter and facilitator of the development and investment process in the water sector, encouraging and coordinating sustainable use and management of water and related resources for navigation, food production, energy production and domestic use.

It will not substitute itself for national and bilateral initiatives, but support the countries at the level of strategic planning and programme implementation. It is now working to identify, plan and prioritise a broader range of development projects in cooperation with the donor community and at the same time finding the right mechanism to deliver the right strategy and priorities for funding.

The Mekong River is an important gateway to trade centres in the Southeast Asia region and beyond. Every year millions of dollars worth of trade is transported in the LMB on the river and its tributaries, but in order to realise its full potential there is a need for a regional development approach to promote freedom and safety of navigation in order to increase international trade opportunities. Issues to be addressed include river navigation conditions; ports; integration of navigation with other transport modes (particularly in the international context); physical and non-physical barriers to navigation; and environmental and

safety concerns such as pollution.

The total hydropower potential of the Mekong river system is estimated at 17,000 MW for the tributaries and 13,000 MW for the mainstream. Only 4,450 MW has been developed to date (1,600 MW in the LMB; 2850 MW in the Upper Basin). Demand in the LMB is expected to grow by around 7% per year over the next 20 years, and there are substantial opportunities for trading of power between the countries in the region. Hydropower options are included in the power development strategies of all the countries in the regions.

There is, of course, often opposition to hydropower development due to concerns about the impacts of dams on local communities, on fish migration and on the modification of the river flow regime. However, storage dams typically decrease wet season flows and increase dry season flows and should make more water available in the dry season while mitigating the devastating effects of floods. Of course any acceptable development would demand the inclusion of stringent social and environmental impact studies and full public participation.

Agriculture is still the dominant economic activity in the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB). It accounts for between 20% (in NE Thailand) and 52% (in Lao PDR) of GDP, providing food for 300 million people in the world. It provides livelihoods for around 75% of the LMB population and is an important source of export income.

Irrigation is vital to food security as well as economic development. Thailand and Vietnam have already developed a substantial proportion of their irrigable land and water resources in the LMB. There is still potential for expansion of irrigation, but more investment is also needed in the improvement of existing irrigation systems and management capacities aiming at increased irrigation efficiency and water productivity. Dry season water shortages are common, particularly in the Mun-Chi basin and in the Delta, which is currently responsible for about 50% of Viet Nam's total food production. Intrusion of seawater into the Delta is causing serious concern and reducing the potential for irrigated rice production. It also affects shallow wells for domestic use.

Sustainability of resources such as the fisheries is one of the prime factors to consider in any argument for development in this region. The Lower Mekong fishery is the world's largest freshwater fishery estimated at over two million tonnes per year, with a total value of around \$US 1.4 billion, but it is facing mounting pressures both from a growing population and the use of more effective fishing methods. This growth cannot continue unchecked and it is essential that alternative sources of food and livelihoods be created for the people who now rely on the fishery.

These are just some of the problems and issues, which we have to address in the coming decade.

I am a water specialist and the most interesting challenge a water person can have in his life is to work in a river basin organisation as complex as the MRC. Now I intend to help steer this organisation into putting its plans into action and contributing to the UN Millennium Goals of alleviating poverty thereby

achieving our MRC goal of creating an economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin.

References:

State of the Basin Report, MRC 2003
Social Atlas of the Lower Mekong Basin, MRC 2003

Dr Olivier Cogels is the Chief Executive Officer of the Mekong River Commission. He is based at the MRC Secretariat in Vientiane, Lao PDR.

RESPONSES TO FEATURE

Response 1

by Kurt Mørck Jensen

Olivier Cogels' article provides a good overview of the current situation and development challenges of the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB). It is, however, almost entirely devoid of history. It is as if Cogels has discovered the LMB and the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in 2005 and then conveys this discovery to the reader. It is a nice introduction to the LMB and MRC that would fit well in high school curricula but it is less appropriate for other audiences such as the many readers of the "Mekong Update" who are all a bit better informed. It also skips the critical problems and challenges that MRC is up against. The informed reader therefore is bound to provide Cogels article with a minimal reality check. This is what this comment attempts to do.

Cogels mentions that MRC has taken on a "new orientation" or "strategy" in 2005 namely "the launching of a Regional Cooperation Programme for Integrated Water Resources Management and Development of the Mekong River Basin". It is not quite clear what this is all about. This could perhaps refer to the new five year strategy for MRC that is regularly updated every five years. But it is not clear.

