

# WATER GOVERNANCE IN CONTEXT

## *Issues for Development Assistance*

Australian Mekong Resource Centre, University of Sydney

### The Project

The Australian Mekong Resource Centre (AMRC), with support from AusAID's Australian Water Research Facility, is conducting research to develop a systematic understanding of experience in water regulation, examining the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of various approaches in a range of countries and regions that are most directly relevant to Australia's official development assistance program.

Challenges for development assistance in designing effective water regulatory systems revolve around the establishment of appropriate, context specific design criteria. In the context of development and rising competition over water, appropriate regulatory systems are central to avoiding water-based conflict and ensuring the efficient, equitable, and sustainable management of water resources. An approach to regulation is required that incorporates the social and cultural dimensions of water use. Adaptive institutional arrangements and new policy strategies are required to cope effectively with change and risk.

The project will investigate the complexities and dynamic aspects of water regulatory systems in **Indonesia, Vanuatu, Thailand, Vietnam** and the **Mekong** region (as a transboundary case study). The **Australian** experience will also feature in research to identify lessons learned and implications for overseas development assistance. Five key themes will be addressed, and these will both inform, and be informed by, overarching issues that cut across all themes and case studies.

### People

Associate Professor Phil Hirsch - Project Coordinator (based in Sydney)

Dr Andrew Wyatt - Senior Researcher (based in Ho Chi Minh City / Can Tho)

Dr Fiona Miller - Senior Researcher for the project and Research Fellow at the Stockholm Environment Institute (based in Stockholm)

Naomi Carrard - Research Assistant (based in Sydney)

Jeff Nielsen - Indonesia Specialist (based in Sydney)

Sarah Mecartney - Vanuatu Specialist (based in Port Vila)

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## Research Themes

### 1. **Drivers for change in water regulatory systems**

This theme will investigate governance and reform, looking at reasons for change such as unsustainability of water regulation and water scarcity. The focus will be on contextual drivers for change, looking at environmental and climatic imperatives, infrastructure (eg storages, diversions and technologies), supply and demand, wider aspects of political and economic reform, social change and ideological influences.

### 2. **Catchment management frameworks and issues of scale**

This theme will investigate frameworks for catchment management within ecosystems and ecological boundaries in each case, looking at relations between different scales of management. It will look specifically at linkages – or lack thereof – between local level management of small catchments and wider river basin management frameworks.

### 3. **Public/private roles and initiatives**

Analysis of public/private roles will move beyond a narrow assessment of privatisation and will investigate state, private and community sector roles in water management and water service provision. It will build on work done by WaterAid and others, applying analyses to case studies in the Asia-Pacific region. Regulation will be considered as both a bureaucratic and social process. The appropriateness of public/private roles and responsibilities in different contexts will be addressed.

### 4. **Equity implications of market and property rights mechanisms: gender, poverty and indigenous dimensions**

This is a key theme in assessing development assistance programs from an equity perspective. This will involve more in-depth case study at a local level. Gender, poverty and indigenous dimensions of water regulation will be addressed with specific reference to the enhanced roles of markets and changing property regimes. ‘Pro-poor’ interventions and the concept of water as a human right will be investigated (rights to water versus water rights).

### 5. **Dealing with conflict and risk**

This theme will identify dimensions of actual or potential conflict. A broad definition of conflict will be adopted to encompass subtle tensions as well as more overt confrontation. Mechanisms for peaceful, sustainable and equitable conflict management will be investigated, as will the economic and environmental processes relevant to risk at different scales. An assessment will be made of risk management and outcomes for different groups, with an emphasis on adaptive frameworks.

## Overarching Issues

1. Defining and conceptualising regulatory systems: regulation can be understood in different ways, and an up-front task is to conceptualise and define regulation to incorporate social processes and management of the common good rather than a narrower bureaucratic or legalistic interpretation.
2. Dimensions of unsustainability: the project was conceived on a fundamental assumption that current arrangements are unsustainable, hence the need for a development assistance intervention. The research will investigate rather than assume the actual and/or perceived dimensions of unsustainability (social, economic, ecological) in current water use and management in each case.
3. Anticipated water futures: based on the thematic research, visions, prognoses and scenarios for water futures as understood by key stakeholders and decision makers will be identified.
4. Best practice: the term “best practice” will be addressed in terms of seeking principles from well-functioning systems encountered in the research rather than as “packages” that can necessarily or readily be transferred from one context to another. Best practice will be considered in a multi-criteria framework (sustainability, equity, efficiency).
5. Articulation of debates and issues in each country context: the key themes all address areas of debate and discussion within the case study countries, and the ways in which these are articulated and inform the decision making process will be reviewed.
6. Comparison of current water regulatory systems in each case study across scales (local to global): scale is a defining and cross-cutting construct for all the research themes.
7. Appropriate design criteria: the term of “principles” for regulatory systems, including issues of adapting to context and adaptive management design, is considered to have more analytic relevance than the more checklist-oriented term “criteria”.
8. Issues of aid delivery in water governance: the research results will be considered in terms of the most appropriate modes of delivery - training, in situ institutional evolution in an adaptive management framework, NGO/consultancy implementation, applied research and so on. This part of the process of raising questions, identifying aid priorities, meeting partner needs and using Australian capacity.

## Outputs

### *Working Papers*

The five working papers will be based on the key themes outlined above. Papers will be 5000-10,000 words in length. Draft papers will be submitted to AusAID once for comments and changes before finalisation. The papers will include charts, figures and relevant technical material.

### *Refereed Papers*

The five refereed papers will be adaptations of the working papers. They will be published in appropriate academic journals (for example *Water International*, *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, *Water Resources Research*, *Water Policy*, *Development in Practice*, *Environmental Management, Development and Change*, *Asia-Pacific Viewpoint*, *Australian Geographical Studies*). Papers will be 5000-7000 words in length. AusAID will have editorial input into the refereed papers before they are submitted for peer review. Following peer review and post contract period the AMRC will have final prerogative in responding to reviewers' comments.

### *Final Report*

The final report will be 40,000-50,000 words in length. It will include the working papers as chapters and will incorporate country/river basin case studies and sections relating to the overarching issues. The final report will be submitted to AusAID for comments and changes before finalisation.

### *Final Seminar*

The final seminar will be scoped according to the research output, key stakeholders and interested parties, and AusAID's preferences regarding key audience. It may be staged in two parts over two days, involving a narrower in-house technical presentation followed by a more inclusive stakeholder-focused event.

## Timetable

- Literature review – August 2004
- Site visits, consultation and interviews – August to December 2004
- Synthesis, comparison and analysis – December 2004 to May 2005
- Working papers, refereed papers, report and final presentation – December 2004 to May 2005

## Methodologies

Fieldwork will primarily be based on semi-structured and open-ended interviews with key informants, supplemented with collection of relevant "grey literature" – i.e. project reports, planning documents, existing analyses relevant to each theme and so on. For each theme, stakeholder matrices will be established to select key informants and relevant agencies to visit for interviews. Interviews will be designed in such a way that a single visit will cover questions relevant to multiple themes, and a semi-structured checklist schedule will be devised for each informant.

Themes 2, 4 and 5 will be further informed by local level work being carried out by AMRC under the ARC-funded study of risk in river basin development with reference to water infrastructure, in northern Thailand and the Mekong Delta respectively. Interviews with key stakeholders in catchment management around Sydney (focusing on the Hawkesbury Nepean Catchment and the Sydney Catchment Authority) will also inform these themes.