Cogels' article does deserve praise in highlighting the importance of MRC as having a regulatory role with regard to investments for development, i.e. MRC "...has the necessary structure in place to facilitate coordinated and balanced investments in the basin..... with due regard for environmental and social impacts". But at the same time one is left with the impression that although the current "Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin" was signed 10 years ago it is only now – in 2005 – that things really start to happen.

This is of course far from reality. Particularly over the last ten years MRC has made considerable progress in implementing its 1995 Agreement. The primary vehicle has been MRC Secretariat currently located in Vientiane. Through the work of the Secretariat - and with considerable financial and technical assistance from donors - MRC has developed an impressive bank of knowledge on the environment, fisheries, water utilization and basin development planning. Much of this knowledge has been translated into strategies, guidelines, tools and mechanisms for "good development" i.e. economic development (including infrastructure investments) in the LMB that is also environmentally and socially sustainable. MRC therefore has the knowledge, tools and mechanism to act as the regulatory body for development investments in the region.

On this background it is therefore not clear how one should understand Cogels' new beginning or new strategy for MRC. Over the last ten years MRC's attention has been on Integrated Water Resources Management either from a water utilization, fisheries, environmental, social or lately also flood protection point of view. MRC's Basin Development Plan encapsulates all of these efforts and IWRM has been an important methodological component in MRC's basin-wide planning efforts that has been ongoing for the last four years. However, it is not alto-

gether clear how IWRM in itself could become the strategy for the LMB as suggested by Cogels.

IWRM is not something new. It is a generic concept that gained prominence over that last ten years. For example, its elements are spelled out in the Global Water Partnership's "IWRM Tool Box" but IWRM can also be found in different semantic versions in most national water resources strategies in both developing and developed countries. IWRM is meant to be applied as guidelines for good water resources planning and management anywhere in the world and at any level: local water resources, ground water, lakes, national rivers, transboundary rivers etc. What is needed in relation to recurrent basin development planning is a basin wide strategy for the LMB that is founded in the realities of the basin. Here IWRM is necessary but is in no way the only ingredient. Thus an IWRM strategy for the LMB sounds a bit like a misnomer and a bit tautological as well. Although Cogels no doubt is well intended there does seem to be a need for both conceptual clarification and some semantic clean-up.

The article touches upon the region's poverty and population growth - with specific reference to Laos and Cambodia - as some of the major development challenges. This is very true but both poverty and population growth are development challenges that are not exclusively MRC's concern. Cogels mentions other challenge-opportunity areas such as hydropower, irrigation and fisheries but in a rather generic way and they could apply to other larger river basins in the world.

Cogels does not deal with current water related conflict areas and "hot spots" in the LMB nor MRC's role and responsibility in that connection. There is no mention of the critical role of China and its recent upstream widening of the river for navigation that has downstream consequences, and its plans for construction of dams and hydropower projects. And what about the controversial Se San project on a Mekong tributary that involves Cambodia and Vietnam? And what about the many plans for hydropower projects on Mekong tributaries in Laos including the much disputed Nam Theun II? It is in relation to such potential conflict areas that MRC has to justify its mandate and very existence.

So far MRC has not had a very proactive role in relation to such "hot spots" - rather it has avoided getting involved. It is a bit of a paradox if one looks at the capacity of MRC's Secretariat that does have the necessary knowledge and regulatory mechanisms to deal with "hot spots" and potential conflicts. It would of course be unfair to blame Cogels for MRC's lack of involvement in potential conflict areas. Here we need to address the political level of the MRC, particularly its Ministerial Council, and national governments. In both cases there has been a reluctance to get involved either because some "hot spots" are considered national affairs (e.g. Nam Theun II) or bilateral affairs (e.g. Se San). The bottom line probably is that each country in the LMB as well as China has its own national priorities in relation to the Mekong River and its resources. And as long as these national priorities are not grossly violated then there is little impetus to take on problems such as "hot spots" that seem to find a solution one way or the other anyway.

However, the future is likely to hold many more "hotspots" and conflict areas (not the least in relation to China) and MRC is bound to get more involved if not only because MRC will otherwise lose its credibility altogether and become a superflu-

ous diplomatic gathering with the Secretariat as its knowledge library.

It would have been more appropriate had Cogels raised some of these issues and thus conveyed a more real, dynamic and cutting edge account of MRC and its role in the LMB. We are of course many who have great expectations of Cogels ability - as Chief Executive Officer of MRC's Secretariat - to steer the work of the Secretariat not only into the design of future "good basin development" but also in addressing critical water related problems and challenges as they occur. In relation to both of these areas the overall challenge is to get MRC's political level as well as national governments proactively involved in MRC's governance.

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Response 2

by Francois Molle

Dr Cogels' vision for the development of the Mekong basin is compelling. There is no doubt that the region is still afflicted by pervasive poverty and that its natural resources are relatively 'undeveloped', leaving ample room for wise and carefully targeted investments and interventions. Because of the interconnectedness of different users and countries within the basin, the role of MRC as a coordinating body is potentially of extreme importance in ensuring that third-party impacts are adequately identified and checked.

This said, the reader –while sharing the enthusiasm of the vision outlined- may wonder what are the mechanisms envisaged to ensure that the investments made correspond to a genuine vision shared by all stakeholders, a negotiated outcome informed by sound scientific and local knowledge.

Assuming that massive injection of capital and the resulting growth in GDP will automatically translate into poverty reduction might not convince all stakeholders that they will be better off in the future. The trickle-down theory has long justified all kinds of investments on the basis that everybody would eventually benefit from them, but experience tells us –unfortunately- that things are not so simple and straightforward.

In line with the Millennium goals and proclaimed pro-poor priorities, the challenge is not only to attract billions of dollars in investment but, also, to learn from past experience and try to make sure that development is not conducive to displacement, environmental degradation, or to mere shifting of costs and benefits.

This can be achieved by supporting decision-making processes which do not only pay lip service to participation but accept that arriving at balanced and socially optimum decisions takes time, often significantly alters projects (compared with how they were first envisioned), and reveals conflicting views and interests which need to be reconciled.

There is no doubt that the MRC can play a pivotal role in

mediating such processes and making sure that investments are not designed and decided in distant and/or foreign offices but are also in conformity with people's needs, world views, and aspirations. This, of course, is a difficult role and the path is, arguably, narrow: MRC does not necessarily have much bearing on the decisions taken at the national level; investors are often "in a hurry" and would like to see their plans materialized at the soonest; participation must contribute to consensus-building but could degenerate into systematic opposition.

The MRC also has a comparative advantage in tackling issues of river basin management. Dams may be assessed to be more beneficial than harmful but such general conclusions should not allow the overlooking of other aspects of flow alteration that need to be addressed. Monthly mean flows are important but daily fluctuations or maintaining water levels over minimum thresholds at given locations is also crucial for fish reproduction and ecosystems sustainability. Rather than considering such aspects as minor, the MRC could take a proactive stance and show its determination to improve the monitoring of the river, make these data available on the web, support collective learning of how the hydrology is altered, and mediate basin-wide discussions on how to remedy or mitigate negative effects. To give a practical example, MRC could study how the management of the lowest Chinese dam on the upper Mekong could be optimized in order to ensure adequate flows in the remaining part of the river course, estimate the economic benefits foregone in terms of hydropower generation, and propose options for internalizing these costs.

Likewise, irrigation development, often presented as a natural solution to the droughts affecting farmers, must be considered with caution. Deficits in the dry season are often the result of an over-development of facilities in river basins and are to some extent manufactured, justifying ever expanding development of infrastructures and prompting the "need" for more resource development (in general increasingly costly and marginal). While politicians (and engineers alike) are prone to being affected by the "desert bloom" (or "greening the Northeast") syndrome, and to emphasizing benefits while glossing over the costs, further irrigation development is unwarranted by the evolution of food-stuff prices, bloated markets, increasing water scarcity, and growing marginal development costs.

The need for screening investments, allowing time and participation to better assess social and environmental impact, might therefore matter more than boosting flows of capital. Rather than limiting itself to promoting or endorsing hasty infrastructural projects (which may stir repeated unrest and opposition), MRC would more surely become a landmark basin organization and emerge as an example for the rest of the world if it was to be successful in instilling a culture of openness and collective problem-solving in the Mekong region.

François Molle is a principal researcher at the International Water Management Institute, seconded from the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, France. He has worked extensively in Thailand and Vietnam and is now involved in the Mekong Water Governance network, with research on irrigation and water policies.

NEWS FROM THE REGION

ASEAN power grid

In 2002 the ADB produced a Master Plan recommending a series of long-distance transmission lines and transformer stations linking Thailand's national grid to future large hydroelectric dams in Laos, Vietnam, Yunnan (China) and Burma. However, Canadian-based NGO, Probe International, has been quite critical of the Master Plan arguing, amongst other things, that it promotes two incompatible concepts: monopoly and state subsidy on the one hand, and market competition on the other.

In early May this year heads of ASEAN power authorities meeting in Vientiane agreed to fast track the ASEAN Power Grid project. A Memorandum of Understanding will be prepared for signing in 2006. Both the Vietnam-Cambodia and Thailand-Cambodia links are due to be commissioned by 2007. The Thailand-Laos interconnection is scheduled to be operating by 2009 and will draw energy from the Nam Theun 2 dam. Both ADB and JBIC will provide funding for the Power Grid.

Keoxomphou Sakdavong 2005 "Accelerated ASEAN power connection", Vientiane Times, 12 May 2005

Ryder, G. 2003 "Behind the ASEAN Power Grid: Analysis of the Asian Development Bank's Master Plan for Regional Power Interconnections and Power Trade in the Greater Mekong Subregion", Probe International report, December 2003

Shipping along the Mekong

An investigation by representatives from the six Mekong countries - China, Laos, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam - has concluded that the Mekong can be used for shipping finished oil products in a similar way to the Yangtse River in China. In fact, oil shipping is already happening from Thailand to Jinghong in Yunnan. In early April an agreement was signed by the Yunnan-Guizhou-Guangxi Oil Exploration Bureau of China's Sinopec Group for the trading of liquified petroleum gas (LPG) with Thailand's PTT Company. LPG will be transported along the Mekong once the new Jinghong oil-gas terminal is completed later this year.

-- 2005 "China's Sinopec to buy LPG from Thailand's PTT", Wen Wei Po newspaper (Hong Kong), 1 April 2005

-- 2005 "Lancang-Mekong waterway, a channel for oil transportation", People's Daily, 14 May 2005



Chinese boat engaged in rapids blasting along the Mekong with the purpose of improving the shipping channel.

Dams update

Gongguoquiao dam in Yunnan

A pre-feasibility study for the proposed 900MW Gongguoquiao dam in Yunnan has been approved. The cost is estimated around 6 billion yuan. Gongguoquiao dam is the uppermost in the Lancang Cascade project which consists of a cascade of eight dams, along the Upper Mekong in Yunnan, to be built in stages. So far two dams are in operation (Manwan and Dachaoshan) and another three are under construction (Xiaowan, Nuozhadu and Jinghong). For some time now serious concerns have been voiced about the downstream effects of these dams.

McCormack, G. 2000 "Water Margins: development and sustainability in China", AMRC Working Paper #2, June 2000 (For free download see http://www.mekong.es.usyd.edu.au/publications/working_papers/abstract_wp2.htm)

-- 2005 "Pre-feasibility study of Lancang River's Gongguoquiao hydropower project approved", Xinhua Yunnan Channel, 22 March 2005

New dam for Cambodia

Construction of a new 180 MW dam in Kampot province, Cambodia, will begin next year. The cost is estimated at \$270 million and will be partly funded by the ADB. The builder is Sino Hydro Corp, a state-run Chinese company.

-- 2005 "Chinese firm Gets \$270 Million Dam Contract", Agence Kampuchea Presse/The Cambodia Daily, 12 May 2005

Theun-Hinboun dam re-evaluated

The ADB-funded 210MW Theun-Hinboun dam and river diversion project in Laos was completed in 1998. In March last year an independent review panel examined the Theun-Hinboun Power Company's mitigation and compensation program and has concluded that, while the company has made good progress at satisfying material needs, it has not been successful in replacing the lost livelihoods of villagers, in particular fisheries and aquatic resources. Back in 1999 an IRN (International Rivers Network) publication reported on the harm caused to local livelihoods and the inadequacies of compensation measures.

Blake, D. 2005 "A Future In Doubt: reviewing hydropower company's efforts to restore river-based livelihoods in Lao PDR, IRN email, 10 February 2005

-- 1999 *Power Struggle: the impacts of hydro-development in Laos*, IRN

Damming the Salween/Nu River Basin in Burma and Yunnan

The Salween River - or Nu River as it is known in its upper reaches - flows from the Tibetan Plateau through Yunnan province in China, through eastern Burma and eventually reaches the sea just east of Rangoon. It is approximately 2,800 kilometres long and for some distance in China runs quite close and parallel to the Mekong River. Many ethnic minority communities live along the Salween's banks and the Salween Basin has been designated as a World Heritage Site.

Construction of some of the dams that China intends to build as a cascade of 13 dams on the Nu River in Yunnan province has been postponed until further investigations are carried out. Nevertheless, construction work on the Liuku dam has already begun. It has been estimated that 70-80,000 people in China will be forced to relocate because of dams on the upper Salween. In

April China announced that it had suspended plans for a particularly large dam on the Nu River. Meanwhile in Burma, a massive Thai-Burmese joint hydroelectric development program is underway for the Salween River. An agreement in April last year between Thailand and Burma proposed that one of the four dams should have a capacity of 5,600MW.

Ma, J. 2005 "Revised plan for dam project", South China Morning Post, 6 March 2005

Yardley, J. 2004 "Beijing suspends plan for large dam", The New York Times, 8 April 2004

Yuthana Praiswan 2005 "Salween dam idea revived again", Bangkok Post, 20 May 2005

-- 2004 "EarthRights International brings concern over dams in Burma to Beijing", IRN email, 23 November 2004

-- 2004 *The Salween Under Threat: Damming the longest free river in Southeast Asia*, Salween Watch, SEARIN, Chulalongkorn University

NEWS FROM THE CENTRE

Agrarian transitions project

AMRC is part of a significant new five-year collaborative study of "The challenges of the agrarian transitions in Southeast Asia" (ChATSEA). Led by Canada Chair of Asian Research Professor Rodolphe de Koninck at University of Montreal, and supported by Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council as a major collaborative research initiative, ChATSEA brings together researchers at diverse international institutions to examine a number of dimensions of rural change in five countries of the region, including Thailand and Vietnam. The research will examine trajectories of change through four main conceptual windows: globalisation, livelihoods, spatiality and actors. It will develop case studies organised into six process teams. The key processes are agricultural intensification and territorial expansion, market integration, urbanisation and industrialisation, population dynamics, intensification of regulation and environmental change. AMRC Director Phil Hirsch is coordinating the environmental change process team in work that will intersect with other research being carried out by AMRC and its partners.

Study of national interests and transboundary water governance in the Mekong

The Danish development assistance agency DANIDA is supporting its senior water specialist, Dr Kurt Morck Jensen, to spend seven months at AMRC from September 2005 as part of a collaborative study of water governance in the Mekong. Kurt (one of the respondents in this issue of MUD) has played a key role in DANIDA's input into MRC since 1995 and recently led the appraisal for the next phase of the Basin Development Plan. DANIDA is also funding AMRC to coordinate a wider team including Professor Stephen Fitzgerald, Professor Ben Boer, Dr Rosemary Lyster and Dr Bach Tan Sinh to bring political science, international law, water law and environmental policy expertise to the study respectively. Phil Hirsch will lead the study and Naomi Carrard will help anchor the project as a part-time research associate. The study will focus on the Mekong

River Commission and its governance role within the entire basin including non-member states, and it will look more broadly at the question of national interest in managing water in its transboundary river basin context. Among the questions to be addressed in the study are the extent to which MRC or other institutional approaches transcend the narrower interests of individual riparian states to work for the overall good of the Basin, but also the extent to which diverse interests within each country are represented under current governance arrangements and ways in which these do or do not dovetail with the MRC as a governance body.

New Doctors and Masters...

Congratulations to AMRC Associates Anucha Leksakundilok and Simon Bush for the awarding of their PhD degrees and Yusheng Zhang for his MSc. Anucha's thesis is on community-based ecotourism in Thailand; Simon's thesis is on the political ecology of fisheries and other living aquatic resources in Lao PDR; Yusheng's thesis is on the political ecology of mining in China, with a case study of Lanping lead-zinc mine in the Lancang Basin in Yunnan.

UPCOMING EVENTS

IDR-KKU International Conference: "Natural Resources Related Conflict Management in Southeast Asia"

6-8 September 2005, Khon Kaen, Thailand

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The Eleventh Biennial Global Conference of the International Association for the Study of Common Property (IASCP): Survival of the Commons: Mounting Challenges & New Realities

19-23 June, 2006, Bali, Indonesia

Contact: IASCP2006 Conference Committee

Email: Iascp06@indiana.edu

Website: <http://www.iascp.org>

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. For submission of new events please contact the AMRC Administrator at mekong@mail.usyd.edu.au

River basin organisations



New Mekong River Commission office in Vientiane, Laos.
(Source: Olivier Cogels)

